

# The Torah of White Fire

## Or, A Re-reading of the Story of Sarah

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There is an ancient idea that the Torah Moses originally received from Sinai was not words inscribed in ink on parchment, as we have today. Nor was it a strictly verbal revelation that was only later written down. Rather, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish teaches in the Talmud Yerushalmi: the Torah that the Holy Blessed One gave to Moses was given to him as:

אש לבנה חרותה באש שחורה; היא אש מובללת באש חצובה מאש ונתונה מאש

White fire engraved with black fire; she was fire enwrapped in fire, hewn from fire and given through fire.

*Esh l'vanah charutah ba-esh sh'chorah.* White fire engraved with black fire.

There is so much one could say about this statement. The analogy of Torah to fire alone is incredibly powerful: like fire, Torah is life giving, with the ability to warm us, to aide in nourishing us; and like fire, Torah can be dangerous, if it is manipulated in the wrong ways, or left unattended. Torah is hard to precisely define, hard to contain; it is constantly moving, constantly taking on new forms; it is not alive and yet has a life of its own.

But the real power of this idea is not just that Torah is like fire, it is that Torah is *esh l'vanah charutah ba-esh sh'chorah*, it is white fire engraved with black fire. If we think of this as a parallel to the physical Torah made of white parchment and black ink, then this becomes a radical statement: Torah is not just the story written down in ink. Torah is the black *and* the white, the ink *and* the parchment, the words *and* the spaces that surround them. When God first gave Torah to Moses, God actually gave two Torahs: the Torah of black fire, the one with letters on a scroll that spells out the story, and the Torah of white fire, the Torah of reading between the lines, the Torah of what is not in the story. Both of these Torahs are equally holy. And we have inherited both.

When we inherit the Torah of black fire, we inherit a clearly definable text that allows you, and me, and Jews all over the world and throughout the centuries to connect. We inherit a common story, and a common language with which we can discuss that story. Of course, we may understand the text differently, we may have different interpretations, different responses. But they all connect back to the same words. That is the beauty of the Torah of black fire, but it is also its limitation. The Torah of black fire is finite, both in the sense that it is a fixed, definable text, and in the sense that it is limited, bound by what the words say.

But when we inherit the Torah of white fire, we inherit a Torah of infinite possibilities. This Torah is the space between the text. When we inherit the Torah of white fire, we inherit all the stories about our stories that fill in the missing pieces, or add another person's perspective, or another layer of meaning. This includes both canonized midrashim and any other insight gained by reading between the lines. And we also inherit a divine invitation to constantly see something new in the text ourselves - or, perhaps, to newly notice something that was always there. The challenge of the Torah of white fire, then, is that you can never fully pin it down. But its beauty and its blessing is that it is always coming alive in different ways, and often in response to our own lives, our questions and yearnings, our joys and sorrows.

The Torah of black fire that we read this morning begins simply:

*Vadonai pakad et Sarah ka'asher amar*, And God visited Sarah, just as God had said; and God did for Sarah just as he had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.

The Hebrew is so simple and clear, giving us the sense that everything is happening just as we should expect it to, that each piece of the puzzle is falling perfectly into place. This is the story of a miracle - a birth at 91 years old. God takes part in Sarah's life, enabling her to fulfill her lifelong dream of having a child, and now we see a snapshot of a happy family, laughing together, celebrating together, and growing together.

This happy picture the Torah of black fire paints is often the primary image that we have of Sarah - so much so that in the Amidah, when we call on the God of our ancestors, we call God *pokeid Sarah*, the one who visits Sarah, in this moment of pregnancy and birth. And for many years, this image of a happy old woman, blessed by God with a child was certainly how I thought of our first matriarch.

But this image neglects the Torah of white fire, because it focuses only on what the words on the page tell us, not on what is absent from the text. And, as any good girl scout can tell you, when you neglect a fire, you risk it smouldering and slowly dying out, leaving you cold and in the dark. However, it is sometimes only in that darkness that the Torah of white fire comes to light.

This was my experience of the story of Sarah. Four and a half years ago, I experienced a miscarriage, and with it, physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. The physical and emotional suffering are subjects for another time - though they are subjects we should be talking about, because somewhere between 20 and 30% of pregnancies end in miscarriage, and over 40% of women who experience miscarriage report that the feeling of loneliness was one of the hardest parts of the experience. But that's for another sermon. The suffering that allowed a Torah of white fire to emerge was my spiritual suffering. I felt abandoned by God, and abandoned by Judaism. Our tradition has long been a source of comfort for me, but aside from eventually going to

the mikvah, there were no rituals to support me; and though my friends were unbelievably supportive when I opened up enough to let them be, there was no communal expectation that they do so. Jewish texts about miscarriage tend toward the legalistic, which I did not find comforting; and prayer? Prayer was hard. At first, the only words that spoke to me were the words of Tachanun, the petitionary prayers we recite on weekday mornings and afternoons that allow us to feel weak and lonely and afraid and even abandoned by God.

