Do you know my story? Do you know my name? I am the one called HaIsha, the woman. I am the one called the Em-Kol-Chai, the mother of all life. I am the one my partner named Chavah, life, calling me this only once before we left the Garden of Eden.

And your record? Your record gives me this name only once more when I conceive a child. After that, I am erased. The generations of children that stemmed from me are only known by their father, not the Em Kol Chai. But why would my name be heard and why would my legacy endure by the men who recorded this story, when God didn’t even hear me? I was not yet created when God forbade Adam from eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. I received this instruction second-hand through Adam. And after God asked me why I gave Adam the apple, giving me a chance to hear and be heard, God didn’t listen to my response. God handed out punishments. I, the Em-Kol-Chai, was destined to be the mother of all life, but was cursed to fulfill my destiny in pain and then my pain was forgotten, unrecorded in your text.

Are you silenced too? Or has God changed God’s dynamics of listening? Does God listen to you, my children, my daughters? I hope that God does. And I hope that you will never know the pain of being silenced and erased. For I am a forgotten womb.

Until Sarah’s narrative, beginning last week in parashat Lech Lecha and continuing this week in parashat Vayera, women are repressed, blotted out, stifled. But Sarah sets off a chain reaction of firsts. Twice, God watches over Sarah in the hands of foreign rulers, protecting her from harm when Abraham fails to do so. God hears Sarah in her infertility and sends messengers to reassure her that she will indeed have a child, the first of many barren women that God will hear. And then, later: hen W ived and Sarah conce “And God took note of Sarah,” 1 ו ַֽיהוָָּ֛ה פָּקַַֽ֥ד אֶת־שָּרָָ֖ה and Sarah fears for her son Isaac, she urges Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. God orders the hesitant Abraham: “All that Sarah tells you, listen to her voice.” 2 הָָּּ֑כֹּל אֲשֶֶׁ֨ר תֹּאמַַֽ֥ר אֵלֶָ֛יךָ שָּרָָ֖ה שְׁמַַֽ֣ע בְׁקֹּל שָרָָ֖ה. Heed her words, God says. Do what she tells you. For the first time in our text, God tells a man to listen to his wife, to listen to a woman. In so doing, God tells women: ‘Your opinions matter. Your voice matters. You matter.’

Our sages interpret God’s listening as a mark of Sarah’s innate unique qualities. They latch onto this idea, installing Sarah as the first female prophet. They base this on the various names by which she is known in the Biblical text. Before God changes her name to Sarah, she is known as Sarai, princess, and is once called Yiscah, seer. The sages confirm that Sarai and Yiscah are the same person, establishing that Sarah is both a leader and a visionary. Indeed, several medieval exegetes claim that Sarah was an even better prophet than Abraham, because God told him ‘shema b’kolah,’ listen to her voice. Sarah, the first female prophet, created a foundation upon which six other female prophets later stood: Miriam, Devorah, Channah, Avigael, Huldah, and Esther.

1 Genesis 21:1
2 Genesis 21:12
As the first heard woman, Sarah earned a name for herself in rabbinic tradition. But what exactly did God hear when God listened to Sarah? And what was the purpose of her power and prophetic voice? The continuation of the verse in which God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah is "Because it is through Isaac that offspring will be proclaimed for you." You should listen to Sarah, Abraham, because it is her son who will make your name great. It is for your own good, Abraham, to let the woman manage the child-rearing. God hears Sarah, but only regarding her status as mother. Sarah’s prophetic tradition, created by our sages, similarly limits the scope of Sarah’s prophetic purpose and abilities to matters regarding her identity as a woman and mother.

Commentary after commentary discusses Sarah’s exceptional physical beauty as the justification for her prophecy. Sarah can see, because she is so easily seen. The male gaze of the sages creates a hierarchy among women, based not on words or actions, but on scales of allure and attractiveness. The sages give Sarah top marks. Other midrashim do ascribe her spiritual talents to her actions, but to a similar effect. According to the Zohar, Abraham purifies the men while Sarah purifies the women and children. Tradition even tells us that Sarah nursed over a hundred children at one gathering.

Midrash associates Sarah’s prophecy with the continuous fulfillment of the three mitzvot designated for women: lighting Shabbat candles, taking challah, and observing purity laws, three commandments whose abrogation causes death in childbirth. While this entire tradition emerged because God heard Sarah, it places Sarah firmly within the tangled web of a patriarchal society. The power of her voice is confined to matters determined by male sages. Sarah receives the power of voice, but only within the patriarchal web of motherhood.

In a patriarchal world, fecundity is currency. Maternity alone is power.

