



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Lech Lecha*

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27

As a young Jewish feminist, I was drawn to a phrase in the story of Abraham and Sarah. God tells Abraham, “everything you are told (to do) by Sarah, shema b’kolah/ listen to/obey her voice.”(Genesis 21:12) This verse becomes an often quoted proof-text for the respect which Jewish husbands should show their wives. I saw this verse as affirming that Judaism had a place for women’s voices, not only in their own homes, but also in public Jewish settings.

Later, as I engaged in deeper study of Biblical texts, and saw the verse in its context, it became troubling. Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael because she feels that her own son, Isaac, is at risk from their continued presence in her home. Abraham is deeply grieved and reluctant to send away his first born son, but God tells him that he must do all which Sarah tells him. I admire Sarah who I believe was as much our spiritual founder as Abraham. However, the cruelty with which she treats Hagar has always been difficult for me read. I wish the Divine statement to listen to Sarah/Jewish women’s voices did not come in such a troubling context.

One of the first things we learn about Sarai and Abram (the original names of Abraham and Sarah) is that they have no children since she was barren. God keeps promising that Abram would be the father of a great nation, but years go by; still Sarai has no children. Sarai eventually decides it is her responsibility to ensure that Abram has children. She gives her servant Hagar to Abram as a wife, with the goal of Hagar’s child being credited to Sarai. What does Abram do? “Abram listens to/ obeys the voice of Sarai”! He doesn’t need a Divine command; he acts as she had instructed him. At first, things go according to Sarai’s plan. Hagar quickly becomes pregnant. But just as quickly, Hagar comes to despise Sarai who cannot tolerate the situation. Sarai treats Hagar so harshly that Hagar runs away. A Divine angel/messenger sends Hagar back to have Abram’s baby. When Sarah finally has her own child, the stage is set for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael at the “voice” of Sarah.

Commentators from early Rabbinic times to our own have struggled with and sometimes attempted to justify Sarah’s actions toward Hagar. In her essay, “Harken to her Voice: Empathy as Tshuva”, Marsha Pravder Mirkin offered a radical re-reading of the phrase “shema b’kolah” which changed my understanding of the entire story. It also gave me a powerful spiritual teaching for working with those facing difficult situations. She points out that the word “shema” means to listen, but usually with the added meaning of to take action based on the listening. “Kolah/ her voice”, is understood in context as “her words”. But what if we took God’s instructions literally? No matter what Sarah tells you, God says to Abraham, listen to her voice! What is the tone, the feeling behind the words? What is she trying to communicate to you from her heart? What if Abram had listened to her pain, sadness, sense of failure when Sarai offered him her

maid? Could he have responded in a way which was more supportive, rather than immediately bringing Hagar into his tent? When Sarah's words demanded the expulsion of Hagar and her son, if Abraham had truly listened to her voice, would he have been able to use his skills as a negotiator to bring peace to his own family? The story, and history, could have been very different.

We are always responsible for trying our best to be aware of, and to explicitly communicate what we feel, need and want to others. However, when we are ill, suffering emotionally or overwhelmed by care-giving, we may not have the internal resources to say the words we mean. Then it is important for our loved ones, or for those who may be trying to help us to listen in a way which goes deeper than our words. I remember trying to see new hospital patient. When I knocked, asking permission to visit, she shouted at me, "No! Go away!" However, there was something in her voice that made me go back later in the day. I knocked nervously and this time she let me in. She explained that she had already had multiple medical professionals poke and prod her that morning. I was the only person she could refuse to talk to, and she needed the power to say "no". Because I had listened to her voice, even more than her words, we were able to engage in a relationship which lasted through her many hospitalizations.

It can be hurtful to be rebuffed by or imposed on by an ill loved one and we may take their words literally. Unless we are willing to listen more deeply, we risk missing what is really being communicated. It also works in the other direction. Those who want to help need to remember that our voices also send a message. Our tone, whether impatient, or compassionate, can say as much as the words which we actually verbalize. In order to help, we need to make the effort to truly "hear her voice" and to match our voices to the words of caring which we offer.

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