



# **Sarah's Laugh: Doubt, Trust, and the Ambiguity of the Womb**

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## Genesis 11:30

(30) Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

בראשית י"א:ל'

(ל) וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וְלֶדָּ:

**Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, pp. 73-74**

Against the flow of generations of chapter 11 - "This is the line of Shem..." (11:10) - is set the central absence of Abraham's life: "Sarai was barren, she had no child" (11:30). *Toledot*, the word translated here as "line" and more commonly as "generations," is rich with a sense of the power of generation, of the multiple birthings, the realized consequences of potentialities inherent in each lifespan. And, ironically, it is the root of this word (*vlad*) that is used to refer to Sarai's childlessness: it is precisely this that she has not: the *vlad* that is the barest notation for some expression of self that lives on beyond self, an essence projected toward eternity.

"She had no child" - *ein la vlad* - the three pungent Hebrew words are freighted with irony. For this significant pair are marked by an emptiness, while all the "dying generations" (Yeats) effortlessly reproduce themselves. This is essentially the business of all other lives, as each generation enacts an identical ritual: the individual, generated by his father, lives a specified number of years; he then generates, projects a version of self beyond self, after which he lives a further tally of years and produces "sons and daughters." In this scheme, a central act of self-propagation is flanked by a period of biological fertility. The expectation built up by the repeated formula is brought to a head in the almost feverish emphasis on Terah's generativeness: clearly, the narrative is closing in on its focus.

But here the rhythm changes: there is death (not the natural kind, but before the shocked face of the father [11:28]), and there is sterility. The resounding negation *ein la vlad* cruelly confirms: what was expected as part of the natural thrust of existence is not. Here the language of the Torah enacts what Bergson calls "the peculiar possibility of the negative." In nature, Bergson argues, there are no negative conditions; only in the realm of consciousness, of desire and expectation, disappointment and frustration, does the knowledge of the negative exist. Memory and imagination attach to a phantom object, in this case the *vlad*, the offspring, which bestrides positive reality and cries out *ein* - "no!" "Every human action has its starting-point in a dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling of absence."

The "human action" of Abram and Sarai begins in this absence. The midrash expresses this paradox of generation as follows: "Whenever it is written '*Ein la* - there is not,' there essentially is.... What is suggested here in this first human experience of *ein* is a new and difficult mode of being and having: absence leads a man and a woman to travel far in search of a realization of self that comes effortlessly to those who preceded and surrounded them.

**Bereishit Rabbah 38:14**

...Now Sarai was barren, etc. Rabbi Levi said: "every place where it says "*Ein la*", she has. "Now Sarai was barren she has no child," she has, "And God remembered Sarah." "And Penina had children and Hannah had no children," she

בראשית רבה ל"ח:י"ד

(יד) (בראשית יא, ל): וַתְּהִי שָׂרִי עֲקָרָה וְגו': אָמַר רַבִּי לְוִי בְּכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אֵין לָהּ, הִנּוּהָ לָהּ. וַתְּהִי שָׂרָה עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וְלֹד, הִנּוּהָ לָהּ, וַיִּפְקֹד אֶת שָׂרָה וְגו'. (שמואל א א, ה): וַיְהִי לְפַנְיָהּ יְלָדִים וּלְחַנָּה אֵין יְלָדִים, וְהִנּוּהָ לָהּ, (שמואל א

had: "Because God took note of Hannah and she conceived and gave birth." "That Zion whom no one seeks out," she has: "He shall come as redeemer to Zion." "Shout, O barren one, You who bore no child! Shout aloud for joy."

ב, כא): כִּי פָקַד יי אֶת חַנָּה וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד וגו'. (ירמיה ל, יז): צִיּוֹן הִיא דִרְשׁ אִין לָהּ, וְהָיָה לָהּ (ישעיה נט, כ): וּבָא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל, (ישעיה נד, א): רְנִי עֲקָרָה לֹא יִלְדָה פִּצְחֵי רִנָּה וְצִהְלִי.

**Genesis 18:10-15**

בראשית י"ח:י"ט-י"ו

(10) Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. (11) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having her periods. (12) And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I've lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" (13) Then " said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' (14) Is anything too wondrous for " ? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son." (15) Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. Came the reply, "You did laugh."

