

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Lech Lecha
October 28, 2023 *** 13 Cheshvan, 5784

[Lech Lecha in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3161/jewish/Lech-Lecha-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The name of the Parshah, "Lech Lecha," means "Go Forth" and it is found in Genesis 12:1.

G-d speaks to Abram, commanding him, "Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." There, G-d says, he will be made into a great nation. Abram and his wife, Sarai, accompanied by his nephew Lot, journey to the land of Canaan, where Abram builds an altar and continues to spread the message of a one G-d.

A famine forces the first Jew to depart for Egypt, where beautiful Sarai is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram escapes death because they present themselves as brother and sister. A plague prevents the Egyptian king from touching her, and convinces him to return her to Abram and to compensate the brother-revealed-as-husband with gold, silver and cattle.

Back in the land of Canaan, Lot separates from Abram and settles in the evil city of Sodom, where he falls captive when the mighty armies of Chedorlaomer and his three allies conquer the five cities of the Sodom Valley. Abram sets out with a small band to rescue his nephew, defeats the four kings, and is blessed by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem).

G-d seals the Covenant Between the Parts with Abram, in which the exile and persecution (galut) of the people of Israel is foretold, and the Holy Land is bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage.

Still childless ten years after their arrival in the Land, Sarai tells Abram to marry her maidservant Hagar. Hagar conceives, becomes insolent toward her mistress, and then flees when Sarai treats her harshly; an angel convinces her to return, and tells her that her son will father a populous nation. Ishmael is born in Abram's eighty-sixth year.

Thirteen years later, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham ("father of multitudes"), and Sarai's to Sarah ("princess"), and promises that a son will be born to them; from this child, whom they should call Isaac ("will laugh"), will stem the great nation with which G-d will establish His special bond. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his descendants as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you." Abraham immediately complies, circumcising himself and all the males of his household.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 40:27-41:16](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579794/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The haftarah for this week discusses Abraham's journey to the land of Canaan at G-d's behest, and touches upon Abraham's miraculous battle against the four kings, both of which are described in this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Isaiah addresses Israel's complaint: ""My way [of serving G-d] has been ignored by the Lord, and from my G-d, my judgment passes [unrewarded]."" Isaiah reminds Israel of the Creator's greatness. The time will come when "He will give the tired strength, and to him who has no strength, He will increase strength. Youths shall become tired and weary, and young men shall stumble, but those who put their hope in the Lord shall renew [their] vigor, they shall raise wings as eagles; they shall run and not weary, they shall walk and not tire." Nevertheless, "there is no comprehension of His wisdom," and as such, at times we cannot understand why He chooses to delay the reward of the righteous.

The haftarah then turns its attention to the idolatrous nations of the world. Isaiah reminds them of Abraham's greatness, how after arriving in Canaan he pursued and defeated four mighty kings. "The islands saw and feared; the ends of the earth quaked." Nevertheless, the nations who witness these miracles did not abandon their ways. "The [idol] craftsman strengthened the smith, the one who smoothes [the idol] with the hammer strengthened the one who wields the sledge hammer; the one who glues its coating says, 'It is good,' and he strengthened it with nails that it should not move..."

G-d promises the Jewish nation to reward them for their loyalty to G-d. "Do not fear for I am with you; be not discouraged for I am your G-d. . . Behold all those incensed against you shall be ashamed and confounded; those who quarreled with you shall be as naught and be lost."

[Food For Thought](#)

[On Being a Jewish Parent: Lech Lecha by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/on-being-a-jewish-parent/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/on-being-a-jewish-parent/>

The most influential man who ever lived does not appear on any list I have seen of the hundred most influential men who ever lived. He ruled no empire, commanded no army, engaged in no spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, performed no miracles, proclaimed no prophecy, led no vast throng of followers, and had no disciples other than his own child. Yet today more than half of the billions of people alive on the face of the planet identify themselves as his heirs.

