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Sarah and Sitis: An Aggadah Inspired by Neil Gillman

RACHEL KAHN-TROSTER



“Imagine if Abraham and Job were sitting at Starbucks, and Abraham said to Job, ‘What do you mean God never told you it was a test?’”

—NEIL GILLMAN

Imagine that two women stood on the edge of the desert. They were very old, though one was clearly beautiful in her youth and the other had the bearing of a princess.¹ Their eyes had run out of tears. Their voices were scratchy from too many screams. Their clothes bore witness to their long travels to get to this desert. They had a guide with them, a bitter prophet who told them that in this desert they would find God and God's mercy. The prophet rejected God's mercy, though he had seen God forgive a city of thousands of people, and he refused to enter the desert. So they went on alone, trying to find an answer to why God would design a test for their husbands' faith that would require the deaths of their children.

Sarah said to Sitis:² “I feel worse for you. You were never told that it was a test, that God was betting with Satan about your husband's faith. What does it mean that he is faithful to a God who claims to be merciful, and yet would test his faith through suffering? Who would kill others just to test him? It seems like it should be a parable, but it is not really, is it? Children still get sick and die because of their parents' sins, and no one ever tells them why . . . Children die even if their parents are blameless. What a world.”

Sitis said to Sarah, “How can you feel pity for me? My husband was caught up in some divine bad joke. Your husband betrayed you and your God betrayed you. You were so faithful to both of them, the husband who for so long could not give you children and the God whose message you spread among the women of Haran. And yet that very God asked Abraham to kill your child—and he agreed to do so out of some kind of faith. He argued for Sodom but not for Isaac? What if the knife had slipped? What if the angel was too late? How can you ever pray again?”

Sarah sighed. “And he went off and didn’t tell me. I guess he worried I would talk him out of it, that I would hold on to Isaac. Well, who would not have? I would have thought he was finally senile. What kind of covenant is this—I will give you as many children as stars in the sky, but only if occasionally you let me play games with them? And you know, you should see Isaac now—he refuses to come home. He cannot look his father in the face. He wanders around like a lost soul studying the words of God, seeking an answer. Maybe someday he will forgive either of them, his father or God. But to look at his face, he could just as easily be the walking dead. You know, that’s why I left home, to find him, to see him again. I heard a rumor that they think I am dead, that I heard that Abraham had actually killed Isaac and that I died of the shock. Well, let them think I am dead. I can never live with Abraham or his God again. Not until I have an answer. In any event, why would God create people who are capable of such things?”

Her companion said, “I hear that he did argue, your husband. Take your son—but I have two—”

“Does it matter?” asked Sarah. “In the time he took to argue, he could have said ‘no’ ten times. Maybe that’s what God expected him to do, anyhow. If this were my version of the story, Abraham would have failed the test before he got up in the morning.”

Sitis nodded. “I heard a rumor, too, that God finally rewarded my husband Job for his unwavering faith with even more prosperity and new children. I even heard his new wife is pretty. But I am too old for new children and no one offered them to me. It wasn’t just Job’s faith all these years, it was mine, too. But I know I did everything right, every *mitzvah*, and yet in the end it was out of my hands. Clearly, it was always out of my hands.”

~~ An Aggadah Inspired by Neil Gillman ~~

They wandered for a long time, past the bones of the weak and old who had died in the desert, past the graves of first-born children who had died for their parents' hard hearts, past the fossils of animals who died in a flood long ago, until they reached the mountain where the prophet had told them they would finally find God. At last, they could ask questions.

Sarah and Sitis cried out, "Where are you, God?" A whirlwind arose and blew around them. Sitis said, "This whirlwind appeared before my husband Job once. It was God's answer to his pain." The women looked at the whirlwind and tried to understand its purpose. Finally, they said, "God is telling us that God is the creator of the world and that we can never fully comprehend God's ways. That we are too small to truly understand the workings of the universe. That we must have faith in Your justice and accept that evil is part of this world. This may be true tomorrow, but today, when the hurt of our lost children is before us, we cannot understand why You refuse to explain why we were pawns, why fathers sending their sons to die fits into the workings of the universe. We reject this wind. This cannot be God's answer." And the whirlwind vanished.

The women called again, "Where are you, God?" There was an earthquake. The women stared at the moving earth and saw water welling up beneath the surface. Sarah said: "The last time the earth cracked and this water was let loose was when creation was reversed, in a simpler time when people sinned and God punished them for it." The women said to the earthquake: "God is telling us that evil is punishment for our human foundations not being solid, for our mistakes and our sins. When things happen to us, they are our fault, even if we do not see how exactly we sinned. And yet, we are innocent bystanders in this drama. Whether Job sinned or not, they were her children, too. Sarah ended up taking the same test as Abraham. Is this the way that you take notice of her? We reject that all evil comes as punishment for our sins if that evil sucks in the blameless along with it. This earthquake is not God's answer." And the ground stopped shaking.

