

A Priest and a Rabbi Walk into a Classroom

Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

November 26, 2023 – Abraham and Sarah in Egypt

[Genesis 12:10-20]



Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife”; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.’ When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, ‘What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, “She is my sister”, so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and be gone.’ And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. **3** He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, **4** to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. **5** Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, **6** so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, **7** and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

8 Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. **9** Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.' **10** Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. **11** So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastwards; thus they separated from each other. **12** Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. **13** Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards; **15** for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring[a] for ever. **16** I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. **17** Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.' **18** So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks[b] of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord.

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“Ten times was Abraham our father put to the test, and he withstood them all. This tells how great was the love of our father Abraham.” (Talmud, Avot 5:3).

Contemporary “Midrashist” Poet Na’ama Eldar identifies ten trials in which our Matriarch Sarah had to make difficult decisions about how to conduct herself.

Ten times was Sarah our mother put to the test, and she withstood them all. This tells how strong she was, and how great was her hope.

- 1 That she was barren and without a child;
- 2 And she was taken from her birthplace and father’s home to an unknown land;
- 3 **That she was asked to lie on Abraham’s behalf on coming to Egypt and being taken to Pharaoh’s home where there was done to her what was done to her (Gen. 12:10-20)**
- 4 That her Egyptian maidservant bore a child for Abraham her man;
- 5 And her maidservant made light of her; (Gen 16:4)
- 6 And her man said to her do with her as you see fit (Gen 16:6);
- 7 That she heard from the opening of the tent the news of Isaac’s birth;
- 8 That she waited many years for Abraham her husband to return from his journeys and wars;
- 9 That she was asked to lie on Abraham’s behalf on coming to Gerar, and being taken to Avimelekh’s home where there was done to her what was done to her (Gen 20:1-18)
- 10 That her son was taken from her to be sacrificed on the altar (G22:1-19)

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The first trial Sarah had to endure was her barrenness, which involved two challenges: she had to deal with her public image as a barren woman, as well as with the private pain of not having a child.

The second trial was that Sarah agreed to leave her homeland and her father’s house and to travel to an unfamiliar land. In general, it is Abraham’s greatness in heeding God’s command that is emphasized, but Eldar notes that Sarah too had to agree to come along. She could have chosen instead to stay back.

The third trial relates to Abraham and Sarah's descent to Egypt in the wake of the famine in Canaan. Sarah chose to cooperate with Abraham and say that she was his sister, even though this meant that she was taken into Pharaoh's palace, despite her being a married woman. Eldar regards Sarah's willingness to lie and to live in close quarters with a strange man in order to save her husband's life as an act of heroism and as another trial that Sarah withstood.

Sarah passed her fourth trial when she took the initiative to give her maidservant Hagar to Abraham so that he would be able to have children with her.

The fifth trial was the disparagement she endured from Hagar after her maidservant learned that she was pregnant. Sarah had to deal with the painful and perhaps unanticipated emotions that Hagar's pregnancy awakened in her, a development that undermined her own status and her place in Abraham's household.

Sarah's sixth trial was when Abraham charged her with the responsibility to decide how to respond to Hagar's hurtful treatment.

Sarah's seventh trial was the news that she would become pregnant at age ninety, which she overheard casually while standing at the entrance to the tent, as if she were merely peripheral.

The eighth trial that Sarah endured was the years in which she waited patiently at home while Abraham journeyed through Canaan and fought against the four kings. Eldar calls our attention to the underappreciated challenges faced by those women back on the home front, as it were.

The ninth trial Sarah endured was when she and Abraham arrived at Gerar and he asked her to say that she was his sister. The Torah does not describe what Sarah endured in Avimelekh's home, but Eldar suggests that Sarah was confronted with a trying situation, as was the case when she was taken to Pharaoh's palace (see #3).

The tenth trial was the binding of Isaac. In her description of Sarah's last trial, Eldar focuses on the experience of women whose children's lives are endangered on account of a system of beliefs or values.

What is the significance of the fact that Sarah withstood this trial? Did she pass the test because she did not prevent Abraham from taking Isaac to the altar? Is she being applauded for her silent compliance? Or perhaps it was that she did not fall apart in spite of her staunch opposition to Abraham's blind obedience?

Na'ama Eldar notes there are many ways in which a woman (any person, a nation) could respond under such circumstances, and Eldar further notes that in each of these trials, Sarah - on behalf of herself and her entire people - withstood the trial by behaving in appropriate, indeed in exemplary ways.