

**Rosh Hashanah 5782**  
**Congregation Rodeph Sholom**  
**Rabbi Juliana S. Karol**

**Finding Sarah:  
Lessons from Our Matriarch Amidst Rising Anti-Semitism**

What happened to Sarah? The Torah doesn't tell us, but a rich midrashic tradition offers infinite possibilities. One medieval commentary<sup>1</sup> imagines a blaring rendering of her final moments: Sarah is told by a malicious spirit that Abraham has killed Isaac and offered him on an altar as a sacrifice. The midrash continues that as Sarah begins to weep, she lets out three harrowing cries, corresponding to the three sustained notes of the shofar, and then three howlings corresponding to the shofar's three disconnected short notes. Thereafter, she fades from our text. Sarah's agony echoes through time as our tekiah and our teruah, an aural attestation to the violence of words and images.

In May of this year, as Israel battled Hamas, the Anti-Defamation League found that anti-Semitic incidents, ranging from harassment to vandalism to assault, increased by 75%.<sup>2</sup> The 2020 Pew Study of Jewish Americans found that 90% of us believe there is anti-Semitism in the United States, 75% believe that there is more now than five years ago, and 53% feel less safe than they did five years ago.<sup>3</sup> In other words, American Jews agree that anti-Semitism exists in our country and at least half of us feel more threatened by it.

Like the contrived story of Isaac told in the midrash, it can be hard to parse which remarks, posts, and stories are true or false, menacing or clickbait. The flow of information and hate is so relentless that we, like Sarah, might feel inundated and even paralyzed, capable of little more than crying. On top of the countless campaigns we are undertaking to overcome the pandemic, save our planet, and protect the vulnerable, how can we fortify ourselves when reports of rising anti-Semitism leave us feeling increasingly insecure? As we confront a world that we cannot control, Sarah's howling cries demand a reckoning with all we carry--all that pain, and that anxiety, and that fear we store away. Her premature retreat from the Torah text is a charge to all of us to find ways to self-account and self-strengthen so that we can claim agency in a narrative that would seek to render us powerless.

This Rosh Hashana morning, each call of the shofar is a thunderous summons from our matriarch. With the first blast Sarah asks us: how does anti-Jewish sentiment felt in our experiences, conveyed in conversations, heard in the news, how does it act upon our bodies? In June, the American Psychological Association issued a statement condemning the surge in acts of hatred and violence against the Jewish community as deplorable. They stated, "Hate crimes, including those derived from antisemitism, can have dangerous physical, psychological and societal consequences....Research demonstrates that acts of discrimination affect the immune systems of victims and those who witness hateful acts."<sup>4</sup> As I wrote this sermon, the ADL tracked numerous anti-Semitic events, one at a playground just twenty minutes from where I

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<sup>1</sup> Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer 32

<sup>2</sup> Zach Beauchamp, "[What's behind the anti-Semitism surge in the US](#)," *Vox*, 2 Jun 21 [accessed 16 Aug 21].

<sup>3</sup> Becka A. Alper, "[Jewish Americans in 2020](#)" Pew Research Center, 11 May 21 [accessed 16 May 21].

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Kelly, "[APA calls for end to continued antisemitic violence in US](#)," *American Psychological Association*, 11 Jun 21 [accessed 17 Aug 21].

grew up, from where my brother is raising my nephews.<sup>5</sup> I took note of my physical response as I read the report in the local paper, and I detected the weight of worry--for the families expecting to find joy and safety in this playground, and for my family a little farther away--settle onto my chest. It was as if two concern pebbles were placed on top of a mound of concern pebbles that I carry within me, not heavy in their own right, but palpable as they accumulate.

Sarah urges us first to get out of our heads and into our bodies, where we can sense, without judgement, how threatening information is processed.<sup>6</sup> So many of us react to anti-Semitism with calls for action before we even pause to check in with ourselves. How can we possibly respond in strength if we take no time to assess how we are faring in all this frenzy? Before we deploy ourselves to tackle the pandemic of hate, Sarah implores us to determine what kind of support can help each of us shoulder the weight of our concern, however it lodges itself within us.

With the second blast of the shofar, our matriarch calls us to examine the storytellers and how we react to them. In the midrash, Sarah is confronted by Samael, a provocative figure who seeks to prove that the Israelites are faithless and unworthy. Sarah is so shattered by Samael's lie that she loses her voice without ever confirming Isaac's death or whether her messenger is reliable.

