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A Letter to Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

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He touches her in places she covers
Yet tells her to be modest

He insists she lies to protect his lies
Yet expects her to stay truthful

He breaks her spirit repeatedly
Yet demands she stay religious

He causes her physical pain
Yet judges her when she hurts herself

He misuses his position and power
Yet instructs her to trust the leaders

He exposes her to adult information
Yet expects her to remain innocently childlike

He breaks the most sacred religious laws
Yet insists she fears and believes in G-d.

He promises her this is love
Yet it feels like a punishment
For a crime she distantly remembers knowing she didn't commit

And all the people wonder
Why she is disconnected
Why she is confused
And why she is angry

And even when she told them
They had heard, but hadn't listened
And they didn't realize
He had killed her long before she died

Listen to Her Voice: The Eternal Message of an Infertile Prophetess

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Until 2008, I read Rachel's demand to Jacob—"Give me children, or I shall die" (Genesis 30:1)—with a sense of enlightened remove. What modern woman would feel this way? There was no way I ever would. I was a person whose self-worth could not possibly be predicated simply on my ability to bear children.

And yet, in 2008, my ob/gyn told me—with the coldness of clinical detachment, and potentially with a hint of irritation—that if I wanted to have children, I would need to see a fertility specialist. As she gave me a referral, dismissing me to the care of someone else, I stared at her feeling entirely empty. I had a job, a career, fancy degrees, a wonderful spouse, good friends, and very little else to complain about. But, as it dawned on me that my reproductive system was not functional, suddenly nothing else mattered.

Rashi, in explaining Rachel's words, cites the rabbinic statement that someone who does not have children is *hashuv ke-meit*, considered like someone who is dead (*Bereishit Rabbah* 71:6; *Nedarim* 64b). I had always thought this was hyperbole. I was one of six children. It never occurred to me that I might one day find myself in Rachel's shoes. I knew, intellectually, that not every woman gave birth every two years like clockwork the way my mother did, but my lived experience was a neighborhood where our family was one of the smaller ones on the block.

As one round of treatment after another ended in failure, I found myself feeling truly *hashuv ke-meit*. When a car ride with friends was crowded with talk of diapers and sleep training, I wanted to curl up and disappear. When I looked around the room at the fertility clinic, I perceived a room full of women who looked beaten and broken. I don't know if they truly felt that way or if I just couldn't imagine any of them felt otherwise.

Infertility can be a lonely journey, marked with shame and secrecy. In this journey, the voices of Rachel, Rebecca, and Sarah felt like stories of comrades in an ancient struggle. Most striking to me was the voice of Sarah, whose anguish cried out from the many layers of her story, in a voice that is both of its time and timeless.

Sarah first shows up as Sarai. We know from the very beginning, before she leaves Haran, that she is infertile (Genesis 11:30). A midrash also tells us that she is named Yiskah because she is "*sokhah be-ruah ha-kodesh*,"—she has the ability to see through holy inspiration (*Sanhedrin* 69b). We hear a lot about her infertility, as well as her legendary beauty. Her access to *ruah ha-kodesh* is only hinted at in the

Torah's text. How must it have felt for this prophetess to be able to see beyond, but to find herself evaluated on the basis of her beauty or her infertility?

Avram and Sarai run into a famine when they first arrive in Canaan and head to Egypt where the Pharaoh, struck with Sarai's beauty, takes her to his house and makes his intentions known. Here *Midrash Rabbah* tells us: "All that night Sarah was face down before God saying, 'Master of the universe, Abraham left Haran with a promise, and I left with only faith. Abraham is outside the ship (i.e., the danger), and I am inside of it'" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 41:2).

This midrash makes a point rarely discussed: that God promises Avram wealth and fertility in return for his journey to Canaan, but he promises Sarai nothing. One can understand why Sarai comes to the conclusion that God's promises simply don't apply to her. "God has prevented me from giving birth," she states, and she offers up her slave to Avram to bear him a child on the logic that "*ulai ibaneh mi-menah*"—perhaps I will be built from her (Genesis 16:2).

