Lech Lechah

While it might be fun to link this parshah to our theme of refugees, I want to take a different tack this week and look at it from the point of view of patriarchy. The stories taken together give an amazing portrait of how the patriarchy is constructed, which you can see when you look at what is emphasized: the importance to having a son; the importance of acquiring wealth; the covenant between god and men and male children; the struggles for rulership between the men; the importance of having the male heir; the importance of the lineage passing from the father to the right son, the son who will carry the covenant. And most of all, how at almost every point there lurks the presence of the woman without whose presence and role these seemingly all male concerns can’t be carried out.

Perhaps one might seem to be all male—the wars between the rulers; but even there, the women return through the booty to be central--Women and slaves, perhaps interestingly linked.

I have to focus this on key aspects of the parshah to cover all this ground within time, so I’ll take the ones that interest me the most.

The first is in the first line: 12.1: 1And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

2And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing.

The departure is from three things, all of which are male: his land, his birthplace, his father’s house. Again for the sake of time I won’t try to establish why I think they are male, but rather suggest that the text implies that these are things owned by, fought over by, linked entirely to men, and they are the place locations on which the men’s origins are based. The father’s beit, not the mother’s or parents’. Secondly, what comes from this departure and obedience of the son, Avram, will be the reward of a great people/nation, the goy gadol. When the promise is to have a people as great, gadol, as the stars and the sands, they should include all, men and women. But the men have greater status at every point, while the women follow the men and their needs.

The greatest of those needs is for heirs, and for heirlooms to give to the sons. The blessing carried by Avram for following god is wealth, and just like the heirs, the heirlooms, that is, the estate, the family property, the wealth. When god gives avram canaan, it becomes his estate to be passed down. But so were the sheep and the cattle. Avram left with his possessions, but they appear lost in the famine—not literally lost, but insignificant, because he had to leave again, and had nothing to sustain him. The famine is not depicted as something that takes away his heirlooms, his wealth, but as an occasion that works within the structure of a myth, a magic formula, whereby the family must leave in destitution, undergo trials, and return armed with wealth. The wealth will include animals and servants—what we’d call slaves—enough to endow the patriarch with status. And the great wars that follow Avram and sarai’s return from Egypt are all about who will ultimately be endowed with that wealth.

For now, let’s follow the story. Avram recognizes that he cannot keep his wife—all that is left of value to him—when he enters into the lands of the Egyptian rulers. God is no longer apparently present to him as the guarantor of the blessing. We are operating in another universe of myth—not that of the covenant any more, or rather, one in which the myth of the covenant entails the blessed one be reduced to powerlessness before being restored. Avram can’t be reduced to that status of powerlessness except by losing control over his dominion, the dominion of the lands, the dominion over his women. And he has lost his control so much that he can’t even tell his wife, his woman, much less Lot and the rest of those who left with him, what to do. He has to plead with her: “Please say that you are my sister: 12:11-13: "Behold now I know that you are a woman of fair appearance.

12And it will come to pass when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife,' and they will slay me and let you live.

13Please say [that] you are my sister, in order that it go well with me because of you, and that my soul may live because of you."

The ruse works; god is forced to intervene, and as a result of the unblessed union of Pharaoh and Sarai, of the despoliation of Avram’s goods by the foreign Patriarch, catastrophic divinely imposed plagues strike the Egyptians. When they come to realize what has happened, they pay off Avram to take back his wife and leave. The pattern of the Exodus is set, and with it every single union involving the men of the covenant and those outside the covenant. To repeat, when the woman who belongs to the man who is in the covenant with god is mismatched with another, catastrophe will strike the other. The covenant brings the blessing; the other will experience the curse of violating that union needed for the covenant, the promise of progency and wealth, to be completed. And to establish that need, we have to have the example of the loss, the famine, the mismatching of the woman, in order that god will intervene and provide the conditions of the blessing and its rewards.

“16And he benefited Abram for her sake, and he had flocks and cattle and he donkeys and men servants and maid servants, and she donkeys and camels.

17And the Lord plagued Pharaoh [with] great plagues as well as his household, on account of Sarai, Abram's wife.”

The same story must be repeated endlessly. We’ll look at the second version, where the separation between us and them, the pattern of pain and loss to be followed by restoration and wealth, is worked out specifically by determining who will be the heir to inherit, who will be the son to carry the covenant.

