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# When Your Journey is Barren

Sarah Marcus-Donnelly ('02) | BronfmanTorah | Lech-Lecha 2017

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A few months ago, when I signed on to write about this parasha, I only thought about Abram and Sarai's journey. I quickly thought, "Yes, to go forth. Great." I had forgotten all about the complications, of course. How women have so little agency over their bodies, so little ownership. But, more, I forgot about Sarah's barrenness, and the thought of writing about infertility, even someone else's, took my breath away for a moment.

G-d begins by telling Abram to: "Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing." We've all taken journeys that require faith. Faith is the knowledge and confidence that everything is going to work out. Faith is the belief that the journey, the uncertainty, the movement and trust, the deep and permanent transformation is going to be worth it. In essence, this portion is about building relationships with a Higher Power and with a partner that foster sureness in our purpose.

Last month, my husband and I were lucky enough to travel to Israel together with

the organization Honeymoon Israel. Their mission is to continue to nurture inclusive “communities of couples who are building families with deep and meaningful connections to Jewish life and the Jewish people.” It was my husband’s first time in Israel, and it was glorious to watch him experience this magic for the first time. We have been on our own long and arduous journey of infertility for a while now. We were in a new place with a both novel and well-worn set of circumstances to endure. We went to Tsfat and sat in the “fertility chair” of Eliyahu at the Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue where our Rabbi was kind enough to say a blessing over us. We stood on the Zodiac Bridge in Tel Aviv, looked out at the Mediterranean, and made a wish. We placed heartfelt, tearful prayers in the Wailing Wall. At first, these gestures offered moments of renewed hope, but we returned to find ourselves essentially in the same place we started.

How does one keep moving with grace and optimism? When we experience suffering we often don’t understand what we have done (or not done) to deserve such pain when others seem to get what we want so easily. I am reminded of the first instance of surrogacy. Sarai says to Abram, “Seeing as G-d has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave; maybe I will have a son through her.” At this point, she believes that she will adopt Hagar’s child. I can imagine the immense pressure Sarai must have felt. She tries to “fix” her suffering by offering Hagar as her surrogate, but only finds more misery in this process.

As most things biblical, this is complicated. I find this part of the story particularly difficult because slaves, by definition, are not free and therefore cannot consent to sex. Also, it is painful to see Hagar become pregnant so quickly, and naturally, Sarai grows jealous and is mean to Hagar, so Hagar flees. It is remarkable that G-d doesn’t punish Sarai for her unfair treatment of Hagar.

While we are walking through difficulty, it is seemingly impossible to understand the deeper meaning behind our suffering. It is hard to find credence in the belief that everything in G-d’s universe is connected. Everything is rooted in a divine love. Was Sarai being tested for the covenant? The suffering Sarai experiences makes the birth of Isaac that much more joyful. The intense pain and struggle of infertility is exactly what makes Isaac’s birth miraculous and momentous. A hero is birthed from her devastation. It’s worth noting that, although today we know either or both partners

may be responsible, barrenness and the problem of infertility in Torah is placed solely on women. This seems strange, because while women are often marginalized and disfavored, barrenness becomes women's only vehicle for direct or indirect communication with G-d. Are these women (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah among countless unmentioned others) somehow singled out? It is never implied that their infertility is a punishment. Can we redefine what it means to be "fruitful"? The Torah tells us that there are higher values in life than having children, but what if our Jewish matriarchs were ultimately unable to conceive, or conversely, were easily able to conceive? Would they have missed out on the communion with G-d? Would Hannah (the first woman to speak from her heart to G-d) have found it in her heart to pray otherwise?

Eventually, G-d changes Sarai's name to Sarah and tells Abram, now Abraham, that he will bless them with a son. G-d says, "I will bless her and she shall become nations; rulers of peoples shall come from her." Sarah is 90 years old when this promise is made. I've read a lot of commentary about how the Rabbis were troubled by both Sarah and Hagar's behavior, but truly, under their sets of circumstances, what choices did they have available to them? They were set up to fail under a patriarchal system, where like today, having children is a source of status. Presently, modern medicine affords us so many possibilities, and we are blessed with new and exciting opportunities to support and hold each other up. And, fortunately, we have evolved mentally and emotionally; so when we hear of someone's struggle, regardless of its nature, what if instead of offering a solution ("Have you tried acupuncture?" "My brother's fiancée's cousin's dad did..." "You should stay more positive."), we were present for the struggle? What if we were steadfast witnesses? What if we listened? What if we asked, "What do you need right now?"

What I take away from this parasha is that we can choose to find the gifts in struggle and in grief. Without hardship, success is hardly as captivating and gratifying. My friend Ruchi recently reminded me that "the joy of achieving something is directly proportional to the struggle that a person had to go through to get there." When I pray for my struggle to be lifted, like Sarai, I become vulnerable to resentment and I am likely to lash out. I become vulnerable to being angry with G-d. Perhaps, if we approach struggle from a place of acceptance, we will not have

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to pray it away and can instead choose to focus on asking for the strength, direction, guidance, and tools we need to meet each specific challenge. What if our struggle is an opportunity to grow closer to G-d?

Shabbat Shalom.

*Continue the conversation. Send Sarah your thoughts:*

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*P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.*

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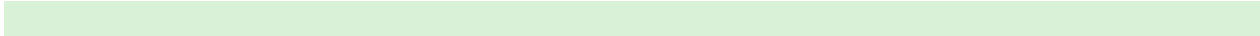
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