Before 2008, I probably would have told you that I would never go through IVF. If I couldn't get pregnant naturally, I would find fulfillment in other aspects of my life or "just" adopt. In 2008, I realized this might be the right answer for some women, but not for me. I desperately wanted to get pregnant, nurse, give birth, and name a child after my mother of blessed memory. I wanted that child to have a biological link to me and to her. This would have sounded foolish to me in 2006, but by 2012, after four years of failed treatments, I felt defective, like a woman whose parts simply didn't function properly, and sometimes like my very womanhood was in question. My story would end with my passing from this world. No one would carry it forward.

Midrash Rabbah further comments on Sarai's infertility: "Whoever has no child is like one who is dead, like one who is destroyed." I do not think that every woman feels this way. Some women genuinely do not want to have children. For me, though, I viscerally understood Sarai's willingness to do what seems truly desperate, to offer her slave as a surrogate. The midrash adds, "We build only what was destroyed" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 45:2).

One summer during college, I spent some time in Oxford where I wandered through the Ashmolean Museum and encountered an exhibit full of little figurines of Canaanite gods and goddesses. I discovered a world obsessed with fertility. In this context, Sarai's statement attributing her infertility to God is a radical statement of faith. "I know the source of my affliction: it is not as people say [of a barren woman]—'he needs a talisman, she needs a charm'—but rather it is God who has kept me from giving birth" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 45:2). She is not bothered by the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people. In a world where fertility of earth and womb was a test of a God's power, Sarai knew Avram had to have a son, whether or not she was the one to bear him. She does not pretend that this union between Avram and Hagar will bring her happiness. She merely says, *ulai ibaneh mi-menah*.

There is only a sliver of hope that this plan will benefit her. Avram listens to her, according to the midrash, because she speaks with *ruah ha-kodesh*, even though she turns out to be blind to her own future as the mother of Isaac.

To give birth is extraordinarily difficult and painful, even in the best of circumstances. When I finally held my first child, in 2013, I realized I would never see any woman who has given birth in the same light. To go through this and survive! That a real-life child comes out! To hold a beautiful baby breathing softly on your chest and feel so overjoyed and so physically wrecked. I wanted to laugh. It happened! Really, it did! To name a first child born after so much trial, *Yitzhak* makes so much sense. All who hear my story shall laugh, with joy, with incredulous disbelief.

We named our first child Eliana—God answered. Our second, brought into being with almost as much hard work, is Natanel—God gave. There are exclamation points at the end of these names, and a surprised giggle, followed by a sigh.

Every child is a miracle, but the child born of struggle is tangibly, achingly so. I feel Sarah's panic as she sees Ishmael threaten her hard-won Isaac. Perhaps Abraham was right to be distressed when she tells him to expel Ishmael and Hagar, but God takes Sarah's side: "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice" (Genesis 21:12)

A midrash on this verse states, "From here you can learn that Abraham was secondary to Sarah in prophecy" (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:1). This midrash is stunning. How could this be? If Sarah was such a great prophetess, even greater than Abraham, how is it possible that she never foresaw the birth of Isaac? Why does she laugh, incredulous, when the angels announce she will bear a son? Why does this laughter seem more bitter than elated?

The answer to this question lies in the *haftarah* for *Parashat Vayeira*. Here, the prophet Elisha tells the Shunamite woman that she will bear a son "*ka-eit hayah*" in exactly a year, in language obviously reminiscent of the angels' announcement to Abraham. Despite the fact that she so respects Elisha that she builds him an apartment in her home and despite the fact that she calls him a Man of God, the Shunamite woman responds, "Do not delude your maidservant" (II Kings 4:16). Constant disappointment, I know well, can put a person in a dark place, which no candle can illuminate. Infertility can make even the fiercely independent Shunamite woman afraid to hope. It can also make the greatest prophetess blind.

The voices of our infertile foremothers in the Bible remain shockingly and bracingly relevant. Personally, I treasure them. They remind me that my experience, with both its dark moments and its golden hours, is by no means exceptional. They are also a reminder to us all to be sensitive to the quiet struggles of infertility, miscarriage, and childbirth that are so common among us.

