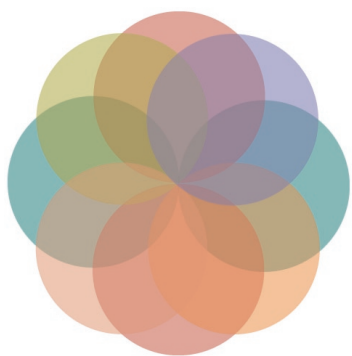


fistula STORIES

EXPLORING FAITH AND ACTION
TO END FISTULA IN THIS
GENERATION



the story
of faith SESSION II

Session Goals

To explore the connections between faith and action as well as between ourselves and women dealing with fistula.

Opening Prayer

Mekor HaChayyim — O Source of Life

Imbue our hearts with the wisdom and compassion we need:

... to hear the stories of our Mothers of old and our sisters today

... to honor their experiences and give voice to their pain

Give us the strength to lift up our sisters' voices and bring healing and wholeness to their lives

And let us say: Amen

RESOURCES FOR PART ONE

- On being made in the image of God and descended from Adam: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ethics/Caring_For_Others/Ethical_Behavior/Concepts_and_Ideas/Being_a_Mentsch.shtml
- Grinblat, Rabbi Ilana Berenbaum, "Haftarah for Yom Kippur Morning: Isaiah 57:14-59:4", in *The Women's Haftarah Commentary*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, 2004 Jewish Lights Publishing

LEADER'S NOTES

Before Part I begins, you may want to review briefly the content of Session I. Ask the group to define what obstetric fistula is and what causes it. Check to see if all group members have had a chance to visit www.fistulastories.org.

Introduce the Biblical passages: "Our readings today, in Part I, begin with the foundational texts that impel Jews toward acts of *tikkun olam*, acts of social justice. The texts that follow, in Part II, illuminate the life experiences of two particular Biblical women who struggled with infertility and a difficult pregnancy."

Break the group into study pairs. Have each pair work together to read the texts in Part I and the articles suggested in the Resource section and to discuss them together, using the Study Questions as a guide to their discussion. Then bring the group together to process their answers to the questions, before proceeding to Part II.

* The word "Lord" has been changed to "Adonai" throughout.

Part I: On Judaism and Social Justice

Translations adapted from the TANAKH, Jewish Publication Society, 1985, except where noted*

Genesis 1:26 & 5:1

1:26 "And God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness."

5:1 "This is the record of Adam's line - When God created man, God made him in the likeness of God."

Leviticus 19:16 & 19:19

¹⁶"you shall not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds; ¹⁹....you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai."

(Verse 16 translated by Rabbi Bonnie Margulis)

Isaiah 58:5-10

⁵"Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when Adonai is favorable?"

⁶"No, this is the fast I desire,
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
To untie the cords of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free
To break off every yoke.

⁷"It is to share your bread with the
hungry
And to take the wretched poor into
your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him;
And not to ignore your own kin.

⁸"Then your light shall burst through
like the dawn,
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you;
The presence of Adonai shall be your
rear guard.

⁹"Then when you call, Adonai will
answer;
When you cry, God will say, 'Here I am.'
If you banish the yoke from your midst,
The menacing hand and evil speech,

¹⁰And you offer your compassion to the
hungry
And satisfy the famished creature -
Then shall your light shine in darkness
And your gloom shall be like noonday.

[1] What does it mean to be created b'tzelem Elohim – in the image of God?

[2] Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai disagree over which is the most important verse in the Bible. Rabbi Akiva prefers “Love your neighbor as yourself”, while Ben Azzai prefers “This is the book of the generations of Adam...” Why does each give the answer he does? Which verse do you prefer? What do both answers teach us about the imperative to engage in social justice?

[3] In Isaiah 58, Isaiah rails against those who perform empty rituals but ignore the suffering around them. Ritual, according to Isaiah, is meaningless without acts of justice and mercy. Does ritual have a place today in inspiring us to social justice? Can we find a balance between spirituality and tikkun olan?

LEADER'S NOTES

Introduce the next part by saying, "We are going to look now at two Biblical women. Both struggled with infertility, and one struggled as well with a difficult and painful pregnancy. As we read these texts and the accompanying articles, let us reflect on what these stories teach us about the power of women's voices and the inspiration we can receive from reflecting on their stories."

