

Excerpts from Chapter 2, “Trans Experience in the Torah”

Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*

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from “God has brought me laughter”: Feeling Trans Experience

The Torah tells us that though Sarah is what her culture considers a successful woman in terms of being married and beautiful (even at age 65, Abraham fears that he may be killed by men who desire her [Gen. 12:11-13]), because Sarah cannot bear children and give her husband a male heir, her marriage is shadowed by her awareness that she is failing to be the woman she is supposed to be. In Genesis 16, Sarah's feeling of gender failure leads her to invite her husband to have sex with her servant Hagar, in hopes that Hagar will bear a son who Sarah (then “Sarai”) can adopt as her own:

And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son [literally, ‘be built up’] through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai's request. So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian ... and gave her to her husband Abram as a concubine. He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. And Sarai said to Abram, “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.... Abram 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. (Gen. 16:2-6)

Sarah presents her proposal that her husband have sex with her maid matter-of-factly, but it is clear that her feelings of failure have reached a crisis point. After a lifetime of infertility, only now, when she is in her eighties, does Sarah feel bad enough to engage in what seems to have been the common practice of forcing female servants to bear surrogate children.¹ Sarah's description of God as preventing her from bearing makes it clear that she has long tried and failed to have children. When she expresses hope that she may be be “built up” through Hagar's fertility, we know that she feels she needs to be built up, that

¹ Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, engage in this practice early in their marriage, and Leah does so even though she has already had children of her own (Gen. 30:1-12).

she feels she cannot build herself up, that she feels she has to have a son in order to become (be built up into) the woman she is supposed to be.

Hagar's immediate success in getting pregnant intensifies Sarah's feelings of gender failure. Rather than feeling built up, Sarah feels looked down upon by Hagar and presumably by her husband, whom she blames for going along with her proposal that he have a child with Hagar ("The wrong done me is your fault!" [Gen. 16:5]). With her husband's encouragement, Sarah takes her feelings out on Hagar, treating her so badly that the pregnant woman flees into the wilderness.² Abraham and Jacob are literally built up through their trans experiences – both become wealthy patriarchs – but Sarah's actions make even her miserable. She sees Ishmael as Hagar's son rather than her own,³ and even though she continues to abuse Hagar, she is forced to watch "the son of that slave woman," as she calls him, grow up as her husband's first-born heir (Gen. 21:10).⁴

Though Sarah's family situation is unusual, gender failure is a common form of trans experience. Many people, trans or not, know the pain and shame of feeling that we have failed to be the men or women our families, communities, or culture tell us we should be. Often, we experience gender failure as meaning that because we don't fulfill gender expectations, we are not, somehow, "real" men or women. We see such thinking at work in the Babylonian Talmud, where several commentators take Sarah's failure to become a mother as a sign that she was intersex rather than physically female:

2 Though the Torah does not describe it, Hagar presumably endures her own form of trans experience, simultaneously occupying the conflicting roles of despised slave and mother of the patriarch's heir.

3 By contrast, when Rachel, wife of Sarah's grandson Jacob, responds to her own fertility problems by giving her maid to her husband, she embraces the sons born to her servant Bilhah as her own (Gen. 30:4-8).

4 Because Hagar, at God's behest, returns from the wilderness and endures Sarah's harsh treatment, Ishmael grows up as Abraham's first-born and is circumcised before his brother Isaac is conceived. Though Sarah drives Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness so that her son Isaac can become Abraham's undisputed heir, God passes on to Ishmael the Abrahamic blessing of becoming the father of "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18). When Hagar runs away, an angel assures Hagar that God "will greatly increase your offspring,/And they shall be too many to count" (Gen. 16:9). When God promises Abraham an heir through Sarah, God responds to Abraham's prayer on behalf of Ishmael by saying, "I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous... and I will make of him a great nation" (Gen. 17:20), a promise God repeats to Hagar when she and her son are driven out into the wilderness after Isaac is weaned (21:18).

Rabbi Nahman stated in the name of Rabbah bar Abbuha: Our mother Sarah was incapable of procreation, for it is said (in Gen. 11:30), “And Sarai was barren; she had no child.” [That is] she did not even have a place for a fetus, i.e. a womb.”⁵

Rabbi Nahman's speculation reflects the way the gender binary fuses, and confuses, gender with biology. Rabbi Nahman recognizes that Sarah does not fulfill the expectations that married women will bear children, but because he doesn't distinguish gender from physical sex, he does not see Sarah's infertility as a form of gender failure, but as a sign that at least in one respect, she was not biologically female.⁶

Sarah ends up blaming Hagar and Abraham for her feelings of gender failure, but when she tells Abraham that God has kept her from bearing, she makes it clear that she sees her condition as imposed on her by God. For Abraham and Jacob, trans experience is a means of securing relationships with God. For Sarah, trans experience is not something she has to go through in order to have a relationship with God, but something God imposes on her. When she tells Abraham that God has made her infertile, she is telling him that she sees her gender failure as a sign – though a painful sign – of God's presence in her life.⁷

5 The rabbis use the term *ayolonit*, which some have understood as an individual assigned female at birth, but lacking secondary sex characteristics such as breasts, and unable to bear children. See Talmud Bavli Yevamot 64b. (Translations from the Talmud are based on *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* (Hebrew/English). Trans. Maurice Simon. London: Soncino Press, 1990.)