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהָיָה-בְּךָ לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שָׁמְעֶת פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו: (יא) וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמִים חֲדָלִי לְהַיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אַרְחַ כְּנָשִׁים: (יב) וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֵיטֵה-לִּי עֲדָנָה וְאֵדְנִי זְקוּן: (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל-אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צָחַקְתָּ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּךְ וְאֲנִי זְקֵנָתִי: (יד) הֲיִפְלֵא מִי דְבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְלְשָׂרָה בֵּן: (טו) וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי וַיִּרְאֶה וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צָחַקְתִּי:

**Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, The Beginning of Desire, pp. 76-77**

"Sarai was barren" - the barrenness of Sarai evokes the other meaning of the word *akara*: the couple is uprooted, the ground cut from under their feet. Voluntarily, they respond to a call to alienation from all that gives self a placement in the world. By removing themselves from the normal conditions of fruitfulness, they - at least on the face of things - cut off vital sources of nourishment, doom themselves to sterile nomadic existence, in which no organic fibers of connection and fertility can grow.... An act of radical discontinuity is, it seems, depicted in the Torah as the essential basis for all continuity: for that act of birth that will engender the body and the soul of a new kind of nation...

However, the midrash allows us no facile resolution of the tension of their lives: "He makes the *akara*, the woman is the essence of the house [lit., the barren woman] to sit as the happy mother of children' [Psalms 113:9]: this refers to Sarai, as it is said, 'And Sarai was *akara* - barren.'" Sarai is described as both the barren one and the joyous mother; these are not simply successive stages of a life, but both remain necessary functions of her identity. Her later happiness never obviates the twin image of alienation: the pun that the midrash sets in focus insists on alienation-sterility as the very condition of Sarai's significant maternity.

## Psalms 139

(1) For the leader. Of David. A psalm.  
O LORD, You have examined me and know me. (2) When I sit down or stand up You know it;  
You discern my thoughts from afar. (3) You observe<sup>a</sup> my walking and reclining, and are familiar with all my ways. (4) There is not a word on my tongue but that You, O LORD, know it well. (5) You hedge me before and behind; You lay Your hand upon me. (6) It is beyond my knowledge; it is a mystery; I cannot fathom it. (7) Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? (8) If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too. (9) If I take wing with the dawn to come to rest on the western horizon, (10) even there Your hand will be guiding me, Your right hand will be holding me fast. (11) If I say, "Surely darkness will conceal me, night will provide me with cover,"<sup>b</sup> (12) darkness is not dark for You; night is as light as day; darkness and light are the same. (13) It was You who created my conscience; **You fashioned me in my mother's womb.** (14) I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made; Your work is wonderful;

תהילים קל"ט

(א) לְמַנְצַח לְדָוִד מְזֻמָּר יי  
חִקְרַתְנִי וַתִּדְעֵ: (ב) אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ  
שְׁבַתִּי וְקוּמִי בְּנִתְּהָ לְרַעִי  
מִרְחוֹק: (ג) אֶרְחִי וְרַבְעִי זִרְיָתָ  
וְכָל־דַּרְכֵי הַסִּפְנֹתָה: (ד) כִּי אֲנִי  
מְלָה בְּלִשׁוֹנִי הֵן יי יָדַעְתָּ כְּלָה:  
(ה) אַחֲזֹר וְקַדַּם צַרְתָּנִי וַתִּשָּׂא  
עָלַי כַּפְּכָה: (ו) (פְּלִיאָה)  
[פְּלִיאָה] דַּעַת מִמֶּנִּי נִשְׁגְּבָה  
לֹא־אֶוְכַל לָהּ: (ז) אֲנָה אֵלֶּךָ  
מִרוּחָה וְאֲנָה מִפְּנֵי אֶבְרָח:  
(ח) אִם־אֶסֶק שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אַתָּה  
וְאֶצִּיעָה שְׁאֵל הַנֶּהָ: (ט) אֲשָׂא  
כַּנְפֵי־שָׁחַר אֶשְׁכְּנֶה בְּאַחַר־יַת  
יָם: (י) גַּם־שָׁם יָדָה תִּנְחַנְּנִי  
וַתִּאחַזְנִי יְמִינֶהָ: (יא) וְאָמַר  
אֶרְחֹשֶׁף יִשׁוּפְנִי וְלִילָה אֲנֹר  
בְּעֵדְנִי: (יב) גַּם־חֹשֶׁף לֹא־  
יִחַשֶׁה מִלְּמֶה וְלִילָה כִּיּוֹם יֵאִיר  
כַּח־שִׁיכָה כְּאוֹרָה: (יג) כִּי־אַתָּה  
קִנִּיתָ כְּלִיתִי תִסְכְּנִי בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי:  
(יד) אוֹדְךָ עַל כִּי נִוְרָאוֹת  
נִפְלִיתִי נִפְלְאִים מַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְנִפְשִׁי  
יָדַעַת מְאֹד: (טו) לֹא־נִכְחַד  
עֲצָמִי מִלְּמֶה אֲשֶׁר־עֲשִׂיתִי בַּסֶּתֶר  
וְקִמְתִּי בְּתַחֲתִיּוֹת אֶרֶץ: (טז)  
גְּלִמִּי וְרָאוּ עֵינַי וְעַל־סִפְרֶךָ

