

## Torah Study: TISHREI SISTERS

By Lisa Kogen, Education Director

Women as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, friends, and now even bosses permeate contemporary culture. It can be the iconic image of Lucy Ricardo sitting in that famous 1950s living room knitting booties in an unspoken signal to her clueless husband that she is pregnant, or the heart-wrenching but redemptive story of two abused co-wives in Khaled Hosseini's haunting bestseller, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Women's complicated relationships with men, their children, other women, and their bodies are explored in every possible medium from books, television, theater, and the movies to the blogosphere.

For Jewish women, the holiday of Rosh Hashanah provides additional cultural grist for this mill-- the holiday Torah and haftarah readings offer an unusually rich array of stories of biblical women that resonate with us today.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we read (Genesis 21:1-34) about the end of Sarah's barrenness and her subsequent demand that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael from their home. The haftarah (I Samuel 1-2:10) recounts a similar theme, this time of the beloved wife Hannah who cannot conceive but who is ultimately blessed with Samuel.

On the second day, in the harrowing narrative of the Akedah (Genesis 22:1-24), Sarah is totally absent from the story. However the presence of the aged mother of this most desired child about to be sacrificed by his father hovers over the entire story. The haftarah (Jeremiah 31:1-19) contains a reference to the fertility-challenged Rachel, weeping for her children.

Rashi understood the texts as a divine gift of remembrance of these women in their barrenness during Tishrei (BT Rosh Hashanah 11a): "On Rosh Hashanah Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were remembered." It also reinforces the themes of creation (giving birth) and trust in God's mercy to those who accept the divine covenant.

Our understanding of these traditional texts has been enhanced by recent generations of women scholars and clergy. Their experiences and creativity have infused these texts with a uniquely feminine perspective.

The characters in the story are unambiguous to the rabbis: Sarah and Isaac are the progenitors of the chosen Jewish people, Hagar and Ishmael the forebears of a more troubling people. Today, by reading it through a feminist lens, we see a more complicated tale of women competing for love and status.

Tikva Frymer Kensky, in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, brings a vast knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian culture to her understanding of the relationships in polygamous households. She suggests that patriarchal oppression made wives rivals rather than allies, a conjecture that is reflected in the Hebrew word for co-wife -- *sarah* -- also the word for trouble. Frymer-Kensky comments that while the rabbis sought ways to fault Hagar "...in contrast, readers today tend to be angry at Sarai, to castigate her for being insensitive to the plight of someone for whom she should have felt both compassion and solidarity."

Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* offers an even more pointed analysis. She portrays Hagar as the victim of Sarah's abuse, a rivalry so contentious that Abraham is forced to banish her and her son. In Trible's devastating indictment, Hagar "experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return."

Vanessa Ochs' *Sarah Laughed: Modern Lessons from the Wisdom & Stories of Biblical Women* envisions Hagar and her son as dreamers who refuse to succumb to hopelessness and despair.

Ellen Frankel's modern midrashim in *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* breathe humanity into the beleaguered Hagar. Also, in *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (Women of Reform Judaism, 2007) Judith Plaskow offers an empathetic interpretation of Hagar's plight.

When reading the bible, we realize that the complexities that confound and bewilder us today are, in fact, eternal. We can rejoice, however, that those who now participate in communal conversations about them are our sisters.