

Parashat Lech L'cha: Genesis 12:1-17:27

October 24, 2015 / 11 Cheshvan 5776

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Brief Outline:

- 1) Avram's call and Avram/Sarai's journey begins - (12:1-9)
- 2) Relating to Others
 - Avram/Sarai sister-wife narrative, trick Pharaoh (12:10-20)
 - Avram and Lot (13:1-13)
 - Covenant promise (vv. 14-18)
 - Avram as warrior (14:1-24)
- 3) Furthering the Covenant (15:1-21)
- 4) Hagar (16:1-16)
- 5) Avram's (Abraham's) Brit (17:1-27)
 - Covenant/Implications of Brit
 - Promises of a child through Sarah
 - Adoption of circumcision sign

Text for deeper study, (16:1-16) The Tale of Hagar¹:

1 וְשָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָהּ לוֹ וְלֵאמֹר שְׂפָחָה מִצְרַיִת וְשָׂמָהּ הָגָר: 2 וְתֹאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלְּדוֹת בְּאִנָּה אֶל-שְׂפָחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי: 3 וְתִקַּח שָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת-אַבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרַיִת שְׂפָחָתָהּ מִקֶּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשֵׁבֶת אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: 4 וַיְבֵא אֶל-הָגָר וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד בְּיָמֵי הָרְחֵל וַתִּקַּל גְּבֻרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ:

1 Sarai, Avram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Avram, "Look, יהוה has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Avram heeded Sarai's request. 3 So Sarai, Avram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian-after Avram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years-and gave her to her husband Avram as concubine. 4 He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, **her mistress was lowered in her esteem.**

"To die without descendants is, in the Bible's view, the worst of all possible fates; the threat of this is the most powerful divine sanction, (called *karet*). This is Sarah's concern, for she expresses the desire to be built up through her handmaiden Hagar. But making a slave a surrogate mother carries the danger that the slave will start thinking herself a wife and become a rival to the wife herself. [This] thing happens to Sarah when Hagar begins to treat her with less honor.... Sarah, knowing that her position depends entirely on Abraham, is frightened when Hagar no longer acts deferential toward her. Sarah begins to abuse her - to treat her without the respect her new status as pregnant concubine demands." -Tikva Frymer Kensky, "Family in the Hebrew Bible," p. 62, in *Religion Feminism, and the Family*, Carr and Leeuw, ed., 1996.

¹ Translation from JPS TaNaKh

5 ותאמר שרי אל-אברם חמסי עליך אנכי נתתי שפחתי בחיקך ותרא כי הרתה ואקל בעיניך ישפט יהוה ביני וביניך: 6 ויאמר אברם אל-שרי הנה שפחתך ביזך עשילה הטוב בעיניך ותענה שרי ותברח מפניה: 7 וימצאה מלאך יהוה על-עין המים במדבר על-העין בדרך שור: 8 ויאמר הָגָר שפחת שרי אי-מזה באת ואנה תלכי ותאמר מפני שרי גברתי אנכי ברכת:

5 And Sarai said to Avram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, **I am lowered in her esteem.** decide between you and me!" 6 Avram said to Sarai, "**Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.**" Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her. 7 An angel of יהוה found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, 8 and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

9 ויאמר לה מלאך יהוה שובי אל-גברתך והתעני תחת ידיה: 10 ויאמר לה מלאך יהוה הרבה ארבה את-זרעך ולא יספר מרב: 11 ויאמר לה מלאך יהוה הנך הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו ישמעאל כי-שמע יהוה אל-עניך: 12 והוא יהיה פרא אדם ידו בכל ויד כל בו ועל-פני כל-אחיו ישכון:

9 And the angel of יהוה said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and **submit to her harsh treatment.**" 10 And the angel of יהוה said to her, "I will greatly increase your offspring, And they shall be too many to count." 11 The angel of יהוה said to her further, "Behold, you are with child And shall bear a son; You shall call him Ishmael, For יהוה has paid heed to your suffering. 12 He shall be a wild ass of a man; His hand against everyone, And everyone's hand against him; He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen."

13 ותקרא שם-יהוה הדבר אליה אתה אל ראי כי אמנה הגם הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי: 14 על-כן קרא לבאר באר לחי ראי הנה בירקדש ובין ברד: 15 ותלד הגר לאברם בן ויקרא אברם שם-בנו אשר-ילדה הגר ישמעאל: 16 ואברם בן-שמונים שנה ושש שנים בלדת-הגר את-ישמעאל לאברם: (ס)

13 And she called יהוה who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered. — 15 Hagar bore a son to Avram, and Avram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. 16 Avram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Avram.

For Our Discussion and Consideration:

- What was the nature of the “harsh treatment” Sarai inflicted on Hagar, indicated by the Hebrew word *‘inah*, a word also associated with instances of rape and slavery in the Bible?
 - Women’s Commentary: the same words describes the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 1:11)
- How do we relate to the issues of status expressed in the text? Especially 16:4, Hagar became an object of scorn, or literally - lightweight in her eyes (derived from the Hebrew word, *ka*). Then immediately following, Sarai claims that indeed the concern is the loss of her own status.
- And what of Avram? What is his role or responsibility in this conflict?
 - Rashi quotes Genesis Rabbah 45:5:

חמסי עליך: חמס העשוי לי, עליך אני מטיל העונש, כשהתפללת להקב"ה מה תתן לי ואנכי הולך ערירי, לא התפללת אלא עליך, והיה לך להתפלל על שנינו והייתי אני נפקדת עמך. ועוד, דבריך אתה חומס ממני שאתה שומע בזיוני ושותק

May my injustice be upon you (meaning: upon you, Avram): [For] the injustice that has been done to me, I lay the punishment upon you. When you prayed to God, “What will You give me, since I am going childless?” you prayed only for yourself, whereas you should have prayed for both of us, and I would have been remembered with you. Moreover, you are stealing from me your [protective] words, for you hear my degradation, and you remain silent (i.e., you are depriving me of the words you should have spoken to Hagar to reprimand her on my behalf).

- Hagar leaves and flees to the desert temporarily. What foreshadowing do we find in this first moment of desperation?
- What does the Torah’s treatment of the characters tell us about them? What clues do we have: Who speaks? Who is silent?
 - How is God portrayed in this text?