The women called for the third time, "Where are you, God?" and at once they were surrounded by a circle of fire. Sarah said to Sitis, "This fire is the fire of covenant, the same fire that consumed Abraham's sacrifice between the pieces, a sign of God's un-ending commitment to us, in this

world and in the next. God is saying that our reward for our faithfulness is some time in the future. Should I rejoice that I will see Isaac in *olam ha-ba*, when first I will wither and die alone?" Sitis said to Sarah, "No, this fire is like the fire of the hearth, warming and nourishing. It is for our benefit. God is telling us that our suffering can be for our own good, to ennable us and bring us to a higher level. Yet I am cast out by my husband, without home or family. This is a bad way to make me stronger." And they said to the fire: "You are not God's answer." And the fire went out.

For the fourth time, they cried out, "Where are you, God?" They heard the sound of silence. And the silence said: "I am lost in a hidden place. I am trying to make my way back to you, but I do not know the way. I will be there someday and all will become clear. My heart is with you, in exile, suffering." The two women looked at each other and said: "Can we accept that God's face can only be hidden when it comes to mercy, when we have seen in our own lives God taking such an active role in the world? That the limit of God's power is the power to be merciful? This is enough. None of your explanations make our grief any easier. In fact, we find it funny that you, God, cannot even adequately explain the way that your world works. We came here to scream at you, but all we can do is laugh; laugh at a world that cannot ever be explained." And so the two of them stood there, laughing in the wilderness.

Many years later, Beruriah was teaching in the marketplace and she encountered Elijah. She asked him, "What did God do when Sarah and Sitis laughed in the face of God's revelation?" Elijah replied, "God cried and said, my children have defeated me, my children have defeated me."

Commentary

The above *aggadah* on evil was written as part of a personal theology I wrote for Rabbi Gillman during my second year of rabbinical school. It is an *aggadah* on dealing with evil in a post-Holocaust world, when the classic explanations for the existence of evil failed and took shape out of my own experience of loss and anger with God. It is not a theology in the traditional sense, reflecting Rabbi Gillman's own ambivalence about whether a systematic answer to the contemporary problem of evil could be found, and the pastoral understanding that no rational explanation of suffering is satis-

—~ An Aggadah Inspired by Neil Gillman ~—

factory in a moment of pain.³ The women's final challenge to God goes unanswered. Not even the Holy One can always explain God's world.

The *aggadah* can be seen as part of the larger rabbinic response to suffering and evil. It is not fiction, but an inter-textual narrative that asserts itself as part of a system by which the rabbis interpreted portions of their world, including events of extreme suffering. An example of such an *aggadah* would be the twenty-third *petikhta* of *Eikhah Rabbah*, which tries to explain the destruction of the Second Temple by exploring God's suffering and anguish. In *aggadot* such as this one, the rabbis regularly employed anthropomorphic language about God not as a way of explaining God in God's totality, but to make comprehensible some particular aspect of God's character. David Stern has asked the question: "Who did the rabbis believe God was?" to suggest that rabbinic *aggadot* were a method of working out complicated theological issues in their daily lives.⁴ These anthropomorphisms described a God living in mythic time. In writing my *aggadah*, I attempted to articulate the intersection of my faith and my religious anger, while also seeking to locate God within the broken myth of Jewish historical experience. It is this shared goal which links the *aggadah* with the rabbinic tradition, keeping it from the realm of fiction.

Gillman understands that Judaism builds a coherent worldview through shared ritual and narrative. In *Sacred Fragments*, he explores the ways that ritual creates order out of the chaos of the human experience of suffering, with the medium becoming synonymous with the message.⁵ The communal storytelling of *aggadah* also allows us to shape what we know to be "true" about the world and about God.⁶ We reshape the collective *aggadah* about evil and suffering in search of a new myth that takes into account the experience of the Holocaust, so that future generations can see what we, along with the rabbis, believed about God.

NOTES

1. Testament of Job 5:11.

2. According to the Testament of Job, the name of Job's wife.

3. "I have no solution to the problem of evil," he said to my class, "so write whatever you want: a poem, a midrash, whatever you think captures it best. Imagine if Abraham and Job were sitting at Starbucks, and Abraham said to Job, 'What

~~ Rachel Kahn-Troster ~~

do you mean God never told you it was a test?” I proposed the alternate scenario of Sarah and Sitis in Starbucks. This aggadah is the result.

4. David Stern, *Midrash and Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 73.

5. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 189.

6. Ibid, p. 31.

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