

Ushpizot: Inviting Biblical Soul Sisters into Our Sukkah

Each night of the festival, take some time to look up each woman's story, then read the accompanying midrashim. What insight does each midrash give you on each Soul Sister?

Sarah & Rebekah (Gen. 18, 24)

All the days that Sarah was alive, a cloud was permanently connected to the entrance of her tent. When she died, the cloud stopped [resting at her tent.] And when Rebekah came, the cloud returned.

All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were open wide. When she died, the wideness ceased. And when Rebekah came, the wideness returned.

All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a blessing in her [challah] dough, and when Sarah died, that blessing ended. When Rebekah came, [the blessing] returned.

All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a candle that would burn from Sabbath Eve to [the next] Sabbath Eve, and when she died, the candle stopped [burning for so long]. And when Rebekah came, [the week-long flame of the candle] returned.

And as soon as [Isaac] saw her, that she did the deeds of his mother, separating her challah in purity and separating her dough in purity, he brought her into the tent. (*Genesis Rabbah 60*)

Hagar (Gen. 16:1-16)

Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai said, "Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When he saw the deeds on behalf of Sarah in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to him, saying, "better that my daughter be a maidservant in this house than a mistress in another house." This is what is written: "She had an Egyptian handmaid whose name was Hagar." [In other words אַגְרִיחַ *agrish* - this is your reward.] (*Genesis Rabbah 45:1*)

Rachel (Genesis 29-30)

Rachel was עקרה (*akarah* = usually translated as "barren"). Rabbi Yitzchak said, "Rachel was the chief of the house, as says "ikar" – the central guiding force. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said, "The majority of those who dined at Jacob's table were Leah's children, but Rachel was 'ikara" - the principal. (*Gen Rabba 71:2*)

Leah (Gen. 29-30)

Rabbi Hanina in the name of Rabbi Shmuel son of Rabbi Yitzchak said: When Jacob our Ancestor saw matters, that Leah had "cheated" her sister, he made up his mind to divorce her, but when she was blessed with children, he said: "To the mother of these I am divorcing?" And in the end he admitted he was wrong, and that is the meaning of the verse: (Genesis 47) "And Israel bowed low at the head of the bed," – in that the head of the bed is a euphemism for Leah, as she was the first one of his conjugal bed, and thus the "head" of his wives. (*Genesis Rabbah 71:1*)

Shifra & Puah (Righteous Midwives of Egypt, Exodus 1)

Shifra and Puah, are considered by Ibn Ezra [a 12th century C.E. Jewish commentator] to represent a large group of working midwives serving the population of Israelite women. They were perhaps the state fiscal administrators of the midwives' guild. (*Aviva Zornberg, The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus, 2001*)

Tzipporah (Moses' Wife) (Exodus 4:25)

There is no reason to permit a woman to perform circumcision, as a woman is not subject to the mitzvah of circumcision, and therefore she is not included in those who must keep God's covenant....the Gemara raises a difficulty against this explanation: And is there anyone who says that a woman may not perform circumcision? But isn't it written: "Then Tzipporah *took a flint and cut off* the foreskin of her son"? This verse explicitly states that a circumcision was performed by a woman. (*BT Avodah Zara 27a*)

Miriam (Exodus 15, Numbers 12)

And Miriam the Prophetess took a timbrel ...from where do we know that Miriam was a Prophetess? It is this: Miriam [as a young girl,] once said to her father, "You are destined to bear a son who will arise and save Israel from the hands of the Egyptians." Immediately, [her father brought about the birth of Moses, but it was during Pharaoh's cruel decree that all first-born boys be cast into the Nile. After Yocheved put Moses in the basket and he floated away,] her father reproached her. He said to her, "Miriam! What about your prediction?" But Miriam held on to her prophecy, as it is said "**And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him.**" (*Mehilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*)

Devorah (Judges 4)

It was said that Devorah's husband was unschooled [in Torah]. So his wife told him, "come, I will make wicks for you. Take them to the Holy Place in Shiloh. Your portion will then be with men of worth in Israel [who will be studying by the light of your wicks], and you will be worthy of life in the world to come." She took care to make the wicks thick, so their light would be abundant. He brought these wicks to the Holy Place in Shiloh. The Holy Blessed One, who examines the hearts and reins of humanity, said to her, "Devorah, since you took care to make abundant light for the study of my Torah, I will make the light of your prophecy abundant in the presence of Israel's 12 Tribes." (*Midrash Tehillim / Psalms*)

Ruth (Ruth 1-4)

As Ruth sat to glean with the reapers, she turned her face away, and not even a single one of her fingers could be seen, for when she saw a standing stalk, she would stand and take it, and when she saw a fallen stalk, she would sit and gather it. (*Ruth Zuta 2:3*)

Vashti (Esther 1)

This is not the way of the world: if a man wants to eat lentils, and his wife desires peas, he cannot force his will upon her. Rather, she acts as she wishes. Similarly, Ahashverosh acted inappropriately when he attempted to compel Vashti to obey him. (*Esther Rabbah 4:12*)

Esther (Esther 2-10)

Esther illuminated Israel like the light of dawn, while this light itself was like darkness for the nations of the world. (*Midrash Tehilim 22:5*)
