

SURROGATE MOTHERS FOR GOD'S GREAT PLANS

The following is an excerpt from the most recent book by the Israeli writer David Grossman. It is a meditation on the biblical story of Samson, which has many resonances with the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Hannah that we read on the High Holidays. The story of this hero resonates as well in these days when many young heroes are again defending Israel against her enemies. One of them was Uri Grossman, the author's son, who was killed this August in Lebanon.

Anyone familiar with biblical storytelling knows that the very mention of a barren woman almost always foreshadows a momentous birth. And indeed, one day - during one of those periods when `the Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord' - when the woman is alone, without her husband, an angel of God appears before her and tells her: `You are barren and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.' And immediately he gives her a list of instructions and warnings, and also good news: `Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicant, or to eat anything unclean; for you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.'

She goes to her husband and says, `A man of God came to me.' And the reader's ears prick up, because the woman does not use the same word as that of the biblical narrator - `an angel of God appeared to the woman' - but rather `came to me', a charged phrase rich with double meaning, which more than once in the Bible refers to the act of copulation itself.

The husband's ears probably prick up too, and his wife quickly describes the stranger. `He looked like an angel of God, very frightening,' she explains. `I did not ask him where he was from, nor did he tell me his name.' And between her words one can hear, -so it seems, a note of apology - so frightening was the man's appearance that she didn't have the nerve to ask where he was from, or even his name.

And the husband, Manoah, how does he respond, and what does his silence say? Maybe he furrows his brow in puzzlement, trying to fish out a question from the confusion so suddenly thrust upon him by his wife, but she doesn't wait for him to ask, and quickly, anxiously, continues to pile on new information: The man of God told me `you shall conceive', and promised I would have a son and commanded that I not drink wine or liquor, or eat anything unclean, because the boy would be a Nazirite from the womb until his dying day ...

There, she has told him everything. She has freed herself from the burden of the encounter and the extraordinary news, yet the text does not tell us a thing about any emotion that flows between them, nor of any smile or tender glance. And this should come as no surprise, since as a rule the Bible rarely records the feelings of its heroes. The Bible is a history of actions and events, and leaves to us, to each and every reader, the task of speculation, an exciting task but one that carries the risks of exaggeration and fantasy. Nevertheless, let us dare to do, in the pages that follow, what many generations of readers before us have done, men and women who have read the spare biblical text according to their faith, the conventions of their age, and their own personal inclinations, and attached meanings and conclusions (and sometimes wishes and delusions) to every word and syllable.'

And so, with necessary caution, but also with the pleasure of guesswork and imagination, let us try to fix in our mind's eye the encounter between the man and his wife, she speaking and he listening, she going on at length and he not saying a word. And there is no knowing what is welling under that silence, excitement and joy perhaps, or maybe anger at the wife who converses so freely with a strange man; and we may also wonder whether she, as she speaks, looks him straight in the eye or averts her gaze downward, away from the husband to whom, for some reason, an angel did not appear. And even if only a small part of what we have pictured actually took place, there is no doubt that the news they have received will shake them both to the core, will stir up his deepest feelings about her longtime barrenness and startling pregnancy, and maybe also hers about him, about the weakness and impotence that, it would seem, are hinted at in this brief scene.

And we, peeking in, are so captivated by this highly charged family moment that we almost fail to notice that what the wife reports to her husband is not quite the same as what she had been told. Two central details are missing: she does not mention that a razor must not touch the head of their unborn son, nor does she tell her husband that this son `shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines'.

Why does she omit these crucial details?

One might argue that in her excitement and confusion she simply forgot the matter of the razor. She was doubtless quite agitated; and perhaps assumed that Manoah would be aware that, if the boy was to be a Nazirite, the well-known restrictions would apply, including the prohibition against the cutting of hair. But how to explain the second omission? How can it be that a woman withholds - even conceals - from her husband such significant information regarding their future son, news that would surely give him satisfaction and pride, and perhaps a measure of compensation for all those bitter, barren years?

To comprehend this, to understand her, we need to go back and read the story through her eyes. Recall that the biblical text does not even reveal her name. The word 'barren' is all that is said of her, and is even redoubled: 'barren and had borne no children.' And this emphasis suggests that she had been waiting long years for a child who never arrived. She has probably given up on the possibility that she will one day have a child. And it is quite likely that the 'title' 'akara, 'the barren one', has been conferred upon her by others, in the family, in the tribe, in all of Zorah. And who knows, maybe even her husband, in moments of anger, flung at her now and then the searing epithet 'akara, and between them, too, the word became her name, the barb that stings her every time she thinks about herself and her fate. And now, this same 'childless one who has not given birth' is suddenly graced by the appearance of an angel who brings her the news that she will bear a child. Yet at this very instant, as her dream is fulfilled and her joy is boundless, the angel adds: 'For the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.'

And she plunges into a dizzying maelstrom of thoughts and emotions.

A son will be born to her. To her. Until this moment she knew nothing of this, of course. The angel knew about it first and told her the news. And perhaps at the moment of the telling she feels an unfamiliar twinge inside (angels know that revelations work best with concrete proof). And she is doubtless very proud that her son will be the one to save the Israelites: what mother wouldn't be proud to produce the savior of his people? But maybe, in a hidden corner of her heart, her happiness is less than complete.

For another recognition, painful and still repressed, is beginning to gnaw at her: she has not conceived her own private, intimate child, but rather some 'national figure', a Nazirite of God and the redeemer of Israel. And his uniqueness is not something that will develop slowly, over the years, so that the two can grow comfortably together into their roles - to be a savior's mother is also a position of responsibility - but instead this is happening now, suddenly, already, in a fixed and inexorable manner: 'For the boy is to be a Nazirite of God from the womb on...'

She tries to understand. This child, this long-awaited child, at the moment he has been given to her, has begun to sprout within her, has already been touched, it turns out, by some other, strange entity, and this means - and here she feels a sharp, alien sting - that he will be a child who will never be hers alone.

Does she understand this immediately? There is no way of knowing. The whole episode has surely overwhelmed her, and it is perfectly possible that at this moment she is filled only with joy over the pregnancy, and pride over the special boy who will be born to her - to her, and not to all those in the village and the tribe who saw her only as 'akara, the childless one. But we may surmise that, deep down, Samson's mother knows, with a deep womanly intuition - a knowledge that has nothing to do with any religious faith or fear of God - that what has been given to her has also been taken away in the same instant. The moment of her greatest intimacy - within herself, as a woman - has been confiscated and made into a public event, shared with strangers (including we who interpret her story after thousands of years), and for this reason, in an instinctive gesture of distancing and denial, she pushes away part of the disturbing news.

And here we are reminded of another woman of the Bible, whose fate was the same as that of Samson's mother: Hannah, who tearfully prayed and vowed that, if a son were born to her, she would give him to God as a Nazirite, and following that vow, Samuel was born, and she was obliged to turn him over to Eli the high priest. Both these tales of extraordinary pregnancies carry with them the uncomfortable implication that God has somehow exploited the despair of these mothers, who thirsted so avidly to conceive and give birth that they were willing to accede to any 'suggestion' regarding the destiny of their child, even - in the language of our own day - to serve as 'surrogate mothers' for God's great plans.

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