

Sarah and Abraham: A Theology of Border Crossing

When we examine the stories of our ancestors in the Bible through the lens of contemporary migration experiences, many of the conditions and threats appear fundamentally unchanged after thousands of years.

Genesis 12:1, 10-17

God said to Abram, "Go forth from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you..."

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. But יי afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.

ויאמר יי אל-אברם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך:

ויהי רעב בארץ ויבד אברם מצרימה לגור שם כִּי-כבד הרעב בארץ:
ויהי פאשר הקריב לבוא מצרימה ויאמר אל-שרי אשתו הנה-נא ילדתי כי אשה יפת-מראה את:
והיה כִּי-יראו אתה המצרים ואמרו אשתו זאת והרגו אתי ואתה יסיו:
אמרי-נא אחתי את למען ייטב-לי בעבורך וחייתה נפשי בגלגלך:

ויהי כבוא אברם מצרימה ויראו המצרים את-האשה כי-יפה הוא מאד:
ויראו אתה שרי פרעה ויהללו אתה אל-פרעה ותקח האשה בית פרעה:
ולאברם היטיב בעבורה ויהי-לו צאן-ובקר וחמרים ועבדים ושפחות ואתנת וגמלים:
וויננע יי את-פרעה וגעים גדלים ואת-ביתו על-דבר שרי אשת אברם:

- What sticks out to you from this story of Abraham and Sarah's migration when exploring it through the lens of the migration experience?

Radak on Genesis 12:12

ויאמר יי אל-אברם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך, ויאמר יי אל-אברם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך, ויאמר יי אל-אברם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך, ויאמר יי אל-אברם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך.

- Sexual assault and human trafficking are recognized in our contemporary context as tools of war and as vulnerabilities for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. It appears that Abraham knows this as well as the dangers posed to him. How does this cause you to view their choices?

A Theology of Migration

Father Daniel Groody

...the path that Abraham and Sarah travel is neither perfectly clear nor perfectly lived. It will demand trust without certainty, assurance without omniscience, and sometimes decisions without surety. Their journey presents many challenging ethical dilemmas along the way, like many migrants in our own times. When Abraham and Sarah cross the Egyptian border, Abraham lies about his relationship with Sarah and says she is his sister when confronted by Pharaoh's border patrol (Genesis 12:11–20).

Such subterfuge may make contemporary readers bristle, but his use of essentially false documentation at border checkpoints is noteworthy. While he does not physically present papers, he hides the details of his identity from local authorities to keep them from taking advantage of them, like many migrants do in our own times. Sarah's willingness to go to extraordinary lengths for the couple's survival has many parallels with those migrants today who subject themselves even to sexual exploitation to preserve themselves or their families (Genesis 12:15).

- This Catholic perspective imposes contemporary language on the ancient story. How does it feel to use terminology like “border patrol” and “false documentation” in this context?

“To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest”

Dr. Rabbi Rachel Adler

Some biblical narratives represent the Israelites as the people other peoples called the Hebrews, the *ivrim*, literally, the crossers-over, those whose progenitors Abraham and Sarah came from the other side of the river Euphrates. Indeed, Scripture uses *ivrim* only when Israelites interact with non-Israelites. *Ivri*-narratives affirm a deity who transcends boundaries and localities altogether, a God who through covenant bridges even the boundary between divinity and humanity. To be an *ivri* is to know that there are other places, other perspectives. To remember having been an *ivri* is to know what it means to be an Other...

Sometimes, I am supposed to be a boundary-crosser, an *ivri(a)*, to go forth as Abraham and Sarah did to a land they did not know. But this same root, *a-v-r*, can mean to trespass, to transgress. This is the dilemma that confronts me in cultural negotiations. When, where, and how am I called upon to trans/pose, trans/act, or trans/ mute, and under what circumstances would my act be a trans/gression, an *averah*, an unmaking of some boundary that maintains a distinct and irreplaceable meaning? When should I guard the boundary? When should I cross the boundary? When should I resituate the boundary or perhaps uproot it altogether? These are questions of halakha in the root meaning of that term: going, making a path.

- How does this text impact your understanding of boundaries and boundary-crossing in Jewish tradition and identity? What would it mean to center the identity of “*ivrim*” in our approach to Judaism?

Compiled by Rabbi Sarah Bassin, HIAS Rabbi in Residence