Break the groups into study pairs again and follow the same procedure as in Part I. Be sure to bring the group together at the end to share and process their responses to the texts.

RESOURCES FOR PART TWO

- http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion/chayeisarah_clal.shtml on Rebekah as powerful, independent woman
- http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion/toldot_kolel5762.shtml on Rebekah's response to her difficult pregnancy, and later rabbinic commentaries' trying to make sense of her cry to God.
- http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Prophets/Former_Prophets/Book_of_Samuel/Hannah.shtml?TSBI on Hannah

Part 2: On Women's Experience

Genesis 25:21-24

²¹Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and Adonai responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²²But the children struggled in her womb; and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of Adonai. ²³And Adonai answered her...²⁴When time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb

I Samuel 1:1-20

¹ There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites in the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives: one named Hannah and the other Peninnah; Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless.

³This man used to go up from his town every year to worship and to offer sacrifice to Adonai of Hosts at Shiloh. Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests to Adonai there. ⁴ One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he would give one portion only - though Hannah was his favorite - for Adonai had closed her womb. ⁶ Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that Adonai had closed her womb. ⁷This happened year after year. Every time she went up to the house of Adonai, the other would taunt her; so that she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why aren't you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose - the priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of Adonai. ¹⁰ In her wretchedness, she prayed to Adonai, weeping all the while. I I And she made this vow and said, "O Adonai of hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to Adonai for all the days of his life, and no razor shall ever touch his head."

¹² As she kept on praying before Adonai, Eli watched her mouth. ¹³ Now Hannah was praying in her heart, only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴ Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" ¹⁵ And Hannah replied, "Oh, no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to Adonai. ¹⁶"Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress." ¹⁷Then, "Go in peace" said Eli, "and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked." ¹⁸ She answered, "You are most kind to your handmaid." So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast. ¹⁹ Early next morning they bowed low before Adonai, and they went back home to Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and Adonai remembered her. ²⁰ Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning "I asked Adonai for him."

[1] Contrast Rebekah and Hannah's responses to barrenness. Who intercedes for each of them? Does the fact that Isaac, rather than Rebekah, prays for a child say something about Rebekah's response to her pregnancy? Why does Eli react as he does to Hannah's prayer?

[2] Were you familiar with these stories before today? What does this say about the need to raise up women's voices and honor women's stories?

[3] Women with fistula may, like Rebekah, cry out – if it is so, why do I live? How can we help empower women around the world to raise up their voices and find the help they need?

LEADER'S NOTES

Decide together what you will do to journey with the stories you have heard today until the group next meets. You may commit to telling one person each about fistula, reviewing the blog at www.fistulastories.org and writing your own short reflection to be posted, posting about obstetric fistula to your blog or facebook, or praying for the women whose stories you have heard as well as those whose stories remain untold.

Part 3: Journeying with the stories

Before our next meeting we/I will:

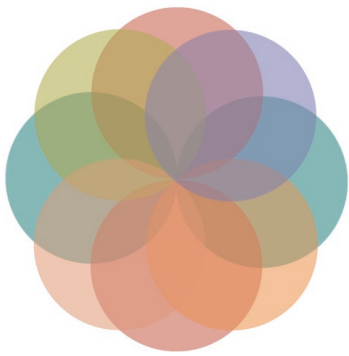
Closing Prayer

Mi She'beirach — May the One who Blessed our Mothers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah; Dina, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Ruth, and Esther

Bless our sisters who are in need of healing,
Bring them strength, comfort, and r'fuah shleimah – a complete healing of mind, body, and spirit.

Bless us also, and help us find the courage to raise up our voices in the struggle to end fistula in our generation.

And let us say, Amen.



**the story
of action** SESSION III

Session Goals

To more closely examine our role in working to end fistula in this generation.

Opening Prayer

Ha-Rachaman — O God of Compassion

Help us fill the world with compassion.

O God of mercy,

Help us bring mercy to those who suffer.

O God of justice,

Help us to bring justice to women around the world who are denied equal food, equal pay, equal education, and an equal voice.

O God who sent the prophets of old to preach on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves,

Help us to speak out for today's women whose voices are silenced.

