

In this week's parashah, Lech Lecha, Hashem commands Avram to go forth from his land, his birth place, his family home to wander to place that Hashem will reveal.

I have spoken in the past of the profundity of Avram and Sarai's sensitivity and receptivity to the Divine call. But I realized this week that when I have spoken in the past about *their* revelation and *their* response, it hasn't been quite accurate. The text in Genesis 12 says that God spoke to Avram and offered the instruction and promise of blessing, and then in verse 4, it says that Avram "took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had made in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan."

Contrary to how I have spoken of Avram and Sarai in the past, as joint recipients of revelation, this text plainly suggests that Avram was the sole recipient, and Sarai just went along for the ride. This is not to say that she herself did not have great faith. In fact, a midrash from Bereshit Rabbah 39:14 suggests that Sarai and Avram were partners in the work of formulating the first Jewish community. Commenting on the line "the souls that they had made," Rabbi Elazar bar Zimra teaches "Anyone who brings an idolater close and converts them [willingly] to Judaism, is considered as if they helped create that person. And why does it say "the souls they made," rather than "the souls he made"? Rav Huna says, Avraham converted the men and Sarai converted the women."

So while I have discussed what it means to respond to revelation, this year, I am moved to consider Sarai's position, and particularly what it means to act on faith without revelation. Sarai was surrounded by people who had intimate encounters with God: of course, her husband and her son, Isaac, even her maidservant Hagar.

. . but Sarai herself never received her own revelation. The closest she comes to her own revelation in Torah is when she hears an angel scolding her for laughing at God's promise that she will bear a son. And yet, she was in many midrashic texts as well as in the plain text of Torah, a powerful partner to Avraham in forming the first Jewish household.

This has its costs. Early in the Torah portion, Avram and Sarai wind up in Egypt during a famine, and Avram asks Sarai to pretend that Avram is her brother rather than her husband, lest the Egyptians kill him so that one of them can claim her for her beauty. The text does not tell us her response to this request, but it does say the deception is carried out. The Egyptian courtiers take Sarai to Pharaoh's harem, and Avram received many gifts. To put it most starkly, we can say that Avram, despite his revelation, lacked faith and sold his wife, by pretending to be her brother. Indeed, that is exactly what the commentator Nachmanides says: "Know that Abraham our father greatly missed the mark by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings for G-d surely has the power to help and to save."

Pharaoh is afflicted with a plague before he can molest Sarai, and so she is restored to Avram. But there is a very poignant midrash that imagines Sarai separated from Avram during that fearful night in the palace, as she awaits Pharaoh's advances, not knowing her fate. Bereshit Rabbah 41:2 teaches, "that whole night, Sarah was prostrate on her face and saying, "Master of the worlds, Avraham went out by a promise, and I went out with [only] faith. Avraham is outside the prison, and I am inside the prison!"

As Rabbi Avia Richman pointed out in a dvar Torah for Hadar this week, it remarkable that he sages imagine this as the first instance of petitionary prayer by any of our forebears. Richman writes that this first prayer comes “not from a figure who is in direct relationship and regular conversation with God, but from someone who has no reason to believe God will do anything for her. In Avivah Zornberg’s words, hers is a faith of “grim realism.” God has never spoken to 6 her and never indicated an interest in her own future. Nonetheless she decides to articulate the fragility of her position, and the untenable nature of her reality, directly to God.”<sup>1</sup>

I find this kind of faith, the spontaneous, tenuous faith of Sarai, quite an inspirational model, and deeply relatable. We often think of faith as all or nothing. We often imagine faithful people to be like Abraham, moving through the world with a confidence of the rightness of their beliefs. And many people do have a consistent faith that consistently nourishes them and guides them. If you are one of them, good for you: that kind of faith can be deeply comforting and motivational.

And of course there are people completely confident and certain in their faithlessness; that there is no supernatural God and we’re on our own here.

But, of course, as I mentioned earlier, even Avram sometimes forgot his faith. And Sarai, in the moment when she had greatest reason to be sure nothing was protecting her, nevertheless cried out directly to God. For many of us, the lines between faith and not are sometimes quite blurry.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Aviva Richman, “Unlikely Origins of Prayer” <https://hadar.org/torah-resource/unlikely-origins-prayer#source-11182>

I can think of a member whom I know identifies as atheist, but whom I have seen at services belting out “Adonai yimloch l’olam va’ed” – “God will reign forever!” Whether she identifies as faithful, she is certainly keeping faith with something. And as much as I value keeping faith with the traditions of prayer and mitzvot, I have seldom felt the revelatory insight of God’s nearness. I have said the traditional words of prayer, appreciating their poetry, appreciating the music, appreciating the tradition behind them and imagining that something beyond my imagination may be listening. I have occasionally in times of great joy or – like Sarai – great stress - spontaneously called out to God, but I couldn’t even tell you when I mean by that. These experiences cannot necessarily be explained in rational terms. As a friend of mine in rabbinical school once told me, “I don’t *believe* in a personal God, but it kind of doesn’t matter – turns out I have one anyway.”

If God does not exist, then whether or not we believe effects mostly us and those around us. If God *does* exist, She is surely infinitely wise and compassionate and understanding of our doubts, so again, whether or not we believe mostly effects ourselves and those around us.

All of which is to say that, as descendant of Avram and Sarai, we may or may not experience divine revelation. But it is not necessary to experience revelation to take a leap of faith, or to keep faith with an ideal. And like my friend from rabbinical school, we do not necessarily have to *believe* in a personal God to have the right to seek a relationship with God, should the need arise.

Shabbat shalom.