



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 3: Parshat Lech Lecha: Slavery and Freedom Begin at Home

Text: Genesis 12

בראשית יב: י נְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וַיֵּרַד אַבְרָם מִצְרָיִם לְגֹר שָׁם פִּי-כַבֵּד הָרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ. יא וְהִי כְּאִשְׁרַת הַקְּרִיב לְבֹא מִצְרָיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה-נָא יַדְעֵתִי כִּי אִשָּׁה זֶפֶת-מִרְעָה אֶתְּ. יב וְהִנֵּה פִי-נִרְאוּ אֶתְךָ הַמִּצְרָיִם וַאֲמָרוּ אִשְׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהִרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאֶתְךָ יִחְיוּ. יג אֲמָרִי-נָא אֵחָתִי אֶתְּ לַמְעַן יִיטֵב-לִי בְּעִבְרַתְךָ וְחַיְתָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְתְּךָ. יד וְהִי כְּבֹא אַבְרָם מִצְרָיִם וַיִּרְאוּ הַמִּצְרָיִם אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה כִּי-יָפָה הִוא מְאֹד. טו וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתָהּ שָׂרַי פְּרָעֹה וַיִּהְלְלוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל-פְּרָעֹה וַתִּשְׁחַח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פְּרָעֹה ה. טז וּלְאַבְרָם הִיטִיב בְּעִבְרַתָּה וַיְהִי-לוֹ צֹאן-וּבָקָר וְחֲמֹרִים וְעַבְדִּים וְשִׁפְחֹת וְנָאֵת נְתִיבִים. יז וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה אֶת-פְּרָעֹה בְּנִגְעִים גְּדֹלִים וְנָאֵת-בֵּיתוֹ עַל-דְּבַר שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם. יח וַיִּקְרָא פְּרָעֹה לְאַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר מַה-זֶּאת עָשִׂיתְ לִי לָמָּה לְ-אֲ-הַגַּדְתָּ לִּי כִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ הִוא. יט לָמָּה אָמַרְתָּ אֵחָתִי הִוא וְאַתָּה אֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אִשְׁתְּךָ קַח וְלֶךְ. כ וַיִּצֹו עָלָיו פְּרָעֹה אַנְשִׁים וַיְשַׁלְּחוּ אֹתוֹ וְנָאֵת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְנָאֵת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ.

Genesis 12: ¹⁰ There was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his spouse Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are." ¹² If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his spouse,' they will kill me and let you live. ¹³ Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

¹⁴ When Avram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. ¹⁵ Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁶ And because of her, it went well with Avram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. ¹⁷ But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the spouse of Avram. ¹⁸ Pharaoh sent for Avram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your spouse?" ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my spouse? Now, here is your spouse; take her and begone!" ²⁰ And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his spouse and all that he possessed.

Genesis 15: ¹² As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him. ¹³ And S/He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; ¹⁴ but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.



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Context & Issues

God addresses Avram (who will soon be renamed Avraham) with the command to leave his home and kin to travel on a journey to an unknown destination. With the promise of blessing, he and Sarai (who will soon be renamed Sarah) head off to Canaan. Fleeing from famine in the land, they descend to Egypt. Returning to the Negev, Avram divides the land and separates from his nephew, Lot. Lot is taken captive by warring kings. He battles for Lot's rescue, and defeats Chedorlaomer and his allies. Avram prospers, but has not born children. God promises that he will have offspring as numerous as the stars. In an extraordinary vision, “between the pieces”, God makes a covenant to assign the land to Avram's descendants.

In an effort to fulfill the promise, Sarai, who has not given birth, offers her maid Hagar to Avram. Once pregnant, Hagar behaves disrespectfully to Sarai who responds harshly. Hagar runs away to a spring where an angel comforts her and bids that she return to Sarai's harsh treatment. Hagar bears a child whom Avram names Ishmael.

God appears again to Avram to strengthen the covenant about the land, to command him to circumcise himself and every male as a sign of the covenant, to rename him Avraham, and Sarai, Sara. Sarah will bear the child Yitzchak who will inherit the covenant; Ishmael will bear 12 princes. Avraham circumcises himself and all males among his community.

Explorations

While the Torah explains the choice of Noah as a special person in his generation who “walks with God”, the text gives no clear reason for choosing Avram as a father of the Jewish people. Many traditions explain that he initiated belief in One God. Stories tell of how he recognizes the Creator who caused the world and all that is in it, and that he smashes the idols in his father's shop. Mainly, this parasha reveals Avram's character as a faithful, willing, obedient and attentive person, a leader and warrior who has principles. Charged with the responsibility to start a new people and bring awareness of the divine Creator into the world, Avraham and Sarah take on the task with dedication and faith. There is one scene in our parasha that disturbs the ideal of Avraham-- when he and Sarah descend to Egypt.

On the way, Avraham anticipates that the Egyptians will find Sarah's beauty irresistible. He makes a plan to fool the Egyptians, hoping, he says, to save himself and to profit from their lust. He asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister. Avraham states his motives outright, “[that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.](#)” At the same time that Avraham fears for his life, he sees in Sarah's beauty an opportunity to benefit. The text does not explain more about the grounds for Avraham's fears, how he expects the scene to unfold, or what



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might happen to Sarah. She might well be terrified of what awaits her in Egypt—the Torah does not inform us about her feelings. The next thing we know, the Egyptian courtiers are praising her beauty, and Sarah is taken to Pharaoh. In the text, Avraham offers no resistance; he does not try to protect Sarah. Captive under Pharaoh’s control, Sarah is alone, afraid, betrayed, and vulnerable. In the words of a midrash (in Tanchuma on Lekh Lekha 5; also in Genesis Rabba 40 (41) 2), she expresses her anguish,

“Now I have been separated from my father, my mother, and my spouse, and this evil man will approach me and abuse me. Act for the sake of Your great name, and because of my trust in Your word.”

