

This week's Torah portion is Vayera, Genesis 18 to 22. It is the same Torah portion that we read on the morning of Rosh Hashanah. As I said then, this Torah portion might be seen as a three-act play. The story begins with three angels visiting Abraham and Sarah and proclaiming that, even in their old age, Sarah and Abraham would have a son. Hearing this news, Sarah laughed in disbelief and skepticism. But we don't usually read that part of the story on Rosh Hashanah. In a Reform synagogue, celebrating one day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac, from Genesis 22, the third act of the play. It is as if we walked into the theater after intermission. We looked down at our Playbill and noticed that a central character of Act One was absent in Act Three. Most significantly, that character's voice was missing, silent.

But Sarah is not here in the Akedah, and I suggest that her absence adds to the tragic nature of this tale of near sacrifice of a child. The Akedah is a story of action, not emotion. Abraham displays no introspection or doubt. He is not a skeptic. The fact that Sarah is not in this story is, itself, a tragedy. Who was Sarah in that first act?

"The Eternal One appeared to Abraham while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent. Abraham looked up, he saw three men standing near him. Abraham ran to meet them, to welcome them into his tent, to feed them with the finest of his grain and the choicest of his calves, with yogurt and milk.

They asked, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" God said: "I will return to you when life is due, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, the way of women had ceased for Sarah. She LAUGHED within herself, saying, "After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me? And my husband so old?"

Sarah LAUGHED. She was the skeptic. She doubted the word of God. Sarah questioned God's promise and laughed at the very idea of a miracle. Sarah laughed at the seeming absurdity of the prophecy from God. She showed no intimidation or fear. But Sarah is not around when God tests Abraham by telling him to take his son, Isaac, and offer him up as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. Abraham answered, "Hineini"—"I am here." Abraham is commanded to do the unthinkable, to sacrifice his son, and Abraham responds without a question. There was no doubt, no skepticism. Abraham did not laugh. At the Binding of Isaac, the skeptical voice of Sarah is not heard.

If only Sarah were present in this third act of the play. Perhaps if Sarah had been there, she would have questioned this test as well. The rabbis in the Midrash recognize Sarah's absence. They look at the text and ask: Why does it say: "And Abraham rose up early in the morning." Why early in the morning? Because Abraham said to himself, "It may be that Sarah will not give permission for us to go. So, I will get up early while Sarah is still asleep. It is best that no one sees us."

The rabbis of ancient times recognized that Sarah was missing from the story, so they wrote her back in and acknowledged that she never would have allowed this frightening story to play out as it did. I am also suggesting that the story is a cautionary tale, telling us that Abraham's blind obedience is an example of what happens when the voice of the woman is silenced. The story seems to cry out for the mitigating presence of the voice of Sarah. I am certainly not saying that there are no women who are blind believers. Not every woman would doubt the voice of God, or be skeptical or laugh, but Sarah is that paradigm. She is the voice of the skeptic. The story of the Akedah reminds us of the danger inherent in not hearing her voice.

A number of recent events have reminded me of the need for the voice of Sarah in our world. We are hearing the voice of women on the college campuses, demanding that they be heard in cases of sexual harassment and violence. Emma Sulkowicz, a senior at Columbia University, has been recognized for her performance piece, "Carry That Weight," as she has carried her mattress around the campus as a protest against sexual assault on campus and the failure of university officials to adequately address those assaults and punish the perpetrators. Similar voices are being heard on other campuses, in the military, and in other fields.

When the NFL domestic abuse scandals occurred, the New York Times ran a story on the front page of the Sports section, titled: "In coverage of NFL scandals, Female Voices Puncture the Din." It mentioned ESPN anchor, Hannah Storm, Rachel Nichols of CNN, and Katie Nolan of Fox Sports. The Times pointed out that the domestic abuse story was seen differently through women's eyes, and their voices helped to define the issue of a culture of violence and misogyny.

In my own profession, the American rabbinate has been transformed by the presence of women rabbis. I consider myself fortunate indeed that I became a rabbinic student and then a rabbi at the very beginning of that movement. Sally Priesand had been ordained the first woman rabbi in the Reform movement in 1972. I have spent my entire career working with women rabbis as equal colleagues. I still remember my first CCAR Convention in Pittsburgh in 1980. Reverend William Sloane Coffin spoke and stated that the most important issue in the Women's Liberation Movement was liberating the female within each male.

The American rabbinate has been profoundly changed for the better by the entrance of women rabbis who have been fully integrated into the leadership of the American Jewish world. That is true for the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements, but it is still not the case within Orthodox Judaism. While some progress is being made in the Open Orthodox group within Orthodoxy, it still does not approach equality in the role of women.

A recent scandal in Washington demonstrates the danger of exclusive male rabbinic authority. Rabbi Barry Freundel, a highly respected Modern Orthodox rabbi, was arrested and charged with setting up cameras in the showers and changing areas of the mikvah, the ritual bath, attached to his synagogue. This was an

incredible violation of privacy, trust, and authority. Rabbi Freundel was a leading figure in conversion within the Orthodox community, and it appears that he particularly targeted women studying for conversion, as well as the many Orthodox women who use the mikvah on a monthly basis.

The human impact was enormous. The female victims of his voyeurism were often in their most vulnerable and powerless state. Indeed, the very nature of Orthodox Judaism creates a power imbalance between male rabbis and their female students and congregants. Women studying for traditional conversion are particularly dependent on Orthodox male rabbis who exercise complete control of the process.

Within Orthodox Judaism, women still cannot be rabbis, judicial witnesses, or members of the court determining conversion status. The voice of the woman is largely silent within Orthodoxy. The Freundel case is a result of an all male system of religious authority. Male rabbis maintain exclusive control over the laws of Orthodox conversions, and that power can too often be used capriciously and irrationally. While Orthodox rabbinic authority seldom results in sexual abuse, the power imbalance is very real. It might be possible to argue that Rabbi Freundel was a deeply flawed individual whose alleged sexually exploitative acts have no wider implications. But I would disagree. The absence within Orthodoxy of women rabbis of equal stature and authority to the male rabbis creates a culture where abuse of authority is more likely. In contrast, the role of women rabbis in liberal Judaism serves as a counterbalance to an anachronistic patriarchal tradition.

So I return to this week's Torah portion of Vayera. How might the story have been different had Sarah's voice been heard? What would the mother of Isaac have answered if she had been the one to be tested by God? Where was her laugh, her doubt, her skepticism? We regret not hearing Sarah's voice, but we do know the result of that silence. The very next chapter is Chaye Sarah—Sarah's life. But the story isn't about Sarah's life. Genesis, Chapter 24 begins: "The life of Sarah came to 127 years. And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba—Hebron."

If there were an Act Four to this play, it would be very brief. Sarah died. The curtain descends. The lesson is learned. Sarah's voice brought life, laughter, skepticism, and doubt. Without that voice, there was silence; there was death. So it is that we must hear the voice of women and men, of children and the aged, of the native born and the stranger.