I know it very well. (15) My frame was not concealed from You when I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth. (16) Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them.<sup>a</sup> (17) How weighty Your thoughts seem to me, O God, how great their number! (18) I count them—they exceed the grains of sand; I end—but am still with You. (19) O God, if You would only slay the wicked— you murderers, away from me!— (20) who invoke You for intrigue, Your enemies who swear by You falsely.<sup>a</sup> (21) O LORD, You know I hate those who hate You, and loathe Your adversaries. (22) I feel a perfect hatred toward them; I count them my enemies. (23) Examine me, O God, and know my mind; probe me and know my thoughts. (24) See if I have vexatious ways, and guide me in ways everlasting.

כָּלֵם יִכְתְּבוּ יָמִים יִצְּרוּ (ולא) [ולו] אֶתְּד בָּהֶם: (יז) וְלִי מֵה־ יִקְרוּ רַעִיָה אֶל מִן עֲצָמוֹ רְאִשֵׁיהֶם: (יח) אֶסְפְּרָם מִחֹל יִרְבּוּן הִקִּיצְתִּי וְעוֹדִי עִמָּךְ: (יט) אִם־תִּקְטֹל אֱלֹהִים רָשָׁע וְאֲנֹשִׁי דָמִים סוּרוּ מִנִּי: (כ) אֲשֶׁר לְמַרוֹה לְמִזְמָה נִשְׂוֹא לְשׂוֹא עֲרִיָה: (כא) הֲלוֹא־מִשְׁנֵאֲיָהּ יִי אֲשַׁנָּא וּבִתְקוּמָיָהּ אֶתְקוּטָט: (כב) תִּכְלִית שְׁנֵאָה שְׁנֵאֲתָיִם לְאוֹיְבָיִם הָיוּ לִי: (כג) חִקְרָנִי אֵל וְדַע לְבַבִּי בְּחִנֵּי וְדַע שְׂרַעֲפָי: (כד) וְרֵאָה אִם־דִּדְרָה־ עֲצָב בִּי וְנִחֲנִי בְּדֶרֶךְ עוֹלָם: {פ}

**Isaiah 66:7-11**

(7) Before she labored, she was delivered;  
Before her pangs came, she bore a son.  
(8) Who ever heard the like?  
Who ever witnessed such events?  
Can a land pass through travail  
In a single day?  
Or is a nation born  
All at once?  
Yet Zion travailed  
And at once bore her children! (9) Shall I  
who bring on labor not bring about birth?  
—says the LORD.  
Shall I who cause birth shut the womb?  
—said your God. (10) Rejoice with  
Jerusalem and be glad for her,  
All you who love her!  
Join in her jubilation,  
All you who mourned over her— (11)  
That you may suck from her breast  
Consolation to the full,  
That you may draw from her bosom  
Glory to your delight. 12) For thus said  
the LORD:  
I will extend to her  
Prosperity like a stream,  
The wealth of nations  
Like a wadi in flood;  
And you shall drink of it.  
You shall be carried on shoulders  
And dandled upon knees. (13) As a  
mother comforts her son  
So I will comfort you;

ישעיהו ס"ו:ז-י"א

(ז) בְּטָרַם תַּחֲלִיל יִלְדָה בְּטָרָם  
יָבֹוא תִּבְּל לָהּ וְהַמְּלִיטָה זָכַר:  
(ח) מִי־שָׁמַע כָּזֹאת מִי רָאָה  
כְּאֵלֶּה הַיּוֹחַל אֶרֶץ בְּיָוִם אֶחָד  
אִם־יִגְלַד גּוֹי פַּעַם אַחַת כִּי־תֵלֶה  
גַּם־יִלְדָה צִיּוֹן אֶת־בְּנֵיהָ: (ט)  
הֲאֲנִי אֲשַׁבֵּיר וְלֹא אוֹלִיד יֹאמֶר  
יִי אִם־אֲנִי הַמוֹלִיד וְעֲצַרְתִּי אֹמֶר  
אֶלְקֵיהָ: {ס} (י) שְׂמַחוּ  
אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וְגִילוּ בָּהּ כָּל־  
אֲהַבֶיהָ שִׂישׁוּ אֶתְהָ מְשׁוֹשׁ כָּל־  
הַמְּתֹאבְּלִים עֲלֶיהָ: (יא) לְמַעַן  
תִּינָקוּ וּשְׂבַעְתֶּם מִשֵּׁד תִּנְחַמְיָהּ  
לְמַעַן תִּמְצוּ וְהִתְעַנְגַתֶם מִצִּי  
כְּבוֹדָהּ: {ס}

