

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Eyes Have It: Looking at the Text

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Matthias Stom's "Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham" (c. 1638)—brought to my attention by Mimi Kaplan, a student at the Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies of The Jewish Theological Seminary—is a proverbial picture worth a thousand words. The three figures, in three different stages of (un)dress, looking in three different directions, encapsulate the difficulties they will encounter as their lives become further entangled. Although Abraham and Sarah almost seem to be communicating, their left hands open, facing upward toward each other, Sarah looks not at Abraham, but off into space. No one is happy; this situation will rapidly deteriorate.

Stom's depiction of the bodies indicates that Sarah, the only figure who is fully clothed—albeit in the garb of a contemporary matron—will be the dominant figure, the one who has her way at this point and who will continue to prevail. Hagar, her body full and youthful, one breast revealed to project her fertility, clothed in seductive red, cannot even direct her own hand. Sarah deprives her slave of agency, literally forcing her hand. No Kierkegaardian "knight of faith," Abraham, his torso revealed, is old, gaunt, and weak, supporting himself on an elbow. No wonder Hagar hesitates to approach him.

Stom's painting constitutes a midrash on Genesis 16:1-3, providing the viewer with a concise visual interpretation of the emotions swirling in the biblical text.

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Parashat Lekh Lekha 5776

פרשת לך לך תשע"ו



A Lesson for Abraham

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Lekh Lekha was the first parashah I ever learned. As kids in Hebrew school, we were not taught Bereishit or Noah, probably because of the theological questions they would raise. We began Bible study with Lekh Lekha. I am happy to return to it as an adult and try to understand its message anew.

But first, a few details from last week's Parashat Noah. The concluding unit (Genesis 11:27-32) says that Terah had three sons—Abram, Nahor, and Haran—and that Haran died young, leaving a son, Lot. It also says that Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren. That detail foreshadows what will happen to Sarai in the coming chapters. But of what significance is the fact that Lot is an orphan? The Torah does not mention biographical data in vain. The penultimate verse of Parashat Noah relates that Terah moved himself, Abram, Sarai, and Lot from Ur Kasdim to Haran, although his stated destination is Canaan.

Rather than focus on Abram, as do many commentators, let's look at Sarai and Lot, his two closest relatives, as their story reveals itself in this week's parashah.

Lekh Lekha (Genesis 12-18) opens with God telling Abram to leave Haran and travel to Canaan. He follows God's command and takes his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and relocates. Chapter 13 reports that both Abram and Lot are wealthy, which suggests that God rewarded them for the move. When their shepherds fight with each other over grazing land, separation of the two households becomes necessary. Abram magnanimously tells Lot that he gets first choice of where to settle. Lot picks the fertile Jordan plain. Later, in Chapter 14, when the four kings go to war with the five city states, among

them Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, his wives, and other members of his household are captured by one of the kings. Word soon reaches Abram of Lot's indisposition. He hurriedly organizes his private army to rescue him. It seems that Abram views Lot as his own progeny, which is not so surprising since Sarai is barren and Lot's father dead. In all, Abram is active with regard to Lot, taking him to Canaan, offering him choice land, and saving him when kidnapped.

We now turn to Sarai. In Chapter 12, right after God tells Abram that his descendants will inherit the land, a famine forces Abram and family to leave Canaan and seek food elsewhere. Egypt is their destination, but before arriving there, Abram tells Sarai to lie regarding who she is. If she admits to being his wife, they will likely kill him and take her. But if she says she is his sister, they will leave Abram alone. The couple arrives in Egypt. When the king's courtiers see how beautiful Sarai is, she is taken to Pharaoh's palace. Abram does not try to retrieve her, but God comes to her rescue, visiting plagues on Pharaoh, who then releases Sarai and showers Abram with gifts.

The next episode involving Sarai appears in Chapter 16. A childless Sarai gives her handmaid Hagar to Abram so that together they may produce a child. Hagar becomes pregnant and begins to treat her mistress with disdain. At this point, Sarai turns to Abram and says "*hamasi alekha*" (v. 5), meaning, "I am furious with you." Rather than intervening in the dispute, Abram tells Sarai to do as she wishes. She treats Hagar harshly, causing her to flee to the desert. An angel of God appears to the distraught woman and reassures her that the son to whom she will give birth will become a populous nation. Again we see that God, or an angel of God—but not Abram—deals with the difficult situation.

The last episode involving Sarai appears in Chapter 17. God tells Abram that from then on his name will be Abraham, with an added letter *heh*. The meaning of the new name is that Abraham will be the father of many nations, "*av hamon goyim*" (v. 4). God changes Sarai's name to Sarah, also giving her the letter *heh*, and also saying that she will give rise to many nations. That is, God treats the two of them with parity.

If we now compare the two sets of episodes, we see a startling difference: regarding Lot, Abram is as solicitous as can be, actively involving himself in

every aspect of Lot's life, even risking his own life in order to free Lot from his captors. Regarding Sarai, Abram behaves in the opposite manner. He does nothing to get her back from Pharaoh, or does he help her when she gets into a row with her maidservant.

It is God, in this parashah, who models—for Abram's benefit, and for our own—commendable, compassionate behavior. It is God who saved Sarai from Pharaoh, who resolved her spat with Hagar, and who changed her name in the same manner as Abram's. The import of these many episodes seems to be that Abram should imitate God and take just as active an interest in his wife's life as in his nephew's, rather than remaining passive and letting events run their course.

This is certainly not the lesson I learned about Abraham in Hebrew School. But it is the lesson I now see in these texts many years later, having developed over time both subtler reading techniques as well as a feminist sensibility in my approach to our Jewish textual heritage.

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