

Rosh Hashanah Second Day Torah Study 2023/2784 The Women and the Reward

The five women in the Torah and Haftarah readings for Rosh Hashanah face struggles and receive rewards.

Sarah

Genesis 16:2

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדוֹת בַּא-נָא אֶל-שִׁפְחֹתַי אוּלַי אֲבָנָה
מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי:

And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, יהוה has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a child through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request. (listen to her voice)

Tur HaAroch (14th-century commentary)

Our sages have remarked, that due to Sarai’s generosity in worrying that her husband should father a child, although not hers, she herself would be granted the satisfaction to have a child of her own. Sarai used the term לאישה, “as a wife,” to describe the union between Hagar and Avraham, in order to indicate that she did not want to raise a child who was the issue of a concubine. The Torah describes all these details to show the concern of Sarai for Avraham’s social standing.

Bereishit Rabbah (Midrash on Genesis)

His intent (Abraham) was merely to do Sarai’s will so that she may build a family from Hagar for she will find satisfaction in her handmaid’s children, or that by the merit of this act she will become worthy to have children, as our Rabbis have said.

Genesis 21:6

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחַק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל-הַשְּׁמִיעַ יִצְחַק-לִי:

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Rashi

יצחק לי

means will rejoice on my account. The Midrashic statement is (Genesis Rabbah 53:8): Many barren women were remembered together with her, many sick were healed in that day, many prayers were answered with hers and there was great rejoicing in the world.

Hagar

Genesis 16:13

וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם־יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אַתָּה אֵל רָאִי כִי אָמַרְהָ הַגַּם הֵלֵם רְאִיתִי אַחֲרַי רָאִי:

And she called יהוה who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after my being seen!"

Seforno

Hagar's new insight, expressed by her saying אתה אל-ראי, meant that whereas up until now she had assumed that revelations from G'd are confined to the house of Avram, she had now learned that G'd may reveal Himself in any location. This is in line with Baba Metzia 59 כל השערים ננעלו חוץ משערי דמעות, that although the gates of prayer have largely remained shut since the destruction of the Temple, the prayer of people complaining (shedding tears) of being dealt with unfairly by their fellow human beings have not been closed.

Genesis 21:19

וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתִּלְךָ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֲמַת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁקֵה אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר:

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

Seforno

He granted her the instinct to look for water in the place where she would find it. She had not been blind previously so that her eyes had to be "opened."

Hannah

Samuel 1:13

וַחֲנָה הִיא מְדַבֵּרַת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחֲשֹבֶהָ עָלֶי לְשֹׁכֶרָה:

Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.

Berachot 31b

Rabbi Elazar said: From the day that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, there was no person who called the Holy One, Blessed be He, Lord of Hosts until Hannah ... Rabbi Elazar explains that Hannah said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "are You Not the Lord of the Hosts, and of all of the hosts and hosts of creations that You created in Your world, is it difficult in Your eyes to grant me one son?"

Midrash, Berachot 5:4

Hannah spoke thus unto Eli: "Thou art not a Judge in this matter. Are there not then the Shechina and the Holy Spirit with thee, that thou judgeth me as guilty and not innocent?" Dost thou not know that I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit but neither wine nor strong drink have I drunk? (Ib.) "We infer from this," said R. Elazar, "that if a man is wrongly accused of anything he ought to inform his accuser of it." ... Then Eli answered and said: 'Go in peace.' (Ib.) We infer from this," said R. Elazar, "that he who wrongly accuses his friend must appease him and moreover must bless him, as it is said (Ib. ib.) And may the God of Israel grant thy request."

Rachel

Jeremiah 31:15

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רָחֵל מִבְּכָה עַל-בָּנֶיהָ מֵאֲנָה לְהַנָּחֵם
עַל-בָּנֶיהָ כִּי אֵינָנוּ: {ס}

Thus said GOD:

A cry is heard in Ramah —

Wailing, bitter weeping—

Rachel weeping for her children.

She refuses to be comforted

For her children, who are gone.

Rachel weeping for her children The Midrash Aggadah states (see Lam. Rabbah Proem 24) that the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs went to appease the Holy One blessed be He concerning the sin of Manasseh who placed an image in the Temple but He was not appeased. Rachel entered and stated before Him "O Lord of the Universe, whose mercy is greater, Your mercy or the mercy of a flesh and blood person? You must admit that Your mercy is greater. Now did I not bring my rival into my house? For all the work that Jacob worked for my father he worked only for me. When I came to enter the nuptial canopy, they brought my sister, and it was not enough that I kept my silence, but I gave her my password. You, too, if Your children have brought Your rival into Your house, keep Your silence for them." He said to her, "You have defended them well. There is reward for your deed and for your righteousness, that you gave over your password to your sister."

Rebecca

Genesis 22:23

וּבִתּוֹאֵל יָלַד אֶת־רִבְקָה, And Bethuel fathered Rebecca.

Seforno

The meaning of the message was that there had been born in his own family a girl who would be a suitable wife for Avraham's son so that he would not have to look for such a wife among the Canaanites surrounding him.