6 Another commentator, Rabbi Ammi, says that neither Sarah nor her husband had recognizably male or female genitalia – that they were both what we would now call intersex (Talmud Bavli Yevamot 64a). Trans Jews seeking to find room in Jewish tradition for those who are not simply male or female often point to passages like these, which recognize the existence of intersex Jews. See for example Reuven Betzalel Ben Acher, “Lech Lecha,” published on the *Eish Zarah* blog, <https://eishzarah.wordpress.com/tag/tumtum/>.

7 The male-centered narratives of Genesis don't show much of Sarah's relationship with God, but when we contrast her response to her infertility with those her daughter-in-law Rebekah's and granddaughter-in-law Rachel's responses to their fertility problems, Sarah's relationship with God becomes clearer. Though Rebekah and Rachel also have trouble conceiving, neither of them attributes her difficulties to God. Moreover, the Torah portrays Rebekah's relief from infertility as reflecting her husband Isaac's relationship with God rather than her own: “Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived” (Gen. 25:2). Rachel turns not to God but to her husband for help: “Give me children,” she says to him, “or I shall die,” to which Jacob responds, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?” (Gen. 30:1, 2). Unlike Rebekah and Rachel, Sarah doesn't ask her husband to intercede with God to help her conceive. She simply tells him that God has kept her from bearing, and presents her own plan (forcing Hagar to have sex with him) for working around it.

That's also the way I see my painful trans experience of growing up with a male body and a female gender identity: as a way God made me. Like many transsexuals, I experienced a double sense of gender failure: I knew I was not a real boy or man, because my gender identity was female, and I knew I could never fit the binary definition of a woman, because I was not born or raised female. I felt, as Sarah felt, that God had given me a body that prevented me from living as the woman I felt I should be. Though my experience of growing up transsexual was different from Sarah's experience of gender failure, I, like Sarah, saw my trans experience as signifying God's presence in my life.

The Torah reports Sarah's belief that God is the cause of her infertility, but does not confirm that God prevented her from bearing. Like me, Sarah has nothing but her feelings to support her understanding of her failure to be the woman she is supposed to be. But the Torah leaves no doubt that God is the cause of Sarah's next trans experience, when she conceives and bears a child in old age. God twice announces that Sarah will have a child, and each announcement provokes the same reaction: laughter (Gen. 17:16 and 18:10). When Abraham hears that Sarah will have a child, he literally falls down laughing at the absurdity of elderly people becoming new parents, thinking, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" (Gen. 17:16). When Sarah hears, she "laugh[s] to herself... `Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?" (Gen. 18:12).

Sarah and Abraham laugh when God announces that Sarah will have a child because their understanding of gender – their beliefs about what men and women can do and be – tells them that such a thing is absurd. Abraham laughs at the idea that he and Sarah could have a child at their age; Sarah seems to be laughing at the idea that they will be able to have sex, that she will feel that kind of pleasure (Gen. 18:12). Neither having sex or having a child are things they expect elderly men and women to do, or be able to do. I know that kind of laughter. The understanding of gender I grew up

with made the idea that I could live as a woman after being born and have lived my whole life as a male seem as absurd to me as the idea that elderly people can become new parents seems to Abraham and Sarah. When I tried to imagine living as myself, I heard the whole world laughing at me.

The Torah makes it clear that God intends Sarah's pregnancy to provoke this kind of laughter. God could easily have enabled Sarah to have a son when she still was of what we normally think of as child-bearing age. If God had done so, Sarah would have been spared decades of gender failure, Hagar would have been spared forced intercourse with Abraham, and the only laughter prompted by Sarah's pregnancy would have been the laughter of pure joy. But such a pregnancy would not have been considered miraculous, a fact the Torah emphasizes by reminding us, the second time Sarah's pregnancy is announced, that "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women" (Gen. 18:11). As God knows, the absurdity of a 90-year-old woman having a child with a 100-year-old man is what makes this pregnancy a sign of God's presence. That is presumably why God is not angry when Abraham and Sarah laugh at the news that Sarah will have a child.⁸ God means Sarah's pregnancy to provoke that kind of response, which Abraham memorializes by naming their son Isaac, *Yitzhak*, which means "laughter."

