



YESHIVAT MAHARAT

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ישיבת מהר"ת

Parshat Lech Lecha 5776
Sarai as Victim and Perpetrator of Abuse
By Chava Evans, Class of 2017

Rabbi David Silber, Founder and Dean of Drisha Institute describes Genesis as a narrative about a family learning how to be a family. Breshit begins in the realm of total family dysfunction-- a marital squabble (Adam and Chava) and fratricide (Cain and Hevel) but ends with a snapshot of a serene multi generational family gathered at Yosef's bedside to receive brachot. The journey from fratricide to functional has it's ups and downs and we read about some of them in Lech Lecha.

The central family tension in this week's *parasha* is the eruption of domestic conflict between Sarai and her maidservant, Hagar. (16:1-6) The incident begins with the seemingly selfless act of Sarai, who gives Hagar to Abram, her husband, so that he may sire the children she seemed unable to produce. But, any good will between the women rapidly evaporates when Hagar conceives:

ד וַיָּבֹא אֶל הָגָר וַתְּהַר וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָה וַתִּקַּל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ.

And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. (16:4)

In frustration, Sarai lashes out at Hagar:

ו וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שְׂפָחֶיךָ בְּיָדִי--עֲשִׂי-לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעַנֶּה שָׂרַי וַתִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵיהָ.

6 But Abram said unto Sarai: 'Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her that which is good in thine eyes.' And Sarah treated her harshly, and she fled from before her. (16:6)

I can marshal some sympathy for Sarai here; She's at the end of her rope after years of coping with the disappointment and stress of barrenness, and Hagar's impudence is the last straw: she snaps. Nonetheless, I have always been both puzzled and deeply troubled by Sarai's abrupt, violent and possibly abusive behaviour towards Hagar. I tend to agree with the Ramban's condemnation of Sarai's conduct. He writes:

[Sarah] transgressed by this affliction [of Hagar], as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction.

Ramban's moral judgment makes sense to me: Sarah's conduct does seem volatile and harsh, and the Torah itself says that Sarah "afflicted" Hagar. Ramban's comment implies that Sarah's behaviour was so beyond the pale that it warranted the punishment of generations of Jewish suffering.

But why? What caused such a lapse in the decorum of our otherwise even-keeled and wise matriarch? A rather disturbing possibility occurred to me this week: perhaps Sarai herself had been victimized. Perhaps her rage against Hagar can be explained by her own psychological scars.

Note the similarities between Sarai's reaction to Hagar and Abram's previous treatment of Sarai. In chapter twelve, we read the disturbing story of how Abram allows Sarai to be "taken" into the household of Pharaoh. We aren't told exactly what occurred between Sarai and Pharaoh but the verb "to take" allows us to speculate on the sexual nature of their relationship. Regardless of exactly what transpired, it's clear that Abram employs Sarai's sexuality as a tool and, to some extent, abandons her to the possibility of sexual assault in Pharaoh's harem.

We might read Sarai's explosive, violent anger towards Hagar in light of the incident in Egypt. Just as Sarai was used and abandoned in Egypt, so she uses and abuses Hagar sexually/tactically/reproductively/physically. In treating Hagar as she does, Sarai acts from deep rage, just as a victim of abuse might behave.

The midrash makes an important connection between the two stories: It explains that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter and that *"Pharaoh was so impressed with the power of Abram and Sarai's God that he declared, 'I would rather Hagar be a slave in Abram's household, than a princess in my palace.'"* The midrash continues, explaining that Hagar joined Abram and Sarai when Sarai left Pharaoh.

From Sarah's point of view, Hagar must have been a constant reminder of her father, Pharaoh and of a painful and divisive time in Sarai's marriage to Abram. Her violence, now contextualized, still troubles me. Ramban may not roundly condemn Sarai so much as pointing out how abuse and violence begets generations of violence and abuse. I fervently pray for the strength to listen and to help with the healing our community so desperately needs.