Naso dvar june 6, 2020

Here we go again.

In my years in Africa it was not unusual to hear of a couple having difficulty conceiving a child. The first assumption was that the woman was infertile, and there were visits to medicine men, herbalists, marabouts or priests, payments for magical substances; prayers; remonstrations; and finally, almost as a last resort, a second wife would have to be taken. The family could not do without an heir.

No one was duped. We all knew, underneath it all, it might have been the man. And if the second wife did not produce a child, after time, well, then a solution would have to be found.

Oh how often do we find this story in our Tanakh. Sarah was the first; then Rachel; then Hannah makes a big deal about it, and almost loses her miracle child. There hovering in the background is the husband, waiting, praying, making sacrifices…. Doing what, exactly, to fix this situation? Everything except to admit he might have been the problem.

In Africa, family counts first. Mishpacha. So, you keep this under your hat. Maybe the husband has a brother, maybe he has to serve double duty. A great film called *Mother of George*, set in Brooklyn with a Yoruba family, is all about just this dilemma; and the wife, in the end, bears the brother’s child, while the husband has finally been shown to have been the one, not her.

In our parshah, a husband might get jealous. Who knows why? Can’t be his fault. So the kohanim will devise a test—just exactly like the tests over the fidelity of a wife I’ve read about often in parts of Africa. What if the woman is unfaithful; say in Afghanistan or Pakistan? Or in Mali? That’s the substance of one major thread of the film *Timbuktu*, where the Islamic fundamentalists have taken over the freewheeling city, and wind up stoning the roaming woman and her lover to death. Honor killings. Here, in Numbers 5 we are told of her punishment:

27He shall make her drink the water, and it shall be that, if she had been defiled and was unfaithful to her husband, the curse bearing waters shall enter her to become bitter, and her belly will swell, and her thigh will rupture. The woman will be a curse among her people.

Maybe she will have to wear the letter A, publicly shamed for life, and her child, say she is called Pearl, will be the sign of her sin forever. By 1850 Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne had reversed the circumstances, and instead of being the eternal figure of shame has become our ideal of liberatory feminism.

What if, the barren wife is cured by having intercourse with a spirit, a saint, a marabout, whose intercourse—really a blessing—cures her? What if the child, the pearl, becomes the sign not of her sin, but of her specialness, the miracle that caused Sarah to laugh with joy at the notion that she could still have a child. Isaac, our original sacrificed child to be dedicated to God, the original Nazirite.

In this haftorah reading Manoah’s wife is barren. She is not given a name, but assumes her role nonetheless. Judges 13:

3And an angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren, and have not borne; and you shall conceive and bear a son.

4Consequently, beware now, and do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat any unclean thing.

5Because you shall conceive, and bear a son; and a razor shall not come upon his head, for a Nazirite to God shall the lad be from the womb; and he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

She returns to her husband, and tells him about this really beautiful man she had met, out there in the fields; and how he had assured her she would have a child.

And so the story goes. I think of Jesus and Mary and another divine angel coming down to announce this news, while the husband sits back there waiting to find out what’s this all about. We can call up all these figures, Abraham, Joseph of Nazareth, Elkanah, and now Manoah the old man. The wife, well, she will become the mother, even the holy mother. The child, the Nazirite, the special one who will save the people.

Why am I telling you all this? There are always two sides to this story: his side, which is that it is her fault; and hers, where she is not allowed to say that, so instead an angel, handsome beyond all men, a messenger from God, will have to do the trick. We can so easily understand all this from the Hestor Prynne side, and decide women will never be free until the damn Puritan Fathers have been thrown out for once and for all; and that’s true. We’ve had those moments in our history over and over, and it began before the feminist movement. *The Scarlet Letter* marks the moment in our history in 1850 when women’s rights had to be heard. And it was repeated during Prohibition and with the Women’s vote in the 1920s, and again, not least in the 1960s with Women’s liberation, and then the 1990s with 3d wave feminism. At the end of this haftorah, it is so fabulously constructed I want to just reread its conclusion:

20And it was, when the flame went up from upon the altar toward heaven, and the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on, and they fell on their faces to the ground.

21And the angel of the Lord did not continue to appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the Lord.

22And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God."

23But his wife said to him, "If the Lord wanted to kill us, He would not have received from our hand a burnt-offering and a meal-offering, and He would not have shown us all these things; and at this time He would not let us hear (such things) as these."

24And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the lad grew, and the Lord blessed him.

We can call this the story of Samson’s mom, and how one day she was walking in the field and happened to meet a very handsome man….

Shabbat shalom