Though it is as absurd that Abraham would become a father at 100 as that Sarah would become a mother at 90, Abraham's identity was not affected by Sarah's pregnancy. Abraham is already a

⁸ Abraham laughs without fear and God accepts his laughter without comment. But God terrifies Sarah by asking why she laughed, and Sarah responds by denying her laughter. Like many others, I have long wondered why Sarah, in her moment of greatest intimacy with God (at least as recorded in the Torah), lies, particularly when God clearly knows the truth. I don't know, but I do know that concealing and misrepresenting feelings is often part of trans experience. I spent much of my life hiding any feelings connected with my female gender identity. Jacob hides his feelings during his deception of Isaac; Abraham conceals any guilt, remorse or worry he might have felt in abandoning his father. We know that Sarah felt her gender failure long before she expressed it to Abraham. Perhaps she felt too exposed when God and Abraham glimpsed her feelings after a lifetime of self-restraint, or perhaps, after decades of God ignoring her obvious misery, she was unable, at least in that moment, to feel safe sharing her feelings with God.

patriarch and father, and God changes his name and identity before announcing Isaac's birth, in connection with the commandment of circumcision. But as God emphasizes in announcing it to Abraham, Sarah's pregnancy alters who she is:

And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her. (Gen. 17:15-16)

God's focus here is not on the miraculous conception, but on Sarah, and God's relationship with her. By changing her name from "Sarai" to "Sarah," God makes it clear that Sarah's identity, no less than Abraham's, is defined by God; by commanding Abraham to call her "Sarah," God shows that who Sarah is to God is more important even than who she is to her husband. By saying "I will bless her" before and after telling Abraham "I will give you a son by her," God makes it clear that Sarah's pregnancy is being done not only *to* her but *for* her by God. God is promising Abraham another son, but Sarah's identity – who she is to herself, to her husband, to the world, and to the future forming in her womb – is being utterly transformed.

When Rebekah and Rachel, the other matriarchs who suffer from infertility, finally bear children, they become the kinds of women – mothers – they are expected to be. But instead of helping her fit established gender roles, Sarah's pregnancy makes her a kind of woman who cannot be understood in terms of those roles at all. According to binary definitions, Sarah can either be old woman or a new mother, but not both.⁹ By making her a kind of woman who, in terms of gender binary categories, is impossible, Sarah's pregnancy demonstrates God's presence in her life and in the world.

That is also the way I see my transition from living as a man to living as a woman who, according to binary gender, I cannot possibly be: as a miraculous sign of God's presence. Like the

⁹ Sarah's miraculous conception confounds the gender binary fusion of biology – the physical changes that go with being elderly, the normal reproductive capacity of women – with the social roles of old woman and new mother.

elderly, infertile Sarah, before my transition, I had accepted that the life I longed for was a physical and social impossibility, and that I would die without becoming the woman I felt I should be. Like Sarah, I was astonished, doubtful, and afraid when I realized that what I thought was impossible was possible, and that the body which had caused me so much misery could give me the life I had longed for. I, like Sarah, saw God as the source of my gender suffering, and so, like Sarah, I experienced the absurd blossoming of my body – an adolescence in middle age, rather than Sarah's conception in old age – as a divinely given miracle. Every time I look in a mirror and see myself instead of the man I was born to be, I see the power of God.

Traditionally religious people often see transgender people as rebelling not just against gender but against God when we refuse to be the men and women biology and gender tell us we should be. But it is God who makes Sarah a kind of woman who, according to the gender binary, should not exist, and who, as Sarah acknowledges, is not only impossible but absurd: “God has brought me laughter,” she says after Isaac is born. “Everyone who hears will laugh [at] me” (Gen. 21:6).¹⁰ Sarah's trans experience of becoming a new mother in old age brings her both *Yitzhak*, laughter, the human response to her violation of gender categories, and *Yitzhak*, Isaac, the heir she struggled so long to bear. *Yitzhak*, both the laughter and the boy, attest to the fact that being human in ways that are incomprehensible in

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¹⁰ In highlighting the ways in which Genesis links trans experience and relationship with God, I do not mean to suggest that God or the Torah, here or elsewhere, undermine either the gender binary or the patriarchal social order. Though Sarah's miraculous pregnancy confounds conventional gender categories, that miracle also reflects and reinforces the idea that women should have children and that wives should give their husbands male heirs. Abraham's violation of patriarchal norms – his abandonment of his elderly father and position as heir, his public circumcision – doesn't stop him from being an extremely successful patriarch; indeed, the Torah parades Abraham's patriarchal successes – his wealth, his social status, his military triumph – as signs of God's blessing and God's presence. But God's association with trans experience in these stories makes it clear that neither God, nor relationships with God, nor the human beings who engage in those relationships, are bound by binary gender categories.

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