(יב) כִּי־כֹה | אָמַר יִי הַנְּנִי  
נִטָּה־אֵלֶיהָ כְּנֶהָר שְׁלֹום וּכְנַחַל  
שׁוֹטֵף כְּבוֹד גּוֹיִם וַיִּנְקַתֶם עַל־  
צַד תִּנְשְׂאוּ וְעַל־בְּרָכִים  
תִּשְׁעֶשְׂעוּ: (יג) כָּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר  
אָמַן תִּנְחַמְנוּ כֵּן אֲנֹכִי אֲנַחֲמְכֶם  
וּבִירוּשָׁלַיִם תִּנְחַמוּ:

(יד) וְאֲנֹכִי מַעֲשִׂיהֶם  
וּמַחֲשַׁבְתֵיהֶם בְּאֵה לְקַבֵּץ אֶת־  
כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם וְהַלְשִׁנוֹת וּבָאוּ וְרָאוּ



You shall find comfort in Jerusalem...  
 (18) For I [know] their deeds and  
 purposes.  
 [The time] has come to gather all the  
 nations and tongues; they shall come and  
 behold My glory...  
 (22) For as the new heaven and the new  
 earth  
 Which I will make  
 Shall endure by My will  
 —declares the LORD—  
 So shall your seed and your name  
 endure. (23) And new moon after new  
 moon,  
 And sabbath after sabbath,  
 All flesh shall come to worship Me  
 —said the LORD.

אֶת־כְּבוֹדִי:

(כב) כִּי כְאֲשֶׁר הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 הַחֲדָשִׁים וְהָאָרֶץ הַחֲדָשָׁה אֲשֶׁר  
 אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה עִמָּדִים לְפָנַי נְאֻם־יְיָ  
 כֵּן יַעֲמֵד זִרְעֵכֶם וְשִׁמְכֶם: (כג)  
 וְהָיָה מִדֵּי־חֹדֶשׁ בְּחֻדְשׁוֹ וּמִדֵּי  
 שַׁבָּת בְּשַׁבְּתוֹ יָבֹוא כָּל־בָּשָׂר  
 לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְפָנַי אָמַר יְיָ:

BY YEHUDA AMICHAH  
 TRANSLATED BY CHANA BLOCH  
 from *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*.

יהודה עמיחי

בתום לילה ראשון בלי אמא. אני מציץ  
 דרך גן עדן (בן שנתיים וארבעה חודשים).

### A Child is Something Else Again

A child is something else again. Wakes  
 up  
 in the afternoon and in an instant he's  
 full of words,  
 in an instant he's humming, in an  
 instant warm,  
 instant light, instant darkness.

ילד הוא משהו אחר. מתעורר  
 אחר הצהריים ומיד מלא מילים  
 ומיד מזמזם ומיד חם  
 ומיד אור ומיד חושך.

A child is Job. They've already placed  
their bets on him  
but he doesn't know it. He scratches  
his body  
for pleasure. Nothing hurts yet.  
They're training him to be a polite Job,  
to say "Thank you" when the Lord has  
given,  
to say "You're welcome" when the  
Lord has taken away.

A child is vengeance.  
A child is a missile into the coming  
generations.  
I launched him: I'm still trembling.

A child is something else again: on a  
rainy spring day  
glimpsing the Garden of Eden through  
the fence,  
kissing him in his sleep,  
hearing footsteps in the wet pine  
needles.

A child delivers you from death.  
Child, Garden, Rain, Fate.

ילד הוא איוב שכבר מתערבים עליו,  
והוא לא יודע, הוא מתגרד בגופו  
להנאה ואין עוד כאב.  
ומחנכים אותו להיות איוב מנומס  
לומר "תודה" שאדוני נתן,  
ולומר "בבקשה" שאדוני לקח.

ילד הוא טיל לתוך הדורות הבאים,  
שילחתי אותו: אני עוד רועד ממנו.

ילד הוא משהו אחר: ביום גשם  
אביב להציץ דרך גדר גן עדן,  
לנשק מתוך שינה  
ולשמוע צעדים במחטי האורנים  
הרטובים.

ילד מציל ממוות.  
ילד, גן, גשם וגורל.