His name, of course, is Abraham, held as the founder of faith by the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He fits no conventional stereotype. He is not described as unique in his generation, as in the case of Noah. The Torah

tells us no tales of his childhood, as it does in the case of Moses. We know next to nothing about his early life. When God calls on him, as He does at the beginning of this week's parsha, to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house, we have no idea why he was singled out.

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham:

“For I have made you father of many nations.” Gen. 17:5

There are today 56 Islamic nations, more than 80 Christian ones, and the Jewish state. Truly Abraham became the father of these many nations. But who and what was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this exemplary role?

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the Midrash we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terah comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, “Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the largest idol. It must have been him.” Terah replies, “But an idol is mere of wood and stone.” Abraham replies, “Then, father, how can you worship them?”[1]

This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. Abraham, says the Midrash, is like a man travelling on a journey when he sees a palace in flames:

He wondered, “Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?” The owner of the palace looked out and said, “I am the owner of the palace.” So Abraham our father said, “Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?” God looked out and said to him, “I am the Ruler, the Sovereign of the universe.”
Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

This is an extraordinary passage. Abraham sees the order of nature, the elegant design of the universe. It's like a palace. It must have been made by someone, for someone. But the palace is on fire. How can this be? Surely the owner should be putting out the flames. You don't leave a palace empty and unguarded. Yet the owner of the palace calls out to him, as God called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice, the man who sees the beauty of the natural universe being disfigured by the sufferings inflicted by man on man.

Finally comes a third image, this time by Moses Maimonides:

After he was weaned, while still an infant, Abraham's mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, “How is it possible that this celestial sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn, for it cannot be that it turns itself?” He had

no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything. He was surrounded, in Ur of the Chaldees, by foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. But his mind was constantly active and reflective, until he had attained the way of truth, found the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, He that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no God beside Him.

Maimonides, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3

This is Abraham the philosopher, anticipating Aristotle, using metaphysical argument to prove the existence of God.

Three images of Abraham; three versions, perhaps, of what it is to be a Jew. The first sees Jews as iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age. Even secular Jews who had cut themselves adrift from Judaism were among the most revolutionary modern thinkers, most famously Spinoza, Marx, and Freud. Thorstein Veblen said in an essay on “the intellectual pre-eminence of Jews,” that the Jew becomes “a disturber of the intellectual peace . . . a wanderer in the intellectuals’ no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.”

The second sees Jewish identity in terms of tzedek umishpat, a commitment to the just society. Albert Einstein spoke of the “almost fanatical love of justice” as one of “the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.”

The third reminds us that the Greek thinkers Theophrastus and Clearchus, disciples of Aristotle, speak of the Jews as a nation of philosophers.

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no direct evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham’s father Terah as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit.

The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham’s challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving. Abraham was chosen simply to be a father. The “Av” in Avram/Avraham means “father”. In the only verse in which the Torah explains the choice of Abraham, it says:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

Gen. 18:19

The great scenes in Abraham's life – waiting for a child, the birth of Ishmael, the tension between Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Isaac, and the Binding – are all about his role as a father (next week I will write about the troubling episode of the Binding).

Judaism, more than any other faith, sees parenthood as the highest challenge of all. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah – the anniversary of Creation – we read of two mothers, Sarah and Hannah, and the births of their sons, as if to say: Every life is a universe. Therefore if you wish to understand the creation of the universe, think about the birth of a child.

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of A Brief History of Time that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific “theory of everything”, we would “know the mind of God.” We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent. The miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the-love-that-brings-new-life-into-the-world that is God's creativity. There is a fascinating passage in Yossi Klein Halevi's book on Christians and Muslims in the land of Israel, At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden. Visiting a convent, he is told by a nun, Maria Teresa:

“I watch the families who visit here on weekends. How the parents behave toward their children, speaking to them with patience and encouraging them to ask intelligent questions. It's an example to the whole world. The strength of this people is the love of parents for their children. Not just the mothers but also the fathers. A Jewish child has two mothers.”

