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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Toledot
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On Behalf of His Wife

Torah Reading: Genesis 25:19 - 28:9
Haftarah Reading: Malachi 1:1 - 2:7

Among the several themes that wend their ways through the book of Genesis, one of the most obvious is infertility. Each of the matriarchs – yes, including Leah (Gen. 30:9) – experiences being unable to become pregnant for much of, or at least at some point during her life. In the ancient world, the inability to bear children was a terrible stigma for a woman; down to this day, the experience of infertility for those who wish to bear children and raise a family can be a source of great pain and even sometimes feelings of shame and failure.

With this, and more besides, in mind as I read the particular parashah for this week, I found myself struck by a simple, single verse – in fact, the first half of a verse. It is right at the beginning of the parashah, a statement that could otherwise easily pass by quickly and barely noticed before we get to the real heart of the parashah this week, the conflict between the twin brothers Jacob and Esau:

Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren… (Gen. 25:21)

I believe the subtle significance of this verse emerges when we compare Isaac's response here to those of both his father Abraham and his son Jacob when faced with similar situations, the infertility experienced by Sarah and Rachel.

In Abraham's case, the issue comes up in two incidents that I want to highlight here. The first of these appears in Gen. 15. Abraham (still named Abram at the time) receives a vision of God, in which God opens by reiterating a promise of abundant reward for Abraham's faithfulness. However, Abraham expresses doubts, or at least concerns:

> *"O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless…Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring…" (Gen. 15:2-3)*

What stands out to me here (and which I have emphasized in the citation) is Abraham's focus on himself, on his own childlessness; he makes no mention of Sarah. The second arises when we look closely at the introduction of Hagar and Ishmael into Abraham and Sarah's family life, and more particularly Abraham's role – or rather, his pronounced lack of an active role. The initiative comes from Sarah (Sarai) and Abraham (Abram) follows her lead; "Abram heeded Sarai's request" (Gen. 16:2). He does not (at least according to the biblical text) ask any questions, anticipate any consequences positive (other than fathering a child) or negative, express any resistance, offer any reassurances to Sarah. Similarly when things – predictably? – do not go so smoothly. "The wrong done to me is your fault!" Sarai accuses Abram, but he does not step in to do anything about the situation himself; "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you wish." (Gen. 16:5-6).

As for Jacob, consider his response to Rachel's pain at her childlessness, especially as she sees her sister Leah bear son after son for the husband they have been forced to share:

> *…Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" (Gen. 30:1-2)*

Now, Rachel's claim may be exaggerated and melodramatic, and may even be uncomfortable to modern ears: is a woman (or any person) no better than dead without children? Moreover, Jacob's response may be technically theologically correct, in that has been empirically proven that he is not the infertile one of the two of them, and he does not have divine powers to cure Rachel's infertility. Yet how can one read this exchange without recognizing that she is in great pain, and that his response is insensitive at best, cruel at worst? Rachel must resort to the same strategy, as did her husband's grandmother, giving Jacob her slave woman Bilhah to serve as a surrogate. Again, the patriarch complies without expressing any apparent resistance or doubts about this course of action.

In her feminist and woman-centered reading of the Torah, The Five Books of Miriam, Ellen Frankel focuses on Rebecca's apparent silence in Gen. 25, wondering why the reader is not told of any prayers she undertook on her own behalf. Noting the very contrasts I have outlined above between the three generations, she asks, "Why doesn't she act on her behalf, like Sarah, who gives Abraham her slave to bear a child in her stead, or Rachel, who resorts to both surrogacy and the magical

power of mandrakes to overcome her infertility?" (40). She then goes on to provide several possible answers (in the names of various women of biblical and rabbinic history, and of Jewish legend, including Rebecca herself), but I want to suggest – at least this week – that the question might not be the right one, or rather, might not be the only and best possible one to ask at this moment.

The fundamental question I want to pose this week is one of empathy. As I have already hinted above – although each generation includes a story of a woman who experiences infertility, should that infertility be her problem alone? In addition, if it is a problem for a man (as it is for Abraham), is it only his problem? The response of each of our patriarchs, each husband of an infertile matriarch, is as of as much significance as the women's responses. Moreover, it is not clear that either Abraham or Jacob shows the kind of thoughtfulness and empathy for their barren wives that we would have hoped and expected to see of persons we revere as our spiritual as well as more literal ancestors.

In the cases of Sarah and Rachel, Frankel imagines each speaking directly to the empathy she seeks from her husband yet feels she does not receive:

> *Sarah: "When the tables were turned—when Abraham thrust me into the beds of Pharaoh and Abimelekh—I remained faithful!... Abraham mistook my gesture, thinking I was giving him a mistress, not a son. Thus, he failed to honor my act… Had he acknowledged my pain and sacrifice…Ishmael might have received the birthright." (19)*
>
> *Rachel: "I turned to Jacob out of despair, since Shekhinah failed to answer my prayers. However, he only responded in anger, mocking me… He misinterpreted my cry of pain as blasphemy, blaming me as if I was expecting divine favors from him instead of God. I felt judged by him, as though I somehow deserved my barrenness." (56)*

Nor is this failure of empathy only visible to a modern eye. The midrashic commentary in Genesis Rabbah 71:10 notes the contrast between Isaac's response and Jacob's, and (although the passage somewhat attempts to exonerate Abraham) the rabbinic judgment of Jacob is unmistakable:

The Holy Blessed One said to him (Jacob): Is this how one responds to women in distress?! By your life, your sons are destined to stand before her son (i.e., Joseph)!

> *"…and he said, 'Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?'" – [he said to her:] from you He has denied, from me He has not denied.*
>
> *She said to him: Thus, your father did for your mother – did he not gird his loins (in prayer) on her behalf?*
>
> *He said to her: He did not have children, I have children.*
>
> *She said to him: Your grandfather had children (i.e., Ishmael) and he girded his loins regarding Sarah.*
>
> *He said to her: You could do what my grandmother did.*
>
> *She said to him: And what did she do?*

He said: She brought her slave woman into her house (i.e., to her husband).

She said: If it is this thing that is preventing (me from having children), "Here is my slave woman Bilhah; cohabit with her…that through her I too may have children" (Gen. 30:3) – just as that woman (Sarah) had children through her slave woman, so too this woman (Rachel) will have children through her slave woman.

When someone we hold dear is suffering, the question is not just how should they respond, but how should we respond, especially, but surely not only, when that suffering implicates and touches us as well. This is the lack of empathy for which the rabbis critique Jacob. Conversely, empathy also may entail recognizing that suffering is not only our own, that others may be suffering together with us, or suffering something similar to us; ideally our suffering becomes an opening to empathy with other sufferers and not just an occasion for self-pity. This, I would suggest, is the difficulty when Abraham sees childlessness as particularly his own problem.

Only Isaac seems to realize how Rebecca's barrenness is not something apart from him. He refuses to accept the situation as an individualized problem that one or the other of them suffers alone, and takes it as his responsibility to respond with her and on her behalf. That it is Isaac who steps forward to pray, as Rebecca's advocate can be understood as a profound act of empathy and caring.

Moreover, in this week, at a time when it seems as though our empathy for each other is too often in short supply, and yet so desperately needed, may Isaac be an example for us all. May we see those who are suffering and need, even when we ourselves might also be suffering and in need – and may others see us. May we see and pray for – and act on behalf of! – Not only ourselves and our own needs this Shabbat and beyond, but for the needs of our loved ones, our friends and neighbors, our fellow citizens, and all of God's creation, all of us for each other.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD, *is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.*

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