

What Should We Call Our First Foremother?

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Twice in this week's parashah our first foremother's name is disrupted. First, when she is abducted into Pharaoh's household in Egypt, she seems to lose her name entirely. Then, in the concluding chapter, God changes her name while she is off screen. In both moments of unnamings, Sarai is voiceless. In both, Avraham receives something grand—a gift, a covenant—while Sarai is elsewhere. Given how similar these two events are for Sarai, it feels like they are asking to be compared. On the other hand, one is an interpersonal episode of a woman suffering while her husband thrives, and the other is the initiation of Avraham's covenant. Can the mistakes Avraham made in Egypt shed light on the holy charge he receives in the conclusion of Parashat Lekh Lekha?

After fleeing to Egypt due to the famine in Canaan, Avraham asks his wife Sarai to masquerade as his sister. He is afraid he will be killed on account of being married to a beautiful woman. The masquerade happens without record of Sarai's verbal consent. Avraham remains unharmed, while Sarai is abducted and married to the Pharaoh against her will. The Torah is very clear—because of her, “things went well for Avraham” (Gen. 12:16). While she is taken into Pharaoh's house, he is lavished with rich gifts.

Many of our commentators try to “fix” this story by insisting Sarai was not harmed during her abduction. Only Ramban comes anywhere close to acknowledging Sarai's pain and Avraham's complicity. On Genesis 12:10 he writes:

Know that Avraham our father sinned a great sin, unintentionally, when he brought his wife, the *tzadeket* (righteous person), to a stumbling block of sin out of his own fear that [the Egyptians] would kill him. He should have had faith that God would save

him . . . On account of this deed, the exile in Egypt at the hands of Pharaoh was decreed for Avraham's descendants.

Ramban finishes this comment with a thematic conclusion from a verse in Ecclesiastes (3:16): “In the place of justice there is evil and sin.” Many of the later commentators take issue with Ramban's choice to blame Avraham for our ancestors' enslavement.

As Ramban and the rest of our commentators argue over whether Avraham sinned, Sarai remains silent. In this silence, she begins to lose her name. Though the Torah often refers to women and girls without names, Sarai is an exception. She is called by her name consistently in the rest of the parashah. Somehow, Egypt is different. Of the 8 verses that describe Avraham and Sarai's time in Egypt, Sarai is mentioned in each but called by her name in only one. For the rest, she is “his wife,” “the woman,” and “she.” In the context of the Egypt episode, the text signals Sarai's objectification, turning her into a woman with no name at all.

Beyond this story, names play another major role in our parashah. In Lekh Lekha's concluding chapter God changes our ancestors' names as the covenant and *brit milah*, ritual male circumcision, begin. In this final episode, our first foremother is just as silent. Physically, she is absent from the name changing encounter with God. Spiritually, she is also absent from the new covenant, which God commands will be ritualized in the blood of only Avraham and the males of the household.

I must imagine that Sarai experienced the parallels. In both stories, she is shunted aside and unnamed while her husband receives grandeur. Still, it is only imagination. Her experience of these two moments remains untold. I am left searching for a lesson in their similarities.

For me, a connection lies in the thematic conclusion Ramban brings from Ecclesiastes 3:16: “In the place of justice there is evil, and in the place of righteousness there is evil.” Avraham and God make the same error to the same effect. They both try to create justice and righteousness, but also create wickedness. Both God and Avraham are acting in a way that, to them, seems just and righteous. Where they fail is in being unable to extend that justice and righteousness to Sarai, and to the women in her household. Avraham is acting in self-defense, but he fails to extend that defense to Sarai. God is acting to connect divine holiness to a people but fails to extend that holiness to the women.

Because of this failure, instead of establishing a covenant that operates for both Avraham and Sarai, God establishes a patriarchy. Sarai is not present for her own name change, and the women who come after her continue to be excluded, for much longer than our exile in Egypt. Perhaps things would have been different if Sarai had reported the parallels she identified between her husband and God. Without Sarai’s voice, it took until Ramban in the 13th century to admit Avraham made a mistake. As for God’s error—we are still in the process of admitting how much damage was done when God made this particular covenant with only the males in mind.

In Berakhot 13a, the Talmud points out another difference between our ancestors’ name changes. Bar Kappara teaches that God commands us all to call Avraham by his new name, and Rabbi Eliezer teaches that God prohibits us from using Avraham’s old name. In contrast, according to the anonymous voice of the Gemara, Sarai gets no such commandment. Only Avraham is told to call Sarai by her new name, Sarah. Others, it seems, can continue to call her other names without violating divine desire. God changes our foremother’s name while she is absent, and we call her Sarah today. And yet, even this divine name change is unstable, perhaps not even meant for our use.

We do not know what she thinks of Egypt, and of the covenant. We do not know what she thinks about her new name. If I could speak to her, this is what I’d want to know most. I wouldn’t ask about Egypt, about the violence some

of us face along the road. I wouldn’t even ask her about being left out of the covenantal moment. She and I have learned those lessons already. Instead, I’d ask her what she wants to be called. And we’d make it a negative commandment to call her by anything else, and a positive commandment to know her name.