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality; what is elsewhere considered normal and sees it as a miracle. What Darwin saw as the urge to reproduce, what Richard Dawkins calls “the selfish gene”, is for Judaism high religious art, full of drama and beauty. Abraham the father, and Sarah the mother, are our enduring role models of parenthood as God's gift and our highest vocation. [1] Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

[Avraham the Warrior by Rabbi Dr Kenneth Brander](https://ots.org.il/avraham-the-warrior/)
<https://ots.org.il/avraham-the-warrior/>

When we speak of Avraham, the founder of our people and our faith, so many moments in his life stand out. The journey to the holy land, the welcoming of the angels, the defense of Sodom, the binding of Isaac – Avraham's story is rich with acts of devotion to God and commitment to human justice and loving kindness. This week, as the Torah introduces us to our patriarch Avraham, one of the traits that stands out is Avraham the warrior.

Avraham who, upon viewing the harm that happened to certain innocent states as well as the fact that his nephew Lot has been taken hostage, immediately recognizes the responsibility to wage war in order to right the evil perpetrated on

society and secure the release of the captives. Avraham's loyalty to society and to his kin, even to the point of battling into the depths of the night in order to free him and the kings, sets an example for us in this trying moment.

The war of the four and five kings marks the first account of warfare in Tanach, and Avraham's entry into the battle gives the Midrash and the commentators an early opportunity to address the Torah's view on military ethics, in anticipation of how such issues will be elaborated upon later in the Torah.

It is against this backdrop that the Pirkei d'Rabi Eliezer (#27) makes a striking point in its recounting of the events of the war. Avraham, looking back at the fighting that has taken place, is suddenly afraid. "Could it be," he asks, "that I have just killed these people without just cause?"

God, in turn, responds using language from this week's Haftara, interpreted by our Sages as being a reference to Avraham. Elegantly reinterpreting Yeshayahu 41:3, at face value a description of a warrior returning home unscathed, the Sages reread the verse as meaning that Avraham was saved not only from harm, but from wrongdoing. While he feared that perhaps he had killed innocent people along the way, God assures Avraham that he has not wrought any unjustified pain or death in the context of his war effort. Sometimes in a Just War collateral civilian casualties occur, an evil consequence that is permitted in war. One of the tragic costs of war. Yet Avraham is assured by God that he and his soldiers did not take deliberate aim at civilian targets.

That fear is real.

Just last week, in the moments leading up to the onset of Shabbat, a group of combat soldiers came together to pray. Going one by one, each soldier was asked to share one prayer they were carrying with them in these trying days. Some quite reasonably asked for safety from harm through the ravages of war, and to be able to return home speedily and full in body and in spirit – a prayer we share with them in these difficult times. But the overwhelming majority of the soldiers, in this moment of honesty and vulnerability, shared that their greatest fear was that they may cause unnecessary harm or death to innocent civilians during the fighting. Our soldiers, of mighty arms and loving hearts, joined with Avraham in the deep worry regarding the unavoidable collateral damage that comes with warfare, hoping at the very least to minimize damage done.

In the face of the Hamas-ISIS cult of death, our soldiers continue to value life. As we continue to pray for the welfare of our armed forces as they take on the Hamas menace in the aftermath of the Simchat Torah massacre, we should be moved by their example. Like that of our father Avraham, our role as Jews guided by morality – in complete contrast to that of our enemy – is that we not lose sight of what is humanity. And even while we recognize that our goal must be complete victory, the safety of our soldiers and people – and nothing should stand in the way of that objective – we can still hold true to the tradition that innocent life has value.