God hears other women as well, but in the cases of our other matriarchs, God also only hears them in relation to that same status—maternity. After struggling with fertility, Rebecca conceives but has a difficult pregnancy. She inquires of God as to why her twins struggle in her womb. God hears her and God speaks to her. In the next generation, Rachel and Leah compete to see who, by way of their maids, can have more children with Jacob, to win his favor. After each maid births a couple children for each wife, God hears both Leah and Rachel, enabling each to conceive. Yet again, we see that fertility and maternity are the only mediums through which God hears the voices of our Matriarchs.

While Sarah sets the precedent for women speaking with God, her use of this newfound power does not set a good example. God raises up her voice, a significant tikkun of God’s indifference to Chavah. However, once Sarah has that small amount of power to determine the fate of her child, she uses it to expel another woman and child. Just as Chavah, silenced, was exiled from the Garden of Eden, so too were Hagar and Ishmael exiled from their home. Was Sarah cruel? Was she vengeful? Perhaps, but maybe this expression of power was all she knew. After all, Sarah acted towards Hagar as Abraham had acted towards her. Cast aside, used as a pawn for Abraham’s own safety, made to feel inferior for her infertility—Sarah was stuck in a patriarchal cycle. So much so that when she had the ability to determine someone else’s fate—a token of

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3 Genesis 21:12
male privilege, she did as the man in her life had done to her. Unwittingly joining the patriarchal cycle, Sarah the oppressed became Sarah the oppressor. Hagar, victim of Sarah’s power, is forced to wander in the desert with Ishmael.

At her lowest point, unable to provide for her child, God hears the cries of Ishmael, and an angel of God calls to Hagar, comforting her in her role as mother. From this moment on, Hagar and Sarah are inextricably bound up with each other, heard by God only during the distress of caring for a child. Sarah and Hagar are not so different after all. God hearing Sarah was a significant milestone compared to God excluding and silencing Chavah. However, the patriarchy limits Sarah’s identity to motherhood making it her only source of authority within both the Biblical text and Rabbinic prophetic tradition.

As American writer and activist Audre Lorde writes, “Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women.” In her landmark essay published in 1984 entitled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” Lorde writes a sharp response to her experience a year prior as a speaker for an NYU Institute for the Humanities conference. She calls out the conference not just for their lack of inclusion of Black feminist and Black lesbian speakers, but for boxing in speakers of those identities to speak about those identities alone. She writes,

“To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women’s culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”

Just as Sarah’s Biblical and rabbinic voices were limited based on her identity as a mother, Audre Lorde writes of the ways in which her voice was restricted based on her identity as a black lesbian woman. However, while Sarah was an unknowing pawn in a patriarchal society, Lorde introduces a critical consciousness of resisting patriarchy. Her cries and the cries of so many other women have pushed our society to think critically about intersectional feminism, but we have only come so far.

While Lorde wrote this in 1984, in the past few years, I have attended too many conferences and lectures that tokenize people for their identities and put them into silos—where the people who aren’t straight, white, able-bodied, cisgender men are invited to speak only about their identities, while the straight, white, able-bodied, cisgender men comprise ‘manels,’ or ‘all-male panels’ that address public policy, international relations, anti-Semitism, inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue, or any number of other topics. The knotted net of the patriarchy is still intact.

In the beginning, Chavah’s voice was denied; Sarah’s voice was raised but then relegated to the domain of women and children. This is the cracked foundation upon which later Biblical women stood. Each woman since then has been able to solidify the ground beneath her feet just a bit more, building a more solid foundation for us today. We all, regardless of gender, are the
descendants of these Biblical women, complete with imperfections and flawed judgment. We are witnesses to the perils that our female ancestors faced, and the strength that carried them forward. We are now responsible to carry on their stories and implement the lessons they have taught us, so that the next generation will be one step closer to a truly grounded world—a world in which, as described by the 5779: Year of the Jewish Woman Facebook Group, “the men, and the women, and the gender non-conforming, and the Jews of color, and the LGBTQ Jews, and the affiliated and the unaffiliated Jews, the working-class Jews, and the intermarried, the intramarried, the unmarried, and the people who d[on’t] define themselves by a marital stage, and the CEOs and consultants and board members and lay leaders and fundraisers and network weavers and writers and educators and everyone else all [live] in a thriving Jewish community together, happily ever after.”

I am Eve, left out of important discussions, talked over, interrupted, ignored, erased. I am Sarah, made to think I have power, so desperate for power that I misuse it, not trusted as a legitimate leader of all because of my gender, only heard when it comes to matters of ‘women’s’ work. I am all of the women who came before me. And we demand a better future.
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