For weeks, these were the only prayers I could bring myself to say. I would sit through the rest of the service, not really praying so much as thinking about the prayers. One day, as I held the siddur open to the *Amidah*, one line jumped out at me: Blessed are you, Adonai, *pokeid sarah*, who visits Sarah.

My first reaction was jealousy, with a side of anger and sadness. Sure, God, you can show up for Sarah, but what about me? But then I started to think more about Sarah, about her life. Yes, the Torah says clearly: God is the one who visits Sarah – at 91 years old. But what about the first 90 years of her life? How many miscarriages might she have had? How many times did she raise her hopes, only to be filled with disappointment month after month?

Curious now, I re-read the text. I wanted to see if there was anything that indicated how Sarah felt for the first 90 years of her life. And what I found took my breath away. In some ways, I still cannot believe that I had never paid attention to the story told by the space between the lines.

From the moment we are introduced to Sarah we are told: *vat'hi Sarai akarah; ein lah v'lad*. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Her fertility struggle defines who she is. It is the most important thing about her aside from the fact that she is married to Avram.

When God first calls to Abraham and promises to make him into a great nation, Sarai is already in her seventies. From that moment, time after time after time, God assures Abraham that he will have a child with Sarah, that a nation will be borne from the two of them. Even with all this divine reassurance, Abraham still worries. He still questions, he still despairs.

And what does God say to Sarah?

Nothing.

When I went back to look for Sarah's experience of all of this, I found... nothing. Or, at least, no single promise or covenant or blessing spoken to Sarah. Now, it's true that the absence of evidence is not evidence itself. Maybe every time God spoke to Abraham, God also spoke to Sarah. Maybe Sarah had dozens of her own conversations with God that we simply have no record of. Maybe Abraham at least reported to Sarah everything that God had told him. We can't know. But the absence is striking. Abraham receives promises of descendants from God on no fewer than seven occasions before

Sarah gives birth, and yet the Torah of black fire never once speaks of God promising Sarah that she will have a child.

And we know that Sarah was pained by this, and we know that this suffering hurt her relationship with God. In the midst of her infertility, Sarai says to Avram: *Hinei nah atzarani Adonai miledet*, “Look, please; the Lord has stopped me from giving birth.” This is not someone who experiences God as one who visits, who performs miracles; this is someone who experiences God as one who stops up, who turns away from our prayers.

Abandoned by God, Sarah takes matters into her own hands, giving her handmaid to Avram, hoping that she will be built up through Hagar. Upon hearing this, does Avram reassure Sarai that she herself will also someday bear a child? Does Avram respond by telling Sarai not to worry, because they will have their own biological offspring? All the Torah of black fire tells us is that Avram listened to his wife's voice. And to add insult to injury, not only is Sarai not built up through Hagar (Sarai is not even mentioned when Hagar eventually gives birth), she is lowered in the eyes of her handmaid.

To be fair, there is one time when God speaks to Sarah. Three guests appear at Abraham's tent, and Abraham - or rather, Sarah and the servants - prepare a feast. Of course, these guests are no ordinary guests but rather angels, coming to announce the birth of Isaac. But it seems as if even here, Sarah is not the one being spoken to. The angels, sitting outside in the shade, make a point of

asking where Sarah is before delivering their good news; and only after Abraham responds that she is inside the tent, do they proceed to declare: in a year, Sarah will have a son.

Of course, Sarah overhears, and laughs *b'kirbah*, in her insides, those same insides that never birthed a child. God turns to Abraham - once again bypassing Sarah - and asks him why Sarah laughed; Sarah, though not the one who was spoken to, then speaks to God. The Torah tells us: "Then Sarah lied, saying: 'I did not laugh', for she was afraid." For most of my life, I always imagined that Sarah laughed because this promise seemed so outlandish she thought it was a joke. And when she realized God heard her, she became afraid that God would punish her for doubting divine abilities.