My father, a Holocaust survivor, escaped with his family to America after the Shoah. This will be the first time in Jewish history that after a pogrom our reaction will not be running away, but responding. And that response will be led by a moral Jewish army. (*Rabbi Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva at Ohr Torah Stone*)

[Parshat Lech Lecha: Nationalism vs. Universalism: The Struggle with Abraham by Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin](#)

<https://ots.org.il/torah-lights-nationalism-vs-universalism-the-struggle-within-abraham/>
“...and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

Our biblical tradition seems to live in a paradox between the universal and the particular; our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family.

This tension is evident from the opening sentence of the Torah: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ While it seems these words are a clear proclamation of universality, Rashi’s opening comment turns the verse on its head. He argues that the fact that the Torah begins with Creation has nothing to do with a grand universal vision, but rather everything to do with establishing Jewish rights to the land of Israel. He cites a midrash that says since God created the world, He can parcel out specific areas to ‘whomever is righteous in His eyes.’ This tension between the particular and the universal also permeates the High Holy Day festival period. The universal dominates Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as the King of the entire universe, and Yom Kippur when we declare, *...for My house (the Holy Temple) shall be called a house of prayer for all people.* (Is. 56:7)

Further, the seventy sacrifices offered over the course of the festival of Sukkot symbolize our commitment to the welfare of all seventy nations. But in stark contrast, Shemini Atzeret signifies a more intimate and particularistic rendezvous between God and Israel, when the Almighty sends all the other nations home, wishing to enjoy a celebration with Israel alone. Simhat Torah, the added celebration of our having completed the yearly reading of the Pentateuch during this festival, merely emphasizes the unique and separatist significance of this holiday.

The tension is apparent in God’s dealings with Abraham. At first God instructs Abraham, *Go out of your land, and from your kindred birthplace and your father’s house, unto the land that I will show you.* (Gen. 12:1)

There are no introductions or apologies. It’s straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the land of Israel. However, in the next verse, this ethnocentric fervor of going up to one’s own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of God’s next mandate: *‘...And through you shall all families of the earth be blessed.’*

From this moment onwards, both of these elements – a covenantal nation with a unique relationship to God and the universal vision of world peace and redemption – will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham’s descendants.

In the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges in the historic arena as a war hero who rescues the five regional nations – including Sodom – from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings. Even after Abraham’s nephew and adopted son, Lot, rejects Abraham’s teachings, he still wants to continue his relationship with Lot, and even bargains with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to the Midrash, the ten righteous people for whom Abraham wishes to save these evil cities are none other than Lot and his family – even though Lot rejected Abraham (and presumably the Abrahamic way of life) for the greener and more permissive pastures of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham also initially opposed the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael – Hagar his Egyptian mistress whom Sarah gave her husband for the sake of enabling him to bear a child and who treated Sarah with derision, and Ishmael, who was the perennially mocking hedonist, interested only in immediate gratification (the *metzañek*) – apparently because this universalistic patriarch would have preferred a place for everyone under the Abrahamic umbrella.

The Midrash magnificently captures Abraham’s concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion of Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of God’s appearance to Abraham after the patriarch’s circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre. Why stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees, Mamre? The Midrash explains that when God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to seek the advice of his three allies – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Now Aner said to him, ‘You mean to say that you are one hundred years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?’ Eshkol said to him, ‘How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, different from the other nations of the world.’ Mamre, however, said to Abraham, ‘How can you refuse to do what God asks you? After all, God saved all of your two hundred and forty-eight limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If God asks you to sacrifice a small portion of only one of your limbs, how can you refuse?!’ Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, God chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. (Gen. Raba 42:14)

What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as ‘checking out’ the advisability of circumcision with his three gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be by the introduction of this unique and nationalistic sign upon his flesh. The tension between the universal and the particular poses a serious threat to Abraham’s relationship with his wife,

Sarah. It would seem that theirs is a union of love and genuine cooperation. After all, the very first time that the Bible mentions a husband choosing a wife is in the case of Abraham: [And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abram was Sarai...\(Gen. 11:29\)](#)

Until that time, the women are generally anonymous, with all the 'begetting' seeming to take place because of the men alone [Gen. 5]! Hence when the Bible records:

[And Abram took his wife Sarai...and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran.... \(Gen. 12:5\)](#)

Rashi hastens to explain based on the Midrash, that to 'gather souls' meant that 'Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.' At least our Sages believed that they truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord.