But this cannot be the only reason the Bible tells

these stories.

There is another stunning reality exposed by this midrash. If Abraham is the lesser of the two prophets in this marriage, why is this story mostly about Abraham? Why isn't this the story of Sarah who left Haran? Why is it not she who receives promises of wealth and fertility to bring a new nation into being? Why do we see only one mention of God speaking to her, and only to chastise her? Why is there no record of Sarah's prophecies? Why is her story framed mostly by her fertility struggles?

Well, the answer is obvious. Sarah was a woman, and so it was Abraham, perhaps the lesser prophet—and perhaps no more righteous, but male—who was able to be the leader who propels this story forward. After all, in the ancient Near East, what would have been crazier than a man smashing idols and claiming there was but one unseen God (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13)? Well, of course, it would be a woman doing these things.

So the stories of infertility and pain are a reminder that these women, however divinely inspired they might have been, had only one way of being part of this story, and that was to give birth to the next generation. In this sense, God's statement to Abraham is meant as a corrective.

"*Kol asher tomar eilekha Sarah, shema be-kolah.*"

"All that Sarah tells you, listen to her voice."

All that she says—not just when she is speaking about fertility or motherhood, but on all topics. After all, this woman received no promises when she left Haran; she left only with her faith. She was already known as an "*akarah*," a woman who cannot bear children, while his ability to bear children was still an open question. He won acclaim wherever he went, while she likely endured ridicule for spurning the local fertility cults. Abraham enriches himself by giving her away twice. Sarah gives Abraham her slave in the hopes of at least getting an honorable mention in the final credits of the story of this Israelite nation. The slave gets pregnant right away and mocks her. Abraham has many children, but Sarah has only one, and she dies before he gets married, and she never sees her grandchildren. Abraham may have had ten tests, but Sarah likely endured many more. Not the least of which is that though she was the greater of the two prophets, she is silenced on all subjects not connected to fertility and motherhood.

This, God tells Abraham, is not as it should be. *All* that Sarah says, God tells Abraham, is worth hearing as they work together to create this nation.

Have things changed in the Modern Orthodox community since Sarah's time? In many ways, the past fifty years or so have brought about a revolution. There are *batei midrash* full of women poring over pages of Talmud. It is no longer unusual to see a woman give a *dvar Torah* at a synagogue. There are respected female Torah scholars, heads of school, and synagogue presidents. An increasing number of women are graduating from Orthodox y*eshivot* with rabbinic-level qualifications, whether or not they are officially recognized as rabbis. In ascertaining what to do on issues of fertility and

taharat ha-mishpahah, a woman can now turn to a *Yoetzet Halakhah*. Orthodox women are no longer defined solely as caregivers and bearers of children, though most of us continue to deeply cherish these roles. This is wonderful.

And yet, women remain glaringly absent from membership of mainstream Modern Orthodox institutions such as the RCA, Beth Din of America, and most *va'ad*s. These are the institutions that decide what role women can have in the community and in the synagogue, as well as how they will be treated in matters of conversion, marriage, and divorce. This is largely because these institutions require *semikhah* for membership while opposing *semikhah* for women. As membership is required for active participation, women effectively have no voice in communal halakhic decision-making. Perhaps, you say, we women need not worry—after all, the men who make these decisions have wives and daughters and sisters, many of whom are Torah scholars as well. They must be naturally aware of the female perspective.

The Bible's stories of infertility are critical because they openly challenge this assumption. God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a son, and Abraham simply says to God, "If only Ishmael can live before You" (Genesis 17:18), seemingly oblivious to Sarah's aching desire for a child of her own. When Rachel tells Jacob she feels like she is dead, he reacts in anger (Genesis 30:2). Tamar must take extreme measures to force Judah to take her perspective into account (Genesis 38). Hannah, finding herself infertile, is heartbroken, and her husband blithely tells her that she has nothing to complain of since *he* is better to her than ten sons could ever be (I Samuel 1:8). The deafness to the female experience is darkly comical and strikingly familiar.