But after reading what is absent from her story, I have to wonder: is Sarah's laughter the laughter of disbelief? Or is Sarah's laughter a defensive laughter, a laughter that protects her from her real emotions? Maybe Sarah laughs because her only other option is to cry from hurt and anger and abandonment, but she cannot cry because once she starts she will not be able to stop; or maybe she cannot cry because she has no more tears left? And maybe she told God that she didn't laugh not because she outright lied, but because her laughter wasn't really laughter, it was an expression of her fear. And maybe her fear was not that God would punish her for doubting God, but rather that God would continue to let her suffer by reversing this divine promise, or that

she would allow herself to get her hopes up one more time only to be disappointed.

It is only at this moment that God speaks to Sarah. The only divine words directly addressed to Sarah in her entire life are *lo, ki tzachakta*. No, you laughed. An accusation. A dismissal of any other emotions hiding behind what God heard.

And yes, after this moment, Sarah's story turns around. She conceives, she bears a son, he becomes the one to fulfill the covenant. She becomes the one whom God visits, the one who receives a divine miracle, the one who gets her happy ending. In the Torah of black fire, this is the Sarah that is our primary focus.

But the Torah of white fire is there, too, flickering in the spaces between the letters. And in that Torah we are reminded that it took Sarah 90 years to get her happy moment. 90 years of inability to have a child. 90 years of silence from God. 90 years of following a husband who has this special relationship and this special role with some God that nobody else worships, all while feeling broken and diminished and closed up by this very same God.

This Torah of white fire is sad, but for me, it is also warming, and nourishing, and a ray of light. Because in the darkness of my loneliness and pain, this Sarah of white fire meant that I wasn't alone. She emerged almost as if to give me a warm embrace, to reassure me that I was not alone, that my experiences were reflected in the Torah, too, if only I remembered to read between the lines. And it was through this realization that I was finally able to start praying again, because I realized that praying to *Elohei Sarah*, the God of Sarah, could now mean praying to a God who sometimes does not seem to answer prayers, who sometimes even feels completely absent. And her story gave me hope, because I can only imagine how certain Sarah must have been, at 90 years old, that she would never have a child, only to find out that the end of her story, the book of her life, had not been finished yet.

And my story, my journey to parenthood, also had not ended. A little over a year later, Ezra was born, and I was in the same kind of snapshot of a happy family that our Torah reading began with. I fully recognize how lucky I am to have a healthy, happy child; and I also recognize that it doesn't erase the loss of a child that never was.

I still think of this version of Sarah's story often, especially in recent months, when the world often feels as void of hope as Sarah must have felt at age 89. Because this Torah of white fire not only speaks to the experiences of so many who are struggling with fertility. It also reminds us that no matter what we are struggling with, we do not need to struggle alone. Although it may feel at times that Judaism has nothing to say about our personal struggles, the Torah of white fire is always there, waiting to take on new meaning, if we are open to seeing it.

And this story of Sarah opens up so many possibilities in our prayer. Every time we say the Amidah, we begin by invoking the God of our ancestors. But we don't only pray to *Elohei Avoteinu*, the God of all our ancestors, we pray to *Elohei Avraham*, *Elohei Yitzchak*, *elohei Ya'akov*, *Elohei Sarah*, *Elohei Rivka*, *Elohei Rachel* *elohei Leah*, to the God of each one of our patriarchs and matriarchs. In articulating each of their names, we invoke their diverse experiences of God. But few if any of us today experience God as one who speaks with us or interacts with us in the same kind of direct, immediate way that God did with our ancestors. When we invoke the story of Sarah as told by the Torah of white fire, we suddenly find permission to pray even when we feel our prayers go unheard, or unanswered. We find, acknowledged in our siddur, that that is a relationship with God, too.

And finally, this story is really a story of hope. If Sarah's life can be headed in one direction for 90 years and then completely turn around, then the same thing can happen with us. Perhaps our own lives, like the Torah, are made of white fire engraved with black fire. We might think we know the main plot points of our lives: who we are, where we are headed, the story we would write out in ink, but there is so much more to our lives than what we think of as the story worth telling. We do not know the stories that will emerge from the blank spaces that surround the letters. And what's more, our stories have not been finished. The story that would have been written about Sarah at age 89 would have been completely different than the one we inherited. Perhaps our stories, too, will be completely reframed in the end. We cannot know what the final chapters of the books of our lives will hold.

May we enter the new year being open to the Torah of white fire, to the unspoken possibilities of our sacred texts and of the stories of our lives. May we have hope that, like Sarah, our lives can suddenly change for the better. And may the stories of our lives all be inscribed for good in this new year.