Indeed, Abraham is deeply committed to Sarah, and also seems to be aware of her higher gift of prophecy. When she, tragically barren after many years of marriage, suggests to her husband that he father a child with her maid-servant Hagar, the text records ['And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah' \[Gen. 15:2\]](#) – suggesting that Abraham's role in this matter was entirely subject to the will of Sarah. And if Sarah's suggestion seems rather jarring and out-of-wifely-character to the modern ear, it is important to note that this was precisely the method of adoption practiced by the ancient Near Eastern world. The secondary wife would literally give birth 'on the knees' of the primary wife, causing the baby to be adopted by the primary wife 'as if she had borne him.'

Moreover, Abraham assumes a purely passive role in the second marriage: ['And Sarai the wife of Abram took Hagar her Egyptian maid-servant and she gave her to Abram her husband for a wife' \[Gen. 16:3\]](#). This description belies the usual biblical formula for marriage: 'When a man takes a woman....' Yet despite Abraham's total devotion to Sarah – all we have to do is consider the effort and expense he invests in the purchase of her permanent burial place in Hebron – they differ strongly in one area. Hagar may have been brought into the picture by Sarah, but when Sarah realizes that the behavior of Hagar's son Ishmael constitutes a serious threat to her family, she is not willing to compromise: Hagar and her son must be banished.

Since Abraham's vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how do we understand his willingness to cast his own flesh and blood to the desert? The Tosefta on Masekhet Sotah, commenting on the verse spoken by Sarah in Lekh Lekha: '...I was derided in her [Hagar's] eyes. Let God judge between me and you,' expands this theme and demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah held two very different world-views. The Sages in the Tosefta fill in the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham:

'I see Ishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Isaac, the name of heaven will be desecrated,' says Sarah to Abraham. 'After I gave her [Hagar] such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress [of our house], how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?,' replies Abraham. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Sarah's position is crystal clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world – but not at the expense of her own son and family. She teaches us that our identity as a unique people must be forged and secure before we can engage in dialogue and redemption of the nations. God teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: **Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called.** (Gen. 21:12)

Indeed, one of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it – or almost lose it. It may well be argued that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate – and be truly committed to – his only son and heir Isaac, who, in the final analysis, will carry on his traditions and life's mission. And at the end of the day, nothing remained for Israel from 'all of those souls whom they [Abraham and Sarah] made in Haran.' The legacy of Abraham was carried on by one individual and he was Isaac! (*Rabbi Riskin is the founder and Rosh Hayeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone*)

Sarai Suffers in Pharaoh's Palace, and Abram Is Rewarded?!

By Prof. Rebecca K. Esterson

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/sarai-suffers-in-pharaohs-palace-and-abram-is-rewarded>

A Text of Terror

In my classes on the history of biblical interpretation, we often start by wrestling with ancient sources whose message seems at odds with our moral sensibilities today. One such text is the story of when Abram and Sarai^[1] are forced to migrate to Egypt to survive a famine. Abram tells his wife to pretend they are sister and brother, anticipating the jealousy of Egyptians regarding her great beauty.

Gen 12:11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. **12:12** If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. **12:13** Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."^[2]

The story that unfolds thereafter constitutes what some scholars have come to call a "text of terror" due to the implied violence against the female character.^[3]

Gen 12:14 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. **12:15** Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace.

Our moral outrage comes not just from the fact that the Abram gives his wife to

Pharaoh to save his own life, but the fact that he is rewarded for this behavior with great wealth:[4] **Gen 12:16** And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. It is as though divine providence itself had this plot in hand all along: the sacrifice of Sarai's safety for the sake of Abram's survival and success.

