

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2 September 11, 2018

A *midrashic* poem on the Akedah (Binding of Isaac)

I'm so grateful to be standing here, having reached my 75<sup>th</sup> year.

This is for my father Max Blachman's *yartzeit* today, for all my ancestors.

This is for my beloved congregation, our new rabbi, Chai Levy, for  
Rabbi Stuart Kelman and all my teachers.

This is above all for my granddaughters, Chloe and Emilie Gill,  
for all our children's future.

#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

About 4 years ago, while enduring bouts of vertigo, I gravitated toward my bookshelf to Aviva Zornberg's *Beginning of Desire*, to the chapter, *Hayyei Sarah: Vertigo—The Residue of the Akedah*. Starting to read, I embarked on a journey to explore the genesis, impact and healing of individual and generational trauma, starting with Sarah *emeinu*, our ancestral mother whose death immediately follows the *Akedah*. A *midrashic* tradition holds Sarah as its true victim.

I resonated with Zornberg's interpretation resting on multiple sources that Sarah died of vertigo, panic, radical doubt – a suicidal potential ignited by learning that her son had barely escaped slaughter. By virtue of personality and perhaps the times she lived in as woman and mother, Sarah could not live through trauma to the other side.

This summer I emerged from my own journey with this extended poem:  
*Sarah Unbound*.

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## SARAH UNBOUND

Inspired by Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg's *The Beginning of Desire*

When Sarah learned of  
the burnt offering  
the world fell off its axis

Her husband's arm, knife in hand  
the altar, ropes binding tender  
flesh, her son's stricken face, the wood,  
the ram, her torn vision, shattered plans  
fragments  
spinning round her head  
whirling waves of vertigo

She couldn't breathe  
couldn't think  
couldn't find her feet on the fissured earth  
couldn't bear her splintered certainties  
her son, her son, lost to her, almost lost to her  
she became the shofar's anguished wail  
breaking her into pieces  
howling her into the vortex  
where she willed her soul to fly away

Pity it happened eons before  
meclizine and Klonopin  
before Peter Levine woke the tiger and  
world to trauma  
before EMDR, SE, EFT  
neurofeedback and neuroscience  
before guardrails at the Golden Gate  
before metta became medicine

Too late for my own mother  
who followed the call of her angry G-d  
to endless grief and shame  
meekly trailed the blinkered doctors  
to their altar of straps and shocks

She lay down with trembling trust  
awoke with empty eyes  
knew the abyss, curled her toes around the edge  
didn't jump but never lived

No stranger to vertigo's curse myself  
another link in trauma's long chain  
stretching back to you Sarah *emeinu*  
mother of my mother  
of all mothers who tiptoe towards the pit  
in garments of sackcloth and ash  
heads bowed, bodies debased  
children torn from arms  
hope slashed, dreams dashed

*Shim 'i!* Sarah, listen to me  
I am only 75 to your 127 but  
I've learned a thing or two  
from my advantaged perch  
in time

Nothing is worse than that scream  
inside you when you cannot  
protect your child  
but, Sarah, you must hang on  
help is coming  
late though it is

You're still in shock  
there is no blame  
trauma seizes the brain  
freezes vision, cognition, action

Hagar the slave you banished to the desert with her son  
couldn't see the well through her weeping  
the battered wife sees the open door and cannot move  
frozen, you saw only the whirlwind  
and the cave

Your mind won't help you now, Sarah  
ground yourself in grief  
ground yourself in the body  
breathe through your pain  
thaw your tears, mourn all you've lost  
a better land awaits you

Plant your feet on the parched earth  
sink roots into soil watered with  
your sisters' sorrow  
deepen yourself  
have *rachmones*\* upon yourself  
soften, Sarah, soften  
we are all connected  
you are not alone

\**rachmones*, Yiddish, compassion.