That determination can’t be done without the woman to bear the right son. I would argue even Rachel and her Joseph over Leah and her Judah, but putting that aside, it has to be Sarah and her Isaac over Hagar and her Ishmael. And yet, when it comes to the famine, to the loss, to the infertility of the wife over against the fertility of her slave woman, it is Hagar who bears Ishmael first, clearing the way for her mistress to be able to accept the blessing of bearing the heir. What is so incredibly remarkable about this story is Abraham’s own reaction.

Avram is not yet Abraham, has not yet entered into the covenant of the men and God, when he has been afflicted with the prospect of not having an heir. From God’s assurances that the heir will come he is led to have sex with his wife’s handmaiden, her servant, the fertile Hagar who easily bears him a son. His son. Ishmael, the son doomed to be accepted as Avram’s son and to be cast out as Abraham’s non-heir. He is and is not Abraham’s son. He is definitely Hagar’s son, but in his relationship with his second mother, as she would be called in Africa, he is despised. Indeed he and his mother are blamed by Sarah, not yet Sarah, still Sarai, for placing themselves above the rightful wife and her rightful son.

Where were Abraham and Sarah, our foreparents, when Avram and Sarai sojourned in Egypt, and when the Pharaoh cavorted with Avram’s beautiful wife? They were out of joint, like Denmark after the foul act that placed the wrong man, Claudius, in power, and in control of Hamlet Sr.’s wife Gertrude. Something rotten needs to be corrected, however much blood must flow. And the blood to flow must be that of the men who are willing to die in order to set things right. Die in obedience to the ruler, die in obedience to God, die in obedience to the order of the patriarchy which is needed to establish the proper ownership of the woman and the wealth. The line of proper, property, and patriarch is established at the outset when Avram left his father’s house and land, taking his woman the possessions with him; it is re-established when he leaves Egypt with his possessions and woman. And it is cemented in his blood alliance with god with the covenant that the circumcision ensures. His name is changed; his sexual union and subsequent heir are ensured after, not before, he is circumcised, and after all the other men and boys, including Ishmael are circumcised. The blood is the men’s blood; the blood of the penis, not the blood of the women’s menstruation which was the sign of their not being pregnant.

The physical pain is irrelevant; but the mental pain, which has to precede the fulfilment of the covenant, is revealed at the most extraordinary of moments, the moment that Avram learns that as Abraham he must actually lose his son to gain his wealth:

17:13 “Those born in the house and those purchased for money shall be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant.

14And an uncircumcised male, who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin-that soul will be cut off from its people; he has broken My covenant."

15And God said to Abraham, "Your wife Sarai-you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.

16And I will bless her, and I will give you a son from her, and I will bless her, and she will become [a mother of] nations; kings of nations will be from her. "

17And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced, and he said to himself, "Will [a child] be born to one who is a hundred years old, and will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?"

18And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael will live before You!"

God ignores that line of Abraham, and as if blind to the pain of telling a father to sacrifice his son tells him the reward that is proper will be forthcoming: “19And God said, "Indeed, your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, and I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.”

We can say something larger than the fate of Ishmael is at stake here. Or we can say, at every point where the patriarchy envisions the rewards of fidelity to its order there will be a price that is exacted: Sarai must be given to the Pharaoh; Hagar must be thrown out; and Ishmael, oh Ishmael, my son, my beloved, my miraculous present given when I was too old for me and my wife to ever imagine we could have a child, was given to us. Who would have thought she and Sarai would get along so badly; who would have thought that I would have to lose them. And then, to have another son, not the miracle son, but the son of the covenant, the one to bear the burden of the covenant to the point where I will be asked, again, to give him up, to place the knife on his throat, before being told again, you did right and will be the father of nations, the father of us all. Now you are Abraham, alone in your role as the patriarch and giver of seeds for the future generations, like stars, like sand. You are no longer to be the human who cries, what will happen to my son, my Ishmael; because you were faithful to me, and were willing to give up your son, you have proven you deserve the reward of being the patriarch.

And we, the bnai Israel, who are we, the circumcised sons? What are we supposed to bear with this heritage when we have become the heirlooms at the price of our mother’s pain? We can share in the expulsion of Hagar; exult in the triumph of Sarah; or remember our father’s pitiful cry, what will become of my son, Ishmael. In the end, as we all know, Isaac was reduced to silence.