

In this weeks Torah portion, Parshat Vayera, we read:

And Sarah said, "Laughter has God made me, whoever hears will laugh at me." And she said, "Who would have uttered to Avraham - Sarah is suckling sons! For I have borne a son in his old age." And the child grew and was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, laughing. And she said to Avraham, "Drive out this slavewoman and her son, for the slavewoman's son shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

ו וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה--צָחֵק, עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים: כָּל-הַשְּׂמִיעַ, יִצְחָק-לִי. ז וַתֹּאמֶר, מִי
מִלֵּל לְאַבְרָהָם, הֵינִיקָה בָּנִים, שָׂרָה: כִּי-יִלְדֹתִי בֶן, לְזִקְנָיו. ח וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד,
וַיִּגְמַל; וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מְשֶׁתָּה גְדוֹל, בְּיוֹם הַגְּמִל אֶת-יִצְחָק. ט וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה
אֶת-בֶּן-הָגֵר הַמִּצְרִית, אֲשֶׁר-יִלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם--מִצְחָק. י וַתֹּאמֶר, לְאַבְרָהָם,
גֹּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת, וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ: כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן-הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת, עִם-בְּנֵי עַם-
יִצְחָק.

There is a good bit of confusion in these few lines, most of it related to the verb "צחק." A verb difficult to translate, whose very presence in these lines hints at the complexity of the situation.

צָחֵק, עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים: כָּל-הַשְּׂמִיעַ, יִצְחָק-לִי.

After the birth of Isaac, Sarah says: God has given me laughter, all who hear will laugh at me. Or is it: God has brought me joy and all who hear will rejoice with me? Even if we simply translate it as laughter -- is it a joyous laughter or a bitter laughter? Is Sarah pointing us to her joy or her pain and can we hold those emotions together at the same time? Sarah, afterall, has been on a rollercoaster ride -- unable to conceive, giving her handmaiden to her husband, now conceiving late in life. I want to view Sarah with compassion and then...

ט וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בֶּן-הָגֵר הַמִּצְרִית, אֲשֶׁר-יִלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם--מִצְחָק.

Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian that was born to Avraham מִצְחָק laughing or playing or, according to the rabbis perhaps engaging in forbidden sexual activity.

The Jewish Study Bible, playing off the common roots of **מִצַּחֵק** and **יִצְחָק** notes that this verb may be best translated as "Isaac-ing." Whatever it was that Ishmael was doing, Sara was threatened by it. And why? Because Ishmael was acting too much like Isaac. Playing at being Isaac. Threatening to take Isaac's place. By using the verb "מִצַּחֵק" the Biblical author blurs Isaac's and Ishmael's identities, just as Sara's giving Hagar to Avraham as a wife blurs their roles. It is this blurriness that is foundation of the threat that ultimately leads to their expulsion.

Yet, the problem is not only that there are blurred lines, but also that the characters of Hagar and Ishmael are so narrowly prescribed in the text. Hagar will always be *ha-gar ha-geir betocham*, always prescribed as the stranger that dwells among us. Ishmael is simply referred to as **"בֶּן-הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרַיִת"**, he is only Hagar's son, even to the exclusion of the fact that Avraham is his father. Further, neither Hagar nor Ishmael is given a name in the moments before Sarah declares that they should be cast out -- they are reduced to the nameless and faceless, slavewoman and her son, sent out into the desert.

If the text didn't so narrowly prescribe who Hagar and Ishmael were, they might have been less threatening. True that those aspects of their identity that created confusion might still be experienced as a threat. But perhaps that threat could have been countered with other aspects of their identity. Instead of identities that are completely overlapping circles -- Ishmael trying to be Isaac all of the time, we would have a venn diagram.

As a female-bodied person who wears clothing typically reserved for men and occasionally uses male pronouns, I know the world of bluriness. I walk through it everyday, and I see the way it is threatening to people. I have compassion for Sarah, because I see her in the face of all those who struggle with excellent intentions to locate my gender in their understanding of the world. I know the ways in which it pushes me outside of community, and I see the ways in which sharing my whole self with people allows them to bring me in. It is an experience of deep pain and of greater joy. Of pure laughter and the laughter that comes in response to the sheer absurdity of any given moment in my life. To be sure, it is not only genderqueer or trans* identified people who live in the bluriness or on the edge. People with disabilities, those of lower economic classes, single parents, interfaith members of our community -- they also live on the edge.

And so I read this week's Torah portion as a caution. As a call to notice, to investigate, to counter moments when a blurred line is making us uncomfortable or when we are too narrowly prescribing a person's identity. After all, Hagar is more than just a slavewoman, regardless of what the text tells us. And despite what people might see when I first enter a room, I am more than just a genderqueer person. And, while it is true that God provides sustenance for Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, in our world those who challenge the boundaries of society are often cast out without even so much as a jug of water on their shoulder. And so, we have two options -- provide the water or confront what feels threatening. Both are important.

Our society is working hard to provide the water -- food pantries, big brother big sister programs, safe space stickers -- are all good examples. Tonight I want to suggest that we all work to do the latter. To confront that which feels threatening. This work is difficult. It requires us to discover the place in our bodies and our minds where that threat exists, to

name it, and to actively work to unseat it. The biblical narrative doesn't allow Sarah time or space to confront her emotions, and in fact, it needs Hagar and Ishmael to be expelled from the community in order for our story to move forward. And though we believe these stories to be sacred, our lives do not need to be dictated by theirs. Our stories require us to do not what Sarah did, but what we wish she had done -- to stop, to look inside ourselves, to articulate our own experience, to learn about other's experience, to find the places where our lives diverge and intersect, and only then to move forward.

Shabbat shalom.