Your grieving may never be done  
but right now, Sarah, look up, look up  
*t'rei*, see what remains  
wipe the tears that cloud your vision  
anchor yourself in the present moment

Behold  
the trees, the river, your hands  
your beating heart  
a bird sings  
can you hear it?  
you're alive!  
can you feel it?

Raise your eyes and see  
your son. Your child lives!  
see his frenzied eyes searching for some  
ground of being, a mirror

Do not turn away  
from your wounded child, defiled  
reminder of all you have lost  
find your mother's heart in *his* need  
fix him in your sights  
let him be the lighthouse  
beaming your way back from the pit

Negate the negation, Sarah  
choose life so Isaac, your only born  
your miracle baby  
can find himself in your  
loving eyes  
and won't live out his days half-blind  
groping for walls  
in your darkened tent

Your child calls, Sarah. *Afoh at, Ema?*  
Where are you, my mother?  
Find your *hineni* for him, for yourself  
*I am here, my son, my child*  
*I am here!*

Honor yourself, our mother, our own  
rise up to your full stature  
remember that you are remembered  
remember delight  
remember yourself  
redeem the shining soul  
with which you were born

As strength returns  
perspective helps, *Emeinu*  
we're all lost and found and lost again  
in history's wilderness  
no one is perfect, nothing is certain  
we have limited power, limited control

Still, the pillar of fire guides by night, by day  
the pillar of cloud brings renewing rain  
healing is possible

Sarah, we want you to heal  
Through the bleating shofar's cry  
we are calling you to return to us  
Creation is not done  
and a mother is needed!

Three thousand eight hundred years  
since you left us, another Temple burns  
in a faraway land promised to the tired and poor  
another Nero fiddles on his gilded throne while  
babies torn from parents' arms wail their terror in urban cages  
empty-armed mothers howling their helplessness  
fathers falling off the earth in despair  
safe places of learning becoming prisons  
teaching what no child should learn  
the language of funerals, AR-15s, SKS rifles  
those are guns, Sarah  
we have found efficient ways to kill  
our young

So much has changed so little has changed  
everyone connected by wires and screens  
everyone falling off the Tower of Babel  
we are drowning in things but thirsting  
for mater      matter      Mother

*Shim 'i!* Sarah, hold your ground  
we are all your children  
and require a late-in-life miracle  
one we will seed together in your ancient womb  
we need you  
returned to us, reborn  
swollen with life  
ready to labor

Our Mother of pillowy breast, muscle and mercy  
of feet hugging the earth, arms clasping the world  
push us beyond the wheel of suffering  
to birth a vision, a true and new beginning

Wise compassionate Mother  
mend our world with kindness  
help us love our neighbor  
walk us gently on the regenerative earth  
purify our hearts, teach us how to pray  
make us messengers of hope  
strengthen our resolve  
move us to right action  
show us how to rest

Sarah *emeinu*, we want you to sing again  
long green notes  
we want your full-throated laugh  
laced with skepticism, intelligence and joy

Rock your children with new songs –  
lullabies at twilight, rising protests at dawn –  
gather the scattered notes of your dirge  
lay them tenderly on the black cloth  
heed Rebbe Nachman's teaching  
to join white dots of goodness to white dots  
transforming dissonance into coherence  
lamentation into the long lyrical line  
of gladness and praise, the unbroken  
*Tekiah Gedolah*\*\*

\*\**Tekiah Gedolah*, Hebrew, longest shofar sound.

Embrace it all, Sarah  
we are returning to the river  
and this time need to cross  
we are all needed and we need each other  
we need a once-upon-a-time to believe in  
where you, Hagar, Avraham, Ishmael, Yitzchak  
and all your children's children coexist  
in a peaceable kingdom  
sitting by the river, every home secure  
every home flanked by olive trees

With all my heart, this I believe.  
A new song is coming, a new story  
we will write together  
for a New Year

Love is coming, Sarah  
the best weapon against terror

And the generations are waiting.

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