

Parshat Lech Lecha: Covenantal Clarity

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Is Sarah a part of God's covenant? At first glance, it isn't clear. She is introduced to us in Bereishit 11:30 as a woman who is not capable of bearing children, a dramatic departure from the list of efficient genealogies that comprises most of Bereishit 11. Several verses later, God tells Sarah's husband Avraham that he will become a great nation, but God does not clarify how this promise of fecundity will be reconciled with Sarah's inability to conceive.

Avraham himself is certainly worried about his continued childlessness. In Bereishit 15:1 God informs Avraham that he will receive a great reward. Avraham responds, "God, what can you give me as I am barren? You have not given me a child. My servant will inherit me." God reassures Avraham that in the future he will have a biological child.

Eventually it is Sarah who decides to take matters into her own hands. She says to Avraham, "Behold God has stopped me from have children. Come please to my maidservant. Perhaps I will be built up through her." In Sarah's understanding God has chosen to deny her a child, but she is hoping to work around this by using a surrogate. Sarah has not given up on having a role in God's covenantal nation. She does not suggest a surrogate just so that Avraham can have a child, but rather so that she, Sarah, can be "built up" through her.

Avraham heeds Sarah's request and one verse later Sarah's maidservant Hagar is pregnant with Avraham's child. Hagar begins to scorn Sarah and Sarah turns furiously to Avraham and says, "That I am wronged is your fault!" This is a curious moment. We understand that Sarah is frustrated and angry with Hagar, but why is she blaming Avraham? Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Yudah in Bereishit Rabbah 45:5 suggests that Sarah is saying "You hear Hagar shaming me and you are silent." Sarah is blaming Avraham for not defending her.¹

The midrash continues:

Rabbi Berechya said in the name of R. Abba: [Sarah is saying,] "I have a grievance against you." It is like two people in prison. The king happens by [the prison]. One of the prisoners calls out, "Execute justice for me." The King says, "Free him!" The prisoner's friend [complains], "I have a grievance against you. If you had said, 'Execute justice for us', then just as you were freed, I would have been freed. But since you said, 'Execute justice for me,'

ר' ברכיה בשם ר' אבא יבעי דיני גבר, לשני בני אדם שהיו חבושים בבית האסורים נמצא המלך עובר, אמר ליה חד תבוע דיקי דידי, אמר אפיקותיה, אמר ליה חבריה יבעי דיני גבר, אילו אמרת תבוע דיקי דידן כמה דאפקרן כן אפקי, וכדו דאמרת תבוע דיקי דידי לך אפיק ולי לא אפיק, כך אילו אמרת הולכים אנו ערירים כמה

¹ Rabbi David Silber suggests a more pointed complaint. He understands Sarah as saying to Avraham, "The way that Hagar treats me is a reflection of how you treat me. She would not dare to disrespect me if you showed me proper respect."

you were freed and I was not freed.” So too if you had said, “We are barren”, as [God] gave you [a child], God would have given me [a child], but since you said, “I am barren”, you were given a child and I was not.

דיהב לך כן יהב לי, וכדו דאמרת וְאֵנֶכִי הוֹלֵךְ עִרְיָי (בראשית טו ב) לך יהב ולי לא יהב.

The prisoner who is left behind complains that if his fellow prisoner had only thought of both of them, they could both be free. Rabbi Berechya’s parable is striking. He imagines that for Sarah childlessness feels like a prison. She is angry at Avraham not just because of Hagar’s insults but because she holds Avraham responsible for the whole situation. When Avraham had the opportunity to make a request of God, he only thought of himself, and he said וְאֵנֶכִי הוֹלֵךְ עִרְיָי *I am barren* (Bereishit 15:2). If only he had included Sarah in his petition, she too might be bearing a child.

Hagar gives birth to Yishmael and Avraham believes that this is his covenantal heir who will become a great nation. Later, when Yishmael is thirteen years old, God tells Avraham that he will have another son, this time with Sarah. Avraham seems unenthused and counters, “Would that Yishmael live before you.”

Abarbanel explains the encounter as follows:

The Holy Blessed One responded to Avraham’s request of *Would that Yishmael live before you* by saying, *But your wife Sarah* as if to say, “Avraham, you thought that all of the good that I said I would do for you was on your account and therefore once you had your son Yishmael you thought the birth of Yitzchak was unnecessary so much so that you asked if Yishmael would live and be before Me in My covenant. Know that this is not correct because Sarah is worthy to have a child - just as you will merit the birth [of the covenantal child] so she will merit.”

השיב הקדוש ברוך הוא לשאלת לו ישמעאל יחיה לפניך באמרו אבל שרה אשתך כאומר אברהם אתה חשבת שכל הטובה אשר יעדת לך לעשות לך יהיה בעבורך ולכן בהיות לך ישמעאל בנך חשבת שתהיה הולדת יצחק ללא צורך עד שמפני זה שאלת אם יחיה ישמעאל ואם יהיה לפני בברית. דע כי אין הדבר כן כי שרה ראוי שתלד לך בן וכמו שאתה בהולדה כן תזכה היא

God promises Avraham that he will become a great nation and Avraham assumes that the covenant is all about him. As long as the child is his, he is unconcerned about its mother. God teaches Avraham that child’s mother, Sarah, is critical to establishing the covenantal people. Women are not incidental to God’s plan, they are equally a part of God’s covenant. Avraham learns this lesson well and in two weeks we will read about the great lengths to which he goes to find the right woman to marry Yitzchak and continue to form God’s covenantal family.



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