I discovered, in my struggles with fertility, that many specialists in the field were men. Going through this process, as a woman accustomed to ideals of modesty, meant agreeing to all sorts of indignities. I also encountered deafness to the internal experience of the patient on the examining table. This is not because these doctors—or our forefathers, for that matter—were bad men. They were men genuinely motivated by a desire to help, but they were not women. I am ever thankful to the female medical professionals who helped me feel human despite the humiliations large and small, the injections, the nausea, the pain, the failures, the heartbreak, and the blood. I will never forget the sublime sympathy of the doctor who told me about her own miscarriage as I went through mine.

The word "*shema*" can mean to listen with empathy, as in "*Vayishma elokim et-kol ha-na'ar*—and God heard the voice of the boy (Ishmael)" (Genesis 21:17). This is a good start, but to listen, as in God's corrective to Abraham, is to recognize that you cannot speak for someone else's experience, needs, and wants. To truly listen is to allow a voice to sway a decision.

God's call to Abraham to listen to Sarah's voice demands that women be active participants in the halakhic decision-making process, most critically for decisions regarding the role of women in the rabbinate and in synagogue ritual, in marriage and in divorce, but ideally on all issues, large and small.

Kol asher tomar eilekha Sarah shema be-kolah.

All that Sarah says, listen to her voice.

A Jewish Perspective on God's Presence in Islam

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Editors Note: This piece was originally written in Hebrew and was translated by Rachael Gelfman Schultz.

Muslims are currently observing Ramadan which, according to their tradition, marks the beginning of the revelation of the Koran to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel in the year 610.

From a national perspective, we cannot separate the story of the Jewish people from the story of Islam, which has deeply influenced us throughout history, for better and for worse.

In our times, Jews and others have suffered from murderous terrorism in the name of Islam and from the existential conflict between Israel and its neighbors. On the other hand, many of our Jewish cultural treasures were created in the Spanish Golden Age in a Muslim environment. Furthermore, the Muslim story itself is built on the biblical story. The character who is mentioned most frequently in the Koran is Moses (more than 100 times, in contrast to Muhammad who is mentioned only four times), and the Jewish people are mentioned dozens of times. Islam, like Christianity, became a vessel for spreading the biblical story throughout the world.

In contrast to Christianity, our relationship with Islam also has an ethnic aspect, because Jews and Arabs see each other as descendants of Abraham. Indeed, our similarity, both theologically and ethnically, has led to Islam often being treated differently from other non-Jewish faiths in rabbinic sources. This may be as simple as not seeing it as *avodah zarah*, due to its purely monotheistic nature. For some, though, the connection goes well beyond this. Exploring some of these often-neglected sources will give us an important theological lens for understanding recent developments in interreligious relations.

One approach is to see the emergence of Islam as guided by divine providence, as part of the process of spreading the truth of Torah in the world. The first to follow this path is Maimonides. He praised Islam because it has faith in the unity of God "unblemished" (*Teshuvot Ha-Rambam* [Blau edition], 448). His words at the end of the *Mishneh Torah* (Law of Kings 11:9) are famous. He points to the development of Christianity and Islam as part of a divinely guided process, "the thoughts of the Creator of the world," aiming to bring the entire world closer to messianic times, when all of humanity will worship God together.

Maimonides, however, did not grant legitimacy to these religions. He thought that they were mistaken and saw them only as means to fulfill a vision of the

future. In short, Maimonides recognizes the value of Islam and its role in the worldwide narrative, but he does not see Islam as legitimate in and of itself.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1698-1776) took another step. Following Maimonides, he sees the hand of God in the spread of Christianity and Islam: "The two families that God chose to subdue many nations, to bring them under the yoke of the beliefs and positions that are necessary for settling the world and improving the national collective…" (*Lehem Shamayim* on *Pirkei Avot* 4:11). However, in contrast to Maimonides, he sees Christianity and Islam as part of fulfilling the divine ideal regarding the nations of the world. Rabbi Yaakov Emden reads the Mishnah—"Every assembly which is for the sake of heaven, will in the end endure" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:11)—as applying to Christianity and Islam. In his eyes, Islam, like Christianity, contains truth, and these religions are fitting for the nations of the world.