As we read on, we learn that the figure who receives the penalty for this trickery isn't Abram, but Pharaoh, the target of Abram's lies: **Gen 12:17** But God afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.

Most notably, the experience of Sarai herself is not mentioned, nor does the text refer to any distress or suffering she may have experienced in the house of Pharaoh—this is left to our imagination. Moreover, Pharaoh has not displayed behavior deserving of the punishment allotted: **Gen 12:18** Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? **12:19** Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!" **12:20** And Pharaoh put agents in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.[5]

Contemporary interpreters of this text are quick to point to its troubling implications. **Wilda Gafney**, for instance, writes that "*there is value in honoring Sarah as a survivor of sexual violence and domestic abuse and acknowledging her partner's complicity in that abuse.*"[6] Honesty about the brutality implicit in the text is necessary lest it be used to justify or minimize brutality perpetrated by its readers.

What has fascinated my students and I, in considering the reception history of these verses from Genesis, is the fact that readers in antiquity seem to have been just as bothered by them, and for the same reasons.

Sarai Hidden and Revealed

In a remarkable exchange from Genesis Rabbah, the rabbis put the tools of midrash to the task of justifying Abram; he does not intentionally put Sarai into harm's way, but first attempts to protect her by concealing her: **Gen Rab 40:5** "When Abram entered Egypt, and the Egyptians saw" (vs. 14). And where was Sarah? He had put her in a box and locked her in it.[7]

Building on the phrase "Abram entered Egypt," in this version of the story, Abram arrives in Egypt alone with his cargo and negotiates with customs officials over the tax to be paid on his crate: **Gen Rab 40:5** When he came to the customs-house, he [the customs officer] demanded, "Pay the custom dues." "I will pay," he replied. As Abram haggles with the officials, the value of the cargo is at first minimized, but increases as the officials sense that something of greater value must be hidden inside: **Gen Rab 40:5** "You carry garments in that box," said he. "I will pay the dues on garments." "You are carrying silks," he asserted. "I will pay on silks." "You

are carrying precious stones.” “I will pay on precious stones.” “It is imperative that you open it and we see what it contains,” he insisted.

Finally, Abram is forced to open the box and reveal its contents, but it is her beauty, rather than her husband’s cunning, that reveals her presence:

Gen Rab 40:5 As soon as he opened it the land of Egypt was irradiated with her lustre [beauty]. R. Azariah and R. Jonathan in R. Isaac’s name said: Eve’s image was transmitted to the reigning beauties of each generation.

The true value of Abram’s cargo is revealed, and it is immeasurable, as indicated by Sarai’s overwhelming beauty. In fact, she bears the glory of humanity’s first mother, Eve, a beauty that has been passed on to the most important woman in each generation. Furthermore, the power of her beauty is redirected in the midrash, which avoids mentioning her sexual allure or the jealousy she might inspire, and instead reveals Sarai’s true greatness, that she bore the glory of Eve, connecting the generations between them.

Sarai Cries out at the Injustice and God Responds

This midrash subsequently takes up the problem of Sarai’s capture in the house of Pharaoh. The rabbis take literally the idea that the house itself was plagued, saying that even the beams were afflicted: Gen Rab 41:2 R. Aha said: Even the beams of his house were smitten, and all exclaimed, “It is because of Sarai Abram’s wife.”

Whereas the narrative is silent about Sarai’s experience in Pharaoh’s house, the midrash has the walls of house broadcasting it.[8]

With the lens pointed at Sarai then, we learn of her efforts to save her own life, which initiates a drama on a cosmic scale. We learn that Sarai cried out to God all night long, lamenting the fact that she is imprisoned, awaiting Pharaoh’s approach, while her husband walks free: Gen Rab 41:2 R. Berekiah said: Because he dared to approach the shoe of that lady. And the whole of that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, “Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Your assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham has departed outside this prison while I am within!”

