



2. NOAH:

Fertility

(GENESIS 6:9-11:32)

TORAH TEACHES: Not long after civilization is set in motion, it goes awry. Humanity becomes corrupt and lawless, and the Holy-One-Who-Dwells-in-This-World decides to try Her hand again, wiping out all life on earth with a great flood and beginning anew with Noah and his family. And so Noah and his sons build an ark, and Naamah and her daughters-in-law make it habitable. And they fill it with breeding pairs from all the kingdoms of life, and in that fragile ark ride out the forty days and nights of rain. When they emerge from their lifeboat a year later, all animal life has disappeared except what remains in the ark and in the seas.

Noah and Naamah, their children, and all their animal guests emerge from their seaborne prison and repopulate the earth. In thanksgiving Noah offers a sacrifice, and the Holy One of Blessing responds with a promise, a rainbow signifying that never again will the earth be destroyed by flood. Then Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk. His son Ham sees him naked and is cursed; Noah's other two sons, Shem and Japheth, cover his nakedness and are blessed. And then human civilization spreads out. In the valley of Shinar, people come together to build a great tower so that they can make a name for themselves and avoid being scattered over the earth. But God babbles their speech, earning this place the name Babel. And so humankind is scattered over the face of the earth.

Shem begins a new line, which leads to Abram, Sarai, and their nephew, Lot. Leaving Ur, they journey to Haran, where Abram's father, Terah, dies.

THE ARK

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: What is the world like after the Flood?

HULDAH THE PREACHER ANSWERS: Before the Flood, the earth is corrupt and filled with violence. Then the Face of Compassion clouds over, filling the world with dark rage. And the world returns to water as at the beginning, undifferentiated, formless, and void. But in the midst of this amniotic world floats an ark, an embryo suspended in the waters of birth and rebirth.

Encapsulating its tenants like a seedpod or a womb, it contains the potential for new life. What reemerges from the ark after this long gestation is not much different from what went in. The animals have not changed their natures; neither have the humans. Indeed, Noah's first act is to plant a vineyard and get drunk.

MOTHER RACHEL ADDS: But Shekhinah has changed. Like all seasoned parents, She now knows that children need two things: a reasonable set of rules and the promise of grace. So She gives humankind seven ethical laws and the rainbow.

NOAH'S WIFE, NAAMAH

OUR DAUGHTERS EXCLAIM: Why doesn't Noah's wife have a name? LILITH THE REBEL TEACHES: The Bible is filled with nameless women!

THE RABBIS PROTEST: But we have given names to most of them, and often stories as well.

LILITH RETORTS: But too often these names and stories don't reflect our experience! Take Naamah, for instance, Noah's wife. According to some Rabbis, her name comes from her practice of beating the drum—*mar'emet*—on her way to worship idols. And other rabbinic legends link her to demons.

THE RABBIS ANSWER BACK: Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, on the other hand, claimed that her name refers to her pleasing—*ne'imim*—deeds. Indeed, she helped to save life on earth; like Eve, she was a Mother of Life.

NAAMAH INTERJECTS: Imagine what it required of me to endure a full year in the ark, cooped up with a boatload of animals and family: so much patience, caring, good humor, fortitude, and resourcefulness.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

OUR BUBBES TEACH: Don't climb too high and you won't have to fall. And besides that, remember: We plan—and God laughs.

LEAVING THE OLD COUNTRY

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: Why do other members of Abraham's family leave with him? As it is written: "TERAH TOOK HIS SON ABRAM, HIS GRANDSON

LOT . . . AND HIS DAUGHTER-IN-LAW SARAI . . . AND THEY SET OUT TOGETHER FROM UR OF THE CHALDEES FOR THE LAND OF CANAAN" (11:31).

SARAH THE ANCIENT ONE ANSWERS: What mysteries still surround the story of how our people began! For though the Rabbis recount that Abraham left Ur after smashing his father's stone gods, they fail to tell all the other stories—about my own decision to leave, and that of my father-in-law, Terah, of Abraham's nephew Lot, his niece Milcah, and her husband, Nahor. Indeed, understanding why we left home is vital to understanding who we are, both as individuals and as a people. I cannot claim to speak for the others, but I can tell my own story:

Abraham and I were brother and sister. We shared the same father but not the same mother. Abraham was the son of Amittai; I, the daughter of Enheduanna, daughter of a priest of Ur. My mother was an *apiltum*, a diviner skilled in prophecy and the interpretation of dreams. When she discovered that I was gifted in such things, she taught me her arts and prepared me to take her place someday as a dream diviner.

One night, I had the most frightening dream: The tyrant Nimrod appeared to me and foretold the death of my beloved Abraham and his entire family. He declared that he would no longer tolerate Abraham's preachings about YHWH, who he claimed was mightier than all the gods of Ur. When I awoke I told my mother of my dream, and she offered a libation in our home shrine to *ishar biti*, inquiring of her whether my dream was true or the work of demons.

According to my mother, the goddess blessed my vision. My mother then urged me to flee Ur and to take with me Abraham, Terah, and those of his family who wished to join him in his new faith. "Your place is with your beloved. Mine is with my people, who need my vision and my healing powers. Furthermore," she told me, "I am too old and weak to survive such a journey."

And so I persuaded Abraham to leave. He agreed to do so only after he consulted with his God, who told him: "Whatever Sarai tells you, do as she says." In turn, Abraham convinced his old father, Terah—Amittai was no longer living, and my own mother had stopped consorting with him long before—his nephew Lot, his niece Milcah, and her husband, Nahor, to leave with him. The next day, after hurried preparations, we left Ur and journeyed toward Canaan. I carried with me my mother's amulets for my own tent, and my mother's blessing for children. For I was barren, and even then too old for bearing. From that day on, I never saw my mother again.

AMITLAI, MOTHER OF ABRAHAM

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: Who is Abraham's mother?

AMITLAI ANSWERS: My name is Amitlai, woman of Ur. When the royal magicians of King Nimrod predicted that a usurper would be born to topple the king, Nimrod ordered all baby boys killed. My husband, Terah, an official in Nimrod's court, was eager to obey his king, but I concealed my pregnancy from my husband and then hid my baby in a cave, where he miraculously grew to full maturity in twenty days, protected and nourished by the angel Gabriel.

OUR BUBBES ADD: Like Moses' mama, Yokheved, and so many mothers before and after her, Amitlai risks her own life to save her baby's.

THE BIBLE'S FIRST PORTRAIT OF SARAH

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: Who is Sarah? The Torah introduces her with so few words: "NOW SARAI WAS BARREN, SHE HAD NO CHILD" (11:30):

SARAH THE ANCIENT ONE ANSWERS: Yes, that is all you are told about me when you first meet me: my name . . .

LEAH THE Namer INTERRUPTS: An honorable name, meaning "princess," "chieftainess," or "priestess" . . .

SARAH CONTINUES: And my barrenness. Abraham is defined by a lineage and extended family; I, only by an absence.

MOTHER RACHEL EXPLAINS: Now we understand why Sarah leaves Ur. Unlike Abraham, who goes in quest of God, Sarah seeks a new home and, with it, a change of fortune. As our bubbes teach: A change of place brings a change of luck. Abraham finds God, but it costs him two sons: one driven into exile, the other into silence. Sarah finds a change of fortune, but it costs her her life, for when Abraham takes away her only son, making her barren once again, she dies, speechless. So it is fitting that from the beginning, Sarah bears two names: Princess and Barren One. Between them they shape her life.