A more far-reaching approach is that of the sages who saw Islam—and particularly the Koran—not only as a product of divine providence but also of divine revelation. Rabbi Netanel Beirav Fayyumi (1090–1165) was the Nagid and leader of the rabbis of Yemen in the generation before Maimonides. In Maimonides's *Letter to Yemen*, which was addressed to the son of Fayyumi, Maimonides calls Fayyumi "our teacher and rabbi." According to Rabbi Kapah,[1] Fayyumi's book, *Garden of the Intellects*, influenced Maimonides in writing *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

In this book, in the sixth chapter, Fayyumi presents a systematic approach to the religions of the nations of the world: "Know, my brother, that it is not inconceivable for God to send to the world who He wants when He wants… and He, may He be blessed, already sent the nations prophets before the giving of the Torah… and it is not inconceivable for God to send who He wants after giving the Torah as well, so that the world will not remain without faith."[2] These words are instructive. First, they unequivocally assert the importance of religions among the nations, as part of the divine goal "that the world will not remain without faith." Furthermore, not only do other religions have a place according to Judaism; it is even possible that the source of these religions is a prophecy received by the nations from God! According to Fayyumi, every nation is obligated to accept the prophecy that is sent to them. Accepting these prophecies will lead to all of humanity worshiping God, each nation in its own way.

Fayyumi's belief that there is a divine goal of bringing the nations to worship God, combined with his faith in certain prophecies of the nations, led him to conclude that there are religions other than Judaism that are not only legitimate but also a

[1] See his notes in his translation of *Iggerot Ha-Rambam*, at the very beginning of *Letter to Yemen*.

[2] Translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Kapah. *Gan Ha-Sikhlim* (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Makhon Mishnat Ha-Rambam, 1984), 114-115.

realization of prophetic revelation. Therefore, Fayyumi relates to the Koran very seriously, and he believes that the Koran obligates the Muslims. He analyzes the words of the Koran carefully, to such an extent that in the second chapter of his book he finds mystical meaning in the *Shahada* (the Muslim declaration of faith).

A substantial part of the sixth chapter of Fayyumi's book is dedicated to analysis and interpretation of the Koran. He concludes from this analysis that Islam is not directed to the Jewish people; rather, it is intended to provide religion and faith to the nations. Its purpose is not to abolish the Torah—just the opposite: the Koran confirms the obligation of the Jewish people to keep the Torah. At the same time, Fayyumi asserts that the Koran teaches that there are additional revelations to other nations, revelations that obligate them to their own religious systems.

One of the prominent sources in the Koran that support this approach is the fifth *sura*, the *sura* of the "Table Spread," which is considered the last *sura* of the Koran (the Koran is not in chronological order). These verses affirm the revelations that came before the Koran:

> Indeed, We revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light, by which the prophets, who submitted themselves to Allah, made judgments for Jews. So too did the rabbis and scholars judge according to Allah's Book, with which they were entrusted and of which they were made keepers… We have revealed to you this Book with the truth, as a confirmation of previous Scriptures and a supreme authority on them… To each of you We have ordained a code of law and a way of life. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but His Will is to test you with what He has given each of you. So compete with one another in doing good. (*Sura* 5:44-47)

This interpretation of the Koran is seen by many scholars as the simple understanding of its words.[3] Today, there are voices of learned Muslims who call for a return to this original approach. For example, Professor Tamer Metwally, in his book, *Bias against Judaism in Contemporary Writings*,[4] points out that Islam branched off from the Jewish story, and any insult to Judaism and the Torah ultimately undermines Islam itself, while respect and legitimization of Judaism actually strengthen the foundations of Islam.

[3] See for example Joseph Lumbard, "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions," in *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 1765-1774.

[4] Tamer Metwally, *Bias against Judaism in Contemporary Writings* (Al Sadiqin Press, 2020).