Some in this congregation might define anti-Semitism as an ancient hatred that retains a unifying strand wherever it appears, while others might contend that there is no obvious relationship between different manifestations of Jew-hatred.<sup>7</sup> Some might hold that anti-Semitism anywhere is a threat to Jews everywhere and others might prefer to focus on the specific contexts in which it thrives.<sup>8</sup> No matter how we parse anti-Semitism, we can all acknowledge that it is highly politicized and comes from every direction. Our political parties and adjectives, our relationships to Israel, these thick strands of identity inform how we respond to reports of rising anti-Semitism, and every one of us should feel deeply unsettled by the incontrovertible rise in venom spewed toward American Jews, on the right and the left, from halls of leadership down to the grassroots activists fighting for justice.

In the midrash, Sarah's sense of isolation and powerlessness blinds her to any avenue for solace or strength. With her second shofar call, Sarah begs us to remember that far more powerful than our politics and preferred sources of news is the bond that unites us as a congregation. We share our moral aspiration and a mission to define the role of the Jewish people in this city and this country. Do not withdraw from one another, Sarah counsels. Turn toward each other in concern and questioning, to discern a path forward **together**. It's not a small order because it requires us to trust each other enough to argue and feel disappointment. That's the kind of resilience Sarah wants for her children, to claim one another in fellowship and fate, no matter how passionately we disagree.

With her third blast of the shofar, Sarah implores us to stay engaged. Do not grow silent and disappear like me. Write a different story. And so, here is another midrash about what happened to Sarah, written just three years ago: Sarah realizes that Abraham has misunderstood God; God wants an offering to *transmit leadership* to Isaac. An animal sacrifice is needed, not a human being. Certain that the survival of the Israelite covenant depends on her, Sarah follows

<sup>5</sup> “[ADL Tracker of Anti-Semitic Incidents](#),” ADL, 16 Aug 21 [accessed 17 Aug 21].

<sup>6</sup> Ed Halliwell, “[The 7 Qualities of Mindfulness Trained in the Body Scan](#),” Mindful.org, 6 Oct 16 [accessed 3 Aug 21].

<sup>7</sup> Judah Bernstein, “[On Antisemitism Historicized and De-Historicized](#),” Judah Bernstein, 5 Jul 21 [accessed 30 Jul 21].

<sup>8</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, “[Antisemitism, and the Inconvenience of Collective Identity](#),” Medium, 6 Nov 18 [accessed 30 Jul 21].

her family and releases their finest ram into the bushes. When the entranced Abraham lifts the knife to sacrifice Isaac, Sarah calls out to him, “Abraham, Abraham” and breaks his trance.<sup>9</sup>

This rendering of the Akedah restores the agency stolen from Sarah in the medieval midrash. Far from a woman vanishing in her bereavement she is an empowered actor who salvages her son’s life and ensures the survival of her people by trusting her instincts. This story inserts Sarah back into Torah as the very angel who calls to Abraham on the precipice of taking Isaac’s life. I like to think that the Sarah of the medieval midrash feels vindicated by the modern Sarah, a more faithful representation of the commanding voice we know from Torah, the mother who protects her son at all costs.

With her third blast Sarah reminds us that her story, like ours, is still being written. We can claim agency like our matriarch employing powerful strategies to shape the unfolding story of Judaism in America. Earlier this year, Rodeph Sholom signed on to become a Signature Synagogue with the Anti-Defamation League, joining more than 30 congregations in New York and New Jersey in their commitment to raising awareness of and speaking out against anti-Semitism and hate. This newly seeded initiative aims to unify dozens of synagogues to fight anti-Semitism by addressing local issues and developing community strategies to prevent future incidents.

And even closer to home, a group of congregants who gathered virtually last winter to learn about anti-Semitism in an adult education series formed their own group to begin brainstorming a congregational strategy to respond to, and more urgently, to curb the rise of anti-Semitism. This group, which welcomes all concerned congregants to their table, has already connected with CRS social action leaders and clergy to think about growing their ranks in and beyond the synagogue. For their first project, a gift to our community, they are creating a page on our website with a variety of sources and perspectives on anti-Semitism.

Perhaps we can learn the most from Sarah when we see each midrash as a facet of her. All of us have moments when we hear frightening reports about anti-Semitism and have energy only to wail in despair. At our most activated we are awake to God’s true message and strong enough to heave a ram up a mountain. More often we live in between these poles. We yearn to act even as we’re unsure of our path forward, and so we show up in our communal lives, like we are right now, to affirm that we are conflicted and we are proud. As the first Jewish woman and mother, Sarah was burdened with tremendous isolation. Her message to us sings through the blasts of the shofar: we are not alone, and thankfully we need not act alone. As we confront hostility, let us distribute the weight of concern across our community, to ensure no single person is too encumbered, let us turn toward one another in our questioning, and let each person see themselves as Sarah did with the ram, as having an essential role in shaping the direction of our communal response.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Kipnes and Michelle November, “[Where Was Sarah During the Akedah \(the Binding of Isaac\)?](#)” ReformJudaism.org, 3 Nov 18 [accessed 3 Aug 21].