

Drasha – Domestic Violence Awareness Month
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Lech Lecha has to be one of the most exciting Parshiot in the Torah. I would liken the significance of this Portion to the Revelation of God at Sinai in Parshat Yitro.

For the community of Israel, Sinai represented the vision and mandate for Judaism.

That revelatory moment can only occur because of Lech Lecha. If not for Abraham and Sarah's faithful leap and brave journey to Canaan, Judaism is a non-starter.

But the story is not without intrigue; Abraham and Sarah encounter moments of great doubt. The life of faith does not always guarantee right decisions.

Toward the end of the portion, Chapter 16, we read one of the most shameful narratives in the Bible, perpetrated by our father and mother, Abraham and Sarah.

After years of a childless marriage, Sarah suggests that Abraham take her maidservant, Hagar, to "build with her" a family. Hagar conceives immediately. She feels privileged, looks down upon Sarah, her mistress. Sarah bitterly complains to Abraham who offers Hagar to Sarah's rule. Sarah viciously abuses Hagar. Hagar runs for shelter, where she encounters an angel who instructs her to submit herself to Sarah with the promise of a son, Ishmael, and a great future.

Before we look at the specifics of this story, the larger question is "what for"?

What does the Torah even include this embarrassing story for? If we were to edit the Torah, we could simply cut chapter 16 out and we would have lost nothing?

Radak was troubled by this very issue and he believes that even a story as awful as this can be educationally and morally useful. Pedagogically, we might think of this as a teachable moment. With that in mind, I would like us to examine this text for its educational message.

October is national Domestic Violence Awareness month and I hope that this text will raise our sensitivity to an issue that the Jewish community is not immune from and whose life-threatening consequences demand a serious Jewish reply.

When we read the text, Hagar may not win our sympathies. Hagar is cruel; she mocks Sarah's barrenness. That's true. But the component parts that lead to abuse is where I want to focus.

After Hagar sneers at Sarah, Sarah blows up at...Avraham. "*Chamasi Alecha*" "I am enraged against you." Why is Sarah furious with Abraham? What was Abraham's fault here? He followed Sarah's suggestion to take Hagar?

Rashi explains the source of Sarah's rage: when Abraham prayed to God for a child, he did not specify that the child should come from Sarah! Or another answer, from Chizkuni, Abraham doesn't defend Sarah's honor when Hagar mocks her. There is a commonality in these replies: Sarah is furious with Abraham over something he has no control over. Abraham cannot control Hagar's attitude and Abraham certainly cannot

control God's Will. Sarah's abuse begins – even if she is completely off-base – when she convinces herself that she has been victimized.

Think how easily this could be one of us. We can get so worked up with a *broigetz* and feeling hurt that we stop thinking rationally; we start making up stories about the awesome magnitude of our hurt. It's at this point, when someone with a cool-head needs to step in and calm things down. Yes, your hurt is justified and we will address that together.

That person should have been Abraham. Abraham has the power to change the outcome of this issue. But that would not be Abraham's reply. "*Shifchateich Biyadech*" "Your maid servant is in your hands." Radak critiques Abraham; he relented in the face of Sarah's anger and said: "Do with Hagar as you wish" – when he should have stopped Sarah.

Often in DV situations, we are like the Abraham's, we may be close to the situation; we may have intimate information about a friend or family member, but we feel like we need to let the family resolve it themselves.

Our respectfulness and politeness could not be more misplaced.

In this, Ramban offers one of most biting critiques of the first Jewish family:

“חטאה אמנו בענוי הזה, וגם אברהם בהניחו לעשות כן”

Our mother Sarah sinned by making Hagar suffer, and Abraham also sinned by allowing this to happen.

Sarah presents to us a possible motivation of the abuser; Abraham presents to us an example of an enabler. But we must not forget the victim. When she runs off, Hagar meets the Angel and she hears the message that she must go back to Sarah and to submit herself to Sarah's abuse. But the abuse will yield a child, who will become the father of nations.

I return to Radak's reading of this story:

”סבל הענוי שתענך, כי לטוב לך יהיה שתשב עם אברהם כי בזכותו יהיה זרעך רב מאד“

The Angel tells Hagar to submit b/c it will be for the good.

I don't think it would be too much of a stretch to think of the Angel as a sub-conscious voice. The Angel is the voice of the victim, too scared to run. What keeps the abused in an abusive relationship? Maybe, like Hagar, the victim sees nobility in suffering; maybe, the emotional and verbal abuse has so badly battered the victim's ego, that she cannot imagine finding help in an abusive relationship.

I believe we will tell ourselves anything to avoid facing the painful truth. “This could *never* happen to me” or “I deserved to be hit” or “my husband is really stressed from work” or “what will my community think” or “Shalom bayit.” Hagar's Angel is more like a demon; victims must elude a thousand snares that she sets for herself before she can find help.

At every stage, the Jewish community has a response.

In this community, we have members who are very involved with The Rachel Coalition and I am very proud of my mother for committing so much of herself and her staff in Jewish Family Service in Clifton to Project Sarah, Stop Abusive Relationships at Home. These programs address the needs of the abuser with highly skilled individual counseling and anger management groups; these programs train and sensitize first responders – rabbis, mikveh attendants, school nurses – so that when an issue comes through our doors, we can be proactive. And these programs address the needs of the victims with counseling, rehabilitation, safe houses, and legal support.

In the next Torah section, chapter 17, Abraham and Sarah are given new names. Maybe, chapter 16 is necessary for chapter 17 - to teach us that our failings and our weaknesses and our shame does not need to define who we are, but can be a catalyst for us to change.

Shabbat Shalom