We sense the longing, on the part of these rabbis, to cry out themselves at such an injustice. Abram’s wellbeing is juxtaposed with her suffering, requiring, if God is just, divine intervention. According to this midrashic interpretation, God not only hears her, but responds to her directly, making Sarai’s centrality a refrain in the story: Gen Rab 41:2 Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: “Whatever I do, I do for your sake, and all will say, ‘It is Because of Sarai Abram’s wife.’”

An Angel at the Command of Sarai

This midrash interprets the declaration that all will be done because of Sarai to mean that Sarah would control the plagues completely, with the help of a heavenly agent: Gen Rab 41:2 R. Levi said: The whole of that night an angel stood with a

whip in his hand; when she ordered, “Strike,” he struck, and when she ordered, “Desist,” he desisted.

Centering Women’s Experience

Aviva Zornberg explains that women are key to accessing subconscious layers of the biblical narrative, and midrash is the technique by which these layers are brought to the surface. Midrash constructs a counter-reality that centers women’s experience:

[It] is precisely in the midrash that women figure as having a separate, hidden history. In effect, the midrash makes the reader aware of a mistaken reading: all along, women have been really absent, really elsewhere. An alternative history, the midrashic history of women, would take us, at least at the most significant moments in the narrative, beyond the margins of the biblical account.[9]

In the case of Sarai, midrash endows her with all the same powers that seem to have been stripped from her in the plain sense of the text. The Torah never mentions her experience; but in the midrash her experience constitutes the central narrative. In the Torah she has no voice; in the midrash she not only speaks but has a direct encounter with God. In the Torah she is a passive object of exchange; in the midrash she is endowed with cosmic powers to enact vengeance or mercy as she sees fit.

The kind of interpretive activity we read in midrashic sources responds to the very problems of moral offence in the biblical text that bother modern readers. It thus connects us to a community of readers reaching back into antiquity, who asked the same questions about Sarai’s agency in the story, and who used the tools of interpretation available to them, to respond with a powerful counter-narrative. This biblical matriarch comes out the other side of midrash being the most divinely empowered character in the story, drawing on the glory of all women who come before her, and on the strength of angels. *(Prof. Rebecca K. Esterson is the Dean of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies and the chair of the Department of Sacred Texts and Their Interpretation at the Graduate Theological Union, where she teaches courses on the history of biblical interpretation and the history of Jewish-Christian relations.)*

1) Abram and Sarai have not yet received their new names Abraham and Sarah (cf. Gen 17:5, 15). 2) Biblical translations follow the NJPS, with modifications. 3) A phrase coined by Phyllis Trible in 1984. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (40th Anniversary Edition): *Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2022). While the four case studies in Trible’s original publication do not include Sarai’s story, the phrase “texts of terror” refers to any text in which violence against women is implied. 4) Editor’s note: On the biblical motif of Israelites gaining wealth in a foreign land, see Hava Shalom-Guy, “**Giving Israel Gold and Silver, Cyrus Improves on a Biblical Motif,**” *TheTorah* (2020). 5) Editor’s note: For a discussion of the relationship between this story and the Exodus, see Christoph Levin, “**Abraham and Sarah in Egypt: A Story Composed to Prefigure the Exodus,**” *TheTorah* (2020). 6) Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Woman of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 33.

7) The midrash translation follows Harry Freedman, Midrash Rabbah, ed. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1961), with modifications.

8) In the midrash it is the beams of the house themselves who seem to interpret the scripture. The frame of the house frames the story, retelling it from their perspective. Whereas the biblical narrative is silent about the events that occurred inside of Pharaoh's house, overlooking Sarai's experience, the midrash moves inward at the invitation of the walls themselves. 9) Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus (New York: Schocken, 2011), 9.

Yahrtzeits

Lisa Small remembers her very dear father Joseph Small on Sunday October 29 (I miss him everyday).