

Filling in the Gaps: Sarah's Daughters

by Sonia Zylberberg

For as far back as she could remember, Sarai of Ur had wanted to be a weaver. Like her mother and her grandmother before her. As a child, her greatest joy was to sit with them as they worked, helping and watching and learning to create the wonderful cloths that came from their looms. Sometimes, when her mother and grandmother went out to visit with the women of the land and to hear their stories, Sarai would go with them. Then they would come back home and weave new designs incorporating these new stories.

In every generation, there was one girl born with the gift and the desire to be a weaver. Sarai's sisters chose other paths, but Sarai never wavered from her initial desire. And, as she grew older, she took her place alongside her mother and grandmother, at her own loom.

Eventually her sisters moved out from their mother's home, but they did not move far, and many times a week the womenfolk would gather, to exchange their news and to tell their stories.

When Sarai married Abram, she was very much in love. Their first years together were very happy ones. They found a house not far from her mother's, and Sarai set about making her own home. She wove many fine tapestries with which to decorate it.

One day as Sarai sat weaving at her loom, she felt deep within her the stirring of a new pattern, a mixture of colours and textures and designs that she had never before imagined. And she knew then that she was pregnant.

Sarai and Abram were very excited about the coming child, and they rushed about, preparing the house and themselves for the new arrival. When Sarai gave birth to a beautiful, perfect child, she named her Rishonah, because she was her first. And into her fabrics she wove a new design, the story of the human being that she had created.

Then, once again, Sarai felt that innermost stirring, that creative surge of new combinations of textures and patterns, and knew that she was pregnant again. And once again she and Abram rushed about excitedly, eagerly preparing for their second child. And this time Rishonah rushed about with them, helping with all the preparations, also very excited about her sibling-to-come.

This time, Sarai named her daughter Shniah, because she was the second. Once again she wove cloths telling the new story, that of the second perfect human being that she had created. And this time Rishonah helped her with the weaving, with the imagining, with the creating.

Again and again and again and again Sarai gave birth to beautiful daughters and with each one her weavings grew more wondrous and more complex. If you looked closely you could see in them all the stories interwoven, the stories of all the women in the land, and especially the stories of Sarai's twelve daughters.

Abram, however, was not happy. He wanted a son. With the birth of each daughter, he grew more disappointed, and, as the years passed, he became obsessed with his longing. Sarai and the girls tried to include him in their happiness but to no avail. He could not be comforted. He dreamed of nothing but a son, and Sarai watched helplessly as he grew away from her, embittered by her inability to provide him with one.

One day Abram awoke from sleep and announced that they must move to a new land. He had dreamed that it was Ur preventing him from having the son he craved. They would move and start over again. They would have a son and he would be happy.

Sarai was incredulous. First she laughed, then she argued, then she pleaded, and finally she wept. But Abram was adamant. They must go.

Sarai looked into her heart and saw no alternative. She had loved her husband so dearly for so long, and it would pain her greatly to separate from him. But it was a choice between him and the rest of her life. Weeping, she told him to go then, but she could not go with him.

Abram, in his turn, looked into his heart, and found that the idea of parting from Sarai was more than he could bear. Still he felt that they must go.

They talked, he pleaded, they argued, they cried. They refound each other, but they could find no resolution. Both felt that their hearts would break.

And then Abram found an argument that cracked Sarai's resolve. "Think of the women", he said, "new women in a new land. Think of all the new stories to be heard, the new patterns and colours and textures and designs to be woven." The seed was planted. It grew and grew inside Sarai. She had to admit that new designs had become infrequent, that mostly she wove variations on the same themes. To introduce wholly new themes ... She began to think of the move with interest, and then with eagerness, and finally she agreed. They would go.

She talked to each of her daughters in turn, and shared with each what was in her heart. And painfully, regretfully, each daughter made the decision to remain in Ur. They were now grown up and had established their own lives there. Sarai bequeathed her place at the loom to Rishonah, who took her place alongside her grandmother and great-grandmother.

And on a day when she felt that she would be torn apart by the conflicting emotions inside her, the pain mixed with the anticipation, Sarai said goodbye to her family and friends, and she and Abram began their journey to the new land.

They arrived in Canaan, and gradually settled into their new household. Some semblance of normalcy returned to their lives. Sarai travelled around the new land, meeting all kinds of new women, and could hardly wait to rush home afterwards to her loom. Abram had been right! So many new women! So many new stories! Her weavings gained depths, they possessed unprecedented magnificence, and people came from far and wide to see them.

Because it seemed that all their hopes and expectations would be realized in their new land, Sarai and Abram took on new names to commemorate their move. They became Sarah and Abraham.

But as the years passed, there still was no son. They both grew old, and finally Sarah reached menopause. It was too late. Sarah tried to comfort Abraham, but again to no avail. He had once again become bitter.

Then one day Abraham rushed excitedly to Sarah's room. He had had another dream, this time announcing that Sarah would soon give birth to their son. Sarah laughed and laughed and laughed. "We're too old now!", she told him. In his dream, Abraham too had laughed at first. But he had gradually become convinced, and he had woken up with this certainty.

And in fact Sarah did become pregnant. This pregnancy was very unlike her others: this time it was Abraham who felt the creative juices flowing, Abraham who felt the surge of new ideas deep within him, Abraham who erupted with wonderful new spurts of creativity.

And 9 months later, when Sarah gave birth to a son, they named him Isaac for their laughter and their joy.

Abraham prepared a huge feast to celebrate. Isaac's twelve sisters came from Ur to celebrate with them, and the family was together again. There was much rejoicing, lots of laughter and some tears as they all told their news. The daughters were very impressed with

Sarah's weavings. Rishonah and her daughter, Zlata, spent many hours at the loom with Sarah, exchanging ideas and techniques.

After forty days, Sarah's daughters prepared to go home. It had been a wonderful visit, and they were all a little sad, especially Rishonah. Zlata had decided to stay on with her grandmother, and Rishonah helped her set up her loom alongside Sarah's.

The sisters said goodbye to Sarah, Abraham, Zlata and Isaac, and set out on their long journey back to Ur. And Sarah and Zlata sat down at their looms and began to weave.

Dedicated to my grandmothers, Sara and Zlata, for whom I have the honour of being named, and to my mother, Regine, who is a weaver.