Rabbi Netanel Fayyumi's approach seems to be unusual in the landscape of Jewish thought. Still, we can find similar ideas in a less sharp formulation in the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. He also raises the possibility that prophecy is the foundation of other religions. In his book, *For the Perplexed of the Generation,*[5] Chapter 52, Rav Kook writes:

> In general, the essence of faith does not contain any opposition to other religions. As we said already, it is possible that the abundance of knowledge and prophecy or Divine spirit or other Divine assistance will influence nations according to their situation and value, through the good and righteous among them.

Rav Kook presents a wide variety of possibilities—from "abundance of knowledge and prophecy" to "other Divine assistance"—which are at the foundation of other religions for the nations of the world.

Many years ago, at my first meeting with Muslim sheikhs, I was surprised to discover that in the eyes of the Koran, Muhammad is not considered the greatest of the prophets! According to the Koran, this description is reserved for Moses, and, as we said, he is the figure mentioned most frequently in the Koran. The uniqueness of Muhammad, according to the Koran, is that he is the last prophet. As we said in our opening, the Muslim tradition is that the Koran was revealed to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel, and there is even a tradition that Muhammad received his first revelation in a dream.

As we can learn from a number of our sources, there are many different levels of divine revelation to people. For example, Maimonides (in *The Guide for the Perplexed* II:45) enumerates two levels of holy spirit, and above them nine levels of prophecy. The following words of the sages are famous (*Berakhot* 57b): "A dream is one sixtieth of prophecy." The holy *Zohar* (on Genesis 183a) includes these words when describing the levels of prophecy. The *Zohar* there discusses dreams, which he identifies as the sixth level of prophecy—at great length—and he explains that prophetic dreams come via the angel Gabriel.

As we said, the Koran itself recognizes the levels of prophecy, and it presents itself as a revelation via the angel Gabriel. The fact that the *Zohar* connects dreams—which are a universal phenomenon—to the possibility of prophecy via the angel Gabriel, illuminates and explains the words of Rav Kook that we mentioned regarding the possibility that the source of the nations' religions is true revelation.

We do not need to choose one position or another from among the wide range of approaches that we saw regarding the place of Islam in the divine narrative of the world. Just recognizing that there is something divine in this story enables us to have respectful dialogue with Muslim believers. This

[5] Abraham Isaac Kook, *For the Perplexed of the Generation* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sefarim, 2014).

dialogue can be based on the general direction of these approaches, our ethnic connection, the assumption that God directs reality, and the place of revelation to the nations.

Though its ethnic and theological similarities with Judaism are not as strong as those with Islam, there are those who see a special role for Christianity in God's plan for history as well. As I hinted to above, R. Yaakov Emden shows from his reading of the New Testament itself that Christianity does not come to abolish the Torah and Judaism. Rather, Christianity is based on the recognition that the Jewish people have an eternal covenant with God, and the purpose of Christianity is to spread religion to the nations of the world. In effect, R. Emden's reading of the New Testament is parallel to R. Fayyumi's reading of the Koran.

Astoundingly, in the last several decades this approach has become accepted in Christianity as well. In 2015, for example, the Vatican published a document entitled, "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable," which officially declares that the Church is ceasing from missionizing Jews, due to the recognition that the divine covenant with the Jewish people still exists.

One and a half years ago, the unbelievable happened when there was a series of peace agreements with Muslim countries, which were named for our shared identity: "The Abraham Accords." We should hope that interreligious dialogue will enable Islam to undergo a similar process to that of Christianity and will recognize that the Koran itself obligates the Jewish people to Judaism. I believe that we should also act to realize this hope.

Divine providence presents us with a challenge. Whether we want it or not, we are in a space that is surrounded by believers in Islam.

As part of our task of bringing the words of God to the world, we are invited to discover the paths through which they are revealed to the world. This understanding, together with the ability to tell this story anew in a way that unites rather than separates, creates new possibilities. At the same time, it challenges us, through this approach, to create the continuation of the story leading to the world's redemption.