

Parshat Lech Lecha
Love Triangle? - Avraham, Sara, and Hagar
Melton Gesher at Shearith Israel, October 31, 2011
JSI at Akiba Academy, November 1, 2011

- A) Sefer Breishit chapter 16, verses 1 – 6
- 1) Background to the above
 - a Sefer Breishit chapter 11, verses 10 – 26 – for many years Terach and his wife were childless.
 - i In a family centered culture, what does childlessness do to a marriage?
 - b Sefer Breishit chapter 11, verses 27 – 30 – Avram, son of Terach, marries and he and his wife Sarai are childless for many years just as his parents had been.
 - i What does it mean to go childless when you have seen your parents suffer through the same thing?
 - c Sefer Breishit chapter 12, verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
 - i God promises offspring
 - ii Avram is 75 years old, 5 years older than his father was when he had his first child, and Avram is still without offspring
 - It is one thing to suffer as your father did; it is quite another thing when it is even worse than what one's father went through
 - d Sefer Breishit chapter 13, verses 11, 14 – 16
 - i The aging Avram and Sarai very likely saw in Lot a surrogate son and heir; with him gone, their world is lonelier and their hopes for the future even dimmer.
 - ii The divine promise is reiterated and made explicit, but it has yet to be fulfilled
 - e Sefer Breishit chapter 15, verses 1 – 6
 - i Years pass and Avram and Sarai are becoming very old
 - ii Avram has given up hope
 - iii The divine promise is reiterated, and Avram again experiences a glimmer of hope.
 - iv Imagine the emotional roller coaster that Avram and Sarai are experiencing.
 - The hope of having children prevents one from accommodating oneself to the reality of childlessness
 - 2) Back to chapter 16, verses 1 – 6
 - a Verse 1 – Emphasis on the husband - wife relationship
 - b Verse 2a – Sarai assumes that it is she who is at fault for the couple's childlessness
 - c Verse 2b – “I shall be *sonned* through her” / “I shall be built up through her”. This is surrogate motherhood, very similar to what we know of today.
 - d Verse 2c – Avram agrees to the request, and what he actually did to fulfill what he took upon himself is described in verse 4. So verse 3 is completely superfluous: What is it doing here?
 - e Verse 3 – The reference to ten years is clearly out of place; it belongs back in verse 1.
 - i Perhaps although Avram had agreed to Sarai's request, he had not done what he had promised.
 - ii Time passed ... until Sarai had no choice but almost to physically ‘take her maid ... and give her to her husband’.

- f Verse 3 – Note that emphasis on relationships – wife, maid, husband – and note also that what is translated as concubine is really in Hebrew the word for wife.
 - i Sexuality creates an unavoidable wife-like status, no matter what the intention.
 - ii The verse describes the incongruity, and perhaps the emotional difficulty, of what Sarai is doing.
 - g Verse 4 – “When she saw”: Hagar internalized the implications of what had transpired
 - i How do you think that she felt?
 - ii How do you think that she acted?
 - h Verse 5 – Completely irrational; didn’t Sarai intend for Hagar to become pregnant!
 - i What is going on?
 - i Verse 6 – Avram behaves as a classic male, who fails to hear what his wife is really saying and really needs.
 - i What did Sarai really need and want?
 - ii Might Avram’s failure already have begun back in verse 2b?
- 3) Chapter 16, verses 7 – 12
- a God provides an opportunity for Hagar to speak; He listens, and the whole meaning of the infant’s name is indicative of the fact that God simply listens.
 - i Avram had heard his wife’s voice and the preposition there is ל meaning that he heeded in the sense of acceptance, acquiescence. God hears the voice of Hagar and the preposition is לא meaning that He listened and took what He heard into account.
 - ii Perhaps what occurs with God is meant as a counterweight to Avram, who did not listen but rather acquiesced immediately. Perhaps there is a hint here to Avram’s failure.
- 4) Naomi Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels*, Dell Publishing, 1995, pages 137 – 141, 142 - 146
- B) Sefer Breishit chapter 21, verses 1 – 14
- 1) Examining the verses
- a Verse 9 – “Playing”, may mean mocking or laughing or *Isaicing*
 - i What brought about her response? Why now?
 - b Verse 11 – Avraham is not recorded as responding to his wife. There is no exterior dialogue but only an internal one.
 - i Why doesn’t he respond? Is he afraid of something?
 - ii What should his response have been?
 - c Verse 12 – “Do as she says”, literally it means only ‘listen to her voice’.
 - d Verse 14 – Avraham acts without speaking
 - i Could Avraham have misunderstood both Sara and God?
- 2) The Netziv – Rav Naftalie Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, Breishit chapter 21, verse 12 שמע בקולה – And it does not say שמע לקולה which would mean that he should do according to her words, as in the language of the verse above in chapter 16 – וישמע אברהם לקול שרה; rather שמע בקולה means that he should listen carefully and consider deeply her words.
- a Although the Netziv does not imply that Avraham should not have obeyed her wishes, by distinguishing between the different syntactical forms he certainly opens the door to an interpretation that goes one step further.
- 3) *Wrestling with Angels*, pages 188 – 189
- 4) Marsha Pravder Mirkin, *Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days*. Edited by Gail Twersky Riemer & Judith A. Kates, Touchstone, 1997, pp. 66-69

By the time Isaac was born, Abraham already had thirteen years to develop a relationship with Ishmael. Sarah, seeing this strong bond, worried that Ishmael would be Abraham's heir along with Isaac. Driven by her fear and insecurity and unable to express her fears directly to a man who previously had been unable to listen to her, Sarah demanded of Abraham that he turn out Hagar and Ishmael.

God intervened and told Abraham to listen or hearken to Sarah's voice, *shema bekola* (Genesis 21:12) and then promised to make nations of both his sons. Traditional interpretation takes these verses to imply that God meant Abraham to obey Sarah and expel Ishmael. Such traditional interpretations often hear language through a patriarchal sensibility.

However, a feminist understanding of this language creates a world of difference between "listening to her voice" and "obeying." Sarah was distraught, she was lonely, she was frightened. She needed Abraham to empathize with her feelings, to listen to her feelings.

Sarah needed Abraham to sit there in empathy. She did not need him to take action, nor do we need to hear God's words as a request that Abraham take action. . . I believe God was saying, "Listen to Sarah, hear her feelings, be empathetic with Sarah. Then, let her know there's no reason to compete, there's room enough for both boys to grow up with my blessings." Abraham instead, acted. He didn't listen or question, but simply turned his son into the wilderness where he could die.

After Sarah tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, we never hear another word from her. I imagine a lonely, jealous, loving, wise, and sometimes shortsighted woman waking up the next morning and discovering that Hagar and Ishmael are gone, that Abraham took literally the words she meant figuratively. I imagine her horror when she realized that her words led to the abandonment and possible death of a boy she had wanted for a son and the woman who served her for many years. I imagine that she felt so guilty that her words wronged others so severely, she vowed never again to hurt another with her words. Then she silenced herself.