

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5783  
Avraham's Faith and Sarah's Faith  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

וְיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

It came to pass after those matters that God put Avraham to the test, saying to him:  
Avraham!  
And he answered, “Here I am.”

This passage comes from the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. There, God commands Avraham to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, in the well-known narrative. We know the story, Yet every time we read it we wonder how, exactly, it is meant to inspire us. Tonight I would like to offer a possibility, based on a question that arises from the plain language of the text.

The question is: what “matters” took place before God tested Avraham? The verse says: “It came to pass after those *matters*, אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה.” What *happens* before God puts Avraham to that terrifying test? What “matters” did we miss?

Here’s what happened, in the midrashic imagination of modern feminist Israeli lawyer and teacher of Torah Rivkah Lubitch:

*Those matters– the matters with Sarah. And God tested Sarah.*

*And the angel said to her: Take your son, your only one, whom you have loved, Isaac, and take him to the land of Moriah, and offer him up (Gen 22:2).*

*And Sarah said: No. Because a mother does not slaughter her child.*

*And early in the morning, Sarah awoke, stunned to see that neither Isaac nor Abraham was there. She lifted her arms to God in heaven and said: Master of the Universe, I know that one who slaughters his son in the name of God will in the end be left without a son or God. Forgive Abraham, who was mistaken about this. Please remember that it did not occur to a mother to offer her son up to God, and save the boy from him.*

*At that moment Abraham stretched out his hand to the knife to slay his son (Gen 22:10). And th angel of God called out to him and said: Do not lay your hand on the boy, and do*

*not do anything to him, for now I know that you are God-fearing (Gen 22:12), even though you did not withhold your son. And this is why it was said 'whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice' (Gen 21:12) and as a result 'for in Isaac your seed will have a name' (Gen 21:12).*

In this midrash, Sarah is the first one to be confronted with that terrible trial, and she refuses to obey. When she discovers that Avraham is on his way to sacrifice her precious son, she believes he made the wrong choice, not only in her eyes but in God's. She pleads with God for mercy on Avraham's behalf. And because of her prayer, tragedy is averted.

On this day we stand together on the brink of birth, or rebirth, into a world that cries out for renewal. Our Torah will offer the example of Avraham, whose faith allows him to trust the Divine command and found a nation whose purpose will be to live out a creative partnership with God. Lubitch's midrash places a woman at the foundation of our tradition: Sarah, whose faith in the human-Divine partnership gives her the clarity needed to protect life.

The midrash comes from a new book midrash by women scholars and edited by Israeli scholar and writer Tamar Biala. The collection pushes us to see biblical texts in ways that can help us now, even as it challenges conventional wisdom.

We live in a world in desperate need of new theories, new stories, and new ways of interacting. As our society grows more polarized, and in certain ways outrageous and frightening, we need to find ways to cut through the posturing and sharp dividing lines and have the courage to see possibilities in gray spaces. We need to learn how to engage in dialogue with people who see things differently and we need to nurture our ability to trust the process.

Over the course of this Holy Days season, we will take a fresh look at our sources and consider how we might hold ourselves in complex and dialectical realities, rather than drawing ranks around one side of an issue.

At Beth Israel Center we have worked hard to define the values we want to live by. The year ahead will be filled with intentional opportunities for each of us to feel a sense of belonging and connection, to learn and to celebrate, and to grow as human beings. I hope that some of our new programming will help us to deepen our connections to one another in the new year. I am filled with optimism for what we can be.

May we be blessed with the capacity to listen deeply to one another and to see beyond our horizons. Together, may we pursue paths of peace and do our part to move our world a bit closer to redemption with faith, trust, and courage.

*L'shanah tovah tikateivu.* May it be a good, healthy, and sweet new year.

*("Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac" in Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash, Ed. with Commentary by Tamar Biala, Brandeis University Press)*