Immediately in the next verse, Avraham “[acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels](#). His expectations about Sarah's beauty, about the Egyptians, and about his benefit are fulfilled.

Meanwhile, Pharaoh suffers plagues. The text explains that the plagues come, "*al devar* -- on account/on the word of Sarai." Most traditional commentaries interpret that Sarah brings the plagues—in her captivity, she takes her destiny in her hands. According to Midrash and Rashi, she summons divine help when Pharaoh approaches her for sex. Midrash describes the scene:

What does the phrase *Because of the word of Sarai* mean? An angel descended with a staff from heaven at that moment, and when Pharaoh approached Sarai to remove her shoe, the angel struck him upon the hand, and when he approached to touch her clothing, the angel struck him again. (Midrash Tanchuma on Lekh Lekha 5; also in Genesis Rabba 40 (41) 2)

Rashi says, "according to her [Sarah's] word [God brought the plague], she tells the angel 'strike' and s/he strikes."

Against Avraham's instruction, Sarah reveals to Pharaoh that she is married to Avraham. Once Pharaoh learns the ruse, he accuses Avraham of lying. Pharaoh shows his integrity in his disgust with Avraham's behavior, and reveals that there was no basis for Avraham's fear for his life. Pharaoh sends them both away with an escort and Avraham keeps his profits.

Sarah being “taken” leads directly to Avraham's winning riches. From the beginning, he expects to profit. By contrast with his willingness to take the goods from Pharaoh when Sarah is taken, a few verses later, after his victory in war, Avraham refuses to accept gifts from the king of Sodom, "I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich'" (Genesis 14:22-23).



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Avraham endangers Sarah's safety. By asking her to lie, and submitting her to captivity in the hands of a foreign king, he also undermines her dignity. Avraham relates to his own spouse, our foremother Sarah as an object of beauty for male pleasure, and participates willingly in using her as an instrument for his benefit. Taking into account the textual and midrashic evidence, it is hard to avoid the painful possibility that Avraham *pimps* Sara.

Soon after this incident in Egypt, God reveals for the first time the future destiny of the Israelites to be enslaved. Perhaps the enslavement comes on account of Avraham's behavior. According to the medieval bible commentator, Ramban, the patriarch's action is a “sign” to his descendants—his behavior affects those who come after him. Ramban relates the 400 years of exile and slavery that the descendants of Sarah and Avraham-- the biblical Israelites'-- suffer at the hands of Pharaoh directly to Avraham's sin.

This text is a family version of the national story told in the biblical Book of Exodus and at our Passover seder tables. This version demonstrates how behavior between spouses affects society, how “the personal is political”--an idea coined in 1970 by Carol Hanisch, a feminist social critic and activist. Avraham abuses his male power over Sarah. Such behavior, betraying the trust, dignity, and respect of a human being, and exploiting her—these acts are at the core of gender, race, and class oppression.

Generations later, Avraham's offspring descend into Egypt and live out this story—suffering slavery at Pharaoh's hands, divine intervention with plagues, and redemption from Egypt with riches. Generations later still, many Jews and non-Jews continue to practice the same abuses in our families, communities, and between nations. This parasha offers the opportunity to face these difficult scenes in the Torah and our lives critically. In these early chapters in the lives of our forebearers, they are at the core of the unfolding of our people and our destiny.

Questions for Discussion

Imagine yourself in Sarah's situation, going to a foreign country, hungry and afraid. The midrash describes Sarah praying and God answering her prayer. What would you do in her place?

Rarely does the Torah directly teach us how to behave; the Torah is more complicated than that. Our forebearers are not heroes whose behavior we can copy directly; they are not ideal characters who never make mistakes. The Torah shows them to us as fully human. With their fears and weaknesses, they bear responsibility for creating a Jewish people, holding onto their vision and testing their faith while dealing with the trials of life. Taking the whole parasha into account, how do you understand the first Jewish couple, Avraham and Sarah as models and/ or teachers?

How can you investigate the idea that the personal is political? Observe the male—female relationships at home, at work, among your friends and associates, and in your community(ies).



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Begin to analyze and discuss connections between the way people treat each other at home, and how these relationships affect public behavior and policies.

Study Links

For an account of some of the main stories that *midrashim* tell of Avraham and Sara, visit [here](#).

[These](#) are some peoples' opinions about who are Jewish heroes throughout history.

[Here](#) is a blog discussing the meaning of “the personal is political”; and a site, [What exactly does the Personal Is Political mean and what does it have to do with me?](#)

On inner biblical interpretation, click on [The Jewish Study Bible](#) by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael A. Fishbane (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Summary of Issues

The forefather of our religion, Avraham, relinquishes our foremother, Sarah to a foreign king, and accepts animals and servants in return. This family story offers insight about how spousal relationships affect society and history. As oppression begins at home, so also liberation from oppression can begin with respect and dignity in our marriages and families.

Methods & Observations

This is what I call a “difficult text”--a text that makes us uncomfortable. We squirm in our chair when we think of our beloved ancestor behaving the way Avraham did in Egypt. Many people prefer to ignore such passages, or to try to apologize for them. Texts like this make studying Torah meaningful—they raise questions about how we relate to sacred traditions and to our lives and society at the same time.

Often, we can learn about one passage in the Torah by comparing it with another. Here we see a link between a story in Genesis--the captivity of Sarah in Pharaoh's hands in Egypt, and a story in Exodus--the enslavement of the Israelites to Pharaoh in Egypt. This is called inter or inner-textual interpretation.

Contact

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