

Imagining Sarah

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Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you." So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.

GENESIS 22:1-3

THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AKEDAH—THE BINDING OF ISAAC—IS STRUCTURED AS A DRAMA FOR TWO, OR PERHAPS THREE, PLAYERS: GOD, ABRAHAM, AND ISAAC. TRADITIONAL MIDRASH ELABORATES ON THE role of each player in this archetypal Jewish story. Sarah does not appear at all in the Biblical text, and the midrash comments only upon her absence, portraying her as either potentially meddling or emotionally weak. But is it reasonable to assume that this strong-hearted matriarch, who laughed in the presence of angels, played no part in this crucial event?

Imagine the following:

Sarah overhears God talking to Abraham outside their tent, overhears the terrifying demand. When Abraham returns to bed, Sarah pretends to be asleep, but lies awake for hours, shocked, frightened, and uncertain what to do. Eventually she falls asleep, and to keep her from detaining Abraham, God makes sure that she does not awaken until Abraham has left. Early in the morning, Abraham quietly collects Isaac and the provisions, gives a misleading message for Sarah to one of the servants, and departs for Moriah.

Sarah awakens, wondering if she has been dreaming. She finds that Abraham has gone, and has taken their son. The servant delivers Abraham's untruthful message, but also unwittingly reveals to her the direction in which Abraham and Isaac have left. The road they have taken is the way to Moriah, the place overheard in God's conversation with Abraham the night before. She considers pursuing them, but realizes that with already half a day's journey between her and Abraham's party, she could never catch up. She considers some of the younger men in their household. Perhaps she could enlist their help in pursuing Abraham. But they would not believe her, not against her husband's word.

Besides, the idea is preposterous. Can she really believe that Abraham could kill their son, or that he would? She spends the late morning and afternoon in a state of disbelief. By dusk she realizes it can only be true. Abraham will return alone, without her son, without Isaac.

So Sarah goes to the place where Abraham stood when God spoke to him in the night. And she asks a question that Abraham did not.

"Why?" she asks into the dark.

At first there is no answer. Then, at the moment that she despairs of receiving one, God says:

"Sarah!"

"*Hineni!*" she replies, automatically assuming Abraham's stance and salutation.

"I have sent Abraham to Moriah, to offer up his son as a sacrifice to me."

"Abraham has more than one son. If you require such a sacrifice, why must you take his heir, the one in whom you have placed the promise of becoming a great nation?"

"I have sent Abraham to Moriah, to offer up *your* son as a sacrifice to me."

"My son! Why?"

"Because, Sarah, he *is* the one in whom I have placed the promise of a people. You are the mother of that promised nation."

"Is this a punishment? In what have we failed you? What have we denied you that you go back on your promise?"

"The promise stands. When your husband was Abram, and you were Sarai, we made a covenant. But do you know all that that promise may contain? You have heard Abraham say that the people that will come out of him will be enslaved in a country that is not theirs, and that they will suffer in servitude and oppression, have you not?"

"Yes... yes I remember."

Sarah then relives a moment, from a time before Isaac, enfolded deep in her memory, and blurred by more joyful things. Now it is stark in her mind:

She had crouched behind a rock as she watched Abram cut a covenant with God: God first asked Abram to number the stars—so many were his offspring to be. Abram then laid out the pieces, the split animals. Night fell, cloudless, and the stars were in their millions, but as she stared, half the sky went black! Sarah fell into a stupor. When she came to her senses again it was dark and cold, the stars were back, thick and glorious as on any other night. Finding her there, her husband had told her of the smoking furnace and the torch that passed between the pieces. He was trembling with fear. He said that his offspring would be enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. There was to be bad as well as good.

Now, Sarah looks hard at the sky, but no darkness threatens her stars. God continues:

"I have also told him that after they again take possession of the land which I have given to Abraham, they will be divided, their northern kingdom will be dispersed and lost, they will go into exile, only to return and be subjugated under different powers, and then they will be exiled again for hundreds and hundreds of years. Did he tell you this as well?"

"No..."

"Sarah, I have told Abraham what must be. Know for sure that your children will be different from other nations. Know that they will survive as a nation in exile, that they will strive to do my will, in many different ways, even should your nation grow up in great danger. But I have not told him what also may come to be. Listen well, Sarah. What if, in those countries where they will be exiled, their name should become a synonym for villainy? They may be hated and falsely accused of horrible crimes. They may be chased from country to country or forced to convert, or massacred. Indeed, a time may come when a ruler arises in a great land of their exile, and attempts to destroy them all. If you knew, Sarah, that such a ruler might send six million of your people, men, women and children, to horrible deaths of starvation and torture and violence, and pile their bodies in the open, and then burn them into smoke and ash, would you want your promise then?"

"Is this what will be? What promise is this? Why must I hear this?"

"None of this should come to be. I have sent Abraham to Moriah, to

sacrifice his son, to burn the body of your son into smoke and ash, and so prevent such future suffering.”

Suddenly, Sarah realizes: God is offering her a retroactive miscarriage. Perhaps her descendants are a doomed people, doomed to live out the harsh destiny God has described, or no destiny at all. Or perhaps God is testing her... as God is testing Abraham. All she need do is utter a word, and Abraham will not lay a hand on his heir. But if she does so, and her son lives, she may give life also to an unspeakable horror. Before her she sees thousands of innocents, starved and murdered, their bodies lying in the open, each emaciated face the face of Isaac, the sky half dark.

“But if that should happen, what is the blessing? You promised us a blessing! This would only be a curse!”

“No, Sarah. Every good thing I have said is true, and more. If Isaac lives, his descendants—your descendants—will flourish in many things, in many ages. They will love me and I will love them. The other nations will be blessed by them, even if your people are reviled and cursed. And they will always bud and bloom again, like a wild rose, even if what I say comes to pass. This, too, is in your hands.”

“And I must decide.”

“Yes, mother of a nation, you must decide, you alone.”

DAY BREAKS. SARAH WANDERS, SLEEPLESS. AT NIGHT SHE SLEEPS DEEPLY, DREAMING of Isaac. But he is far away, someone else’s child, in some remote land, beyond her grasp.

She awakens early on the third day. It is hot, and the air is heavy. She returns to the place where she spoke to God, and waits. Late in the afternoon, she stands.

“Sarah!”

“*Hineni.*”

“What have you decided?”

“I have only one question and then I will answer you. What will happen to the nations, what will happen to the world, if my people is not to be?”

But without waiting for an answer, she knows it is still worse than the terror of her innocents.

Before her eyes is the sight of a starless sky, and Isaac bloodied. She cries: “Stop!”

And now, suppose that, at that moment, Abraham was standing

poised, the consuming knife raised. And at that very moment, God’s messenger cried: “Abraham, Abraham!”

And if it happened that way,
 God might have said to Sarah as to Abraham,
 “Indeed, because you have done this thing,
 because you have not withheld your son, your only-one,
from the world, Sarah,
 Indeed, I will bless you,
 I will multiply your descendants
 As the stars of the heavens and as the sand on the seashore.
 Your descendants will know final victory over their enemies,
 And through them all the nations of the earth will be blessed,
 Because you heard my voice
And decided well.”