May all our voices join together to bring about an end to injustice and suffering wherever it exists.

Amen

Part 2: Stories of Action — Sarah's Story

Sarah Omega Kidangasi



Turn back to page 8 and remember Sarah Omega Kidangasi's story. She ended by asking of other fistula sufferers, "how will they know there is still hope?" They will know in part because of the work Sarah has been doing as an ambassador to governments and the United Nations—raising awareness, concern, and money to bring an end to fistula in this generation.

In 2008, Sarah came to Washington DC to advocate on behalf of the millions of women who die each year in childbirth or suffer from related injuries, speaking with US government representatives and dignitaries and encouraging their support of a resolution to reduce maternal mortality in the US and abroad. At a press conference on Capitol Hill she said, "Living with obstetric fistula is a life full of stigma...It is a condition that has left many homes broken. It denies you the freedom to intermingle with others. You live a lonely life, and you are rejected. The worst thing about obstetric fistula is that you become a social outcast." The day after Sarah's visit, the resolution guaranteeing US commitment to reducing maternal mortality that had been introduced by Congresswoman Lois Capps was passed by the US House of Representatives, supported by every Democratic woman member of Congress.¹

And then in 2009, Sarah traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to address the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, whose yearly focus was Global Public Health. The council met especially to discuss the health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDG), including MDG 5, which aims to improve maternal health and reduce maternal death—the goal where the least has been achieved to date. The 400 attending ministers of health, ministers of foreign affairs, and ambassadors at the ECOSOC High-Level meeting listened to Sarah tell her story and were confronted with the grim facts that every minute a woman dies needlessly in pregnancy or childbirth, and for every woman who dies, 20-30 women suffer a serious birth injury, of which one of the more devastating is obstetric fistula. Since this meeting, maternal health has been on the radar screen of the United Nations in several ways, including the creation of an Adolescent Girl Taskforce and movements to more fully integrate gender and gender justice work at all levels of the United Nations.²

- [1] Who holds the power in Sarah's story?
- [2] How does Sarah assert power for herself?
- [3] How can Sarah serve as role models for us? For other women in her situation?

LEADER'S NOTES

Look back to Session 1 and remember reading and hearing Sarah Omega Kidangasi's story. Her story did not end there. As we continue to hear her story, take turns reading out loud and listen with openness and respect. As you read and listen, ask the group to note what feelings and questions are coming up for them.

¹ UNFPA, "Fistula Advocates Visit Capitol Hill: Maternal Mortality Resolution Passes House," 22 May 2008 <http://www.americansforunfpa.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=729>

² Leyla Alyanak and Katia Iversen for UNFPA, "Advocates Rally World Support to End Fistula; Safe motherhood on the forefront of important UN meeting," 06 July 2009.

LEADER'S NOTES

In the next session, the group will decide together what action we will take as we continue to journey with all of the stories we have heard. The group should commit to visiting www.fistulastories.org/action and reviewing the ideas for action there to discuss in the next session.

Invite the group to add the words omitted in each section of the Closing Prayer:

Part 3: Journeying with the stories

Before our next meeting, we will brainstorm action ideas, beginning with visiting www.fistulastories.org/action. In addition, I/we will:

Closing Prayer

God, today we have learned about faith and action.

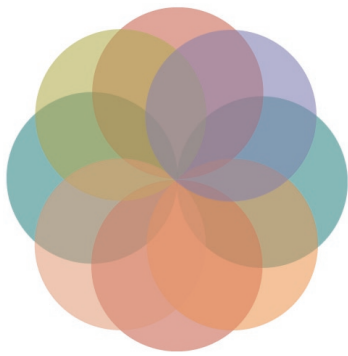
We feel...

We thank you for the advocacy and action of Sarah and Julie.

For the people in our world who don't know about fistula, we ask...

Move us to do your work, together with people all over this world, bringing
an end to fistula in this generation.

Amen.



tell a new story: faith in action

PRAYERS FOR SESSION IV

Opening Prayer

Every morning, traditional Jews pray:

“Praised are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who in wisdom created human beings, carving out openings and channels in our bodies. It is clear and known that if any of them should be opened or stopped up, it would be impossible to exist and rise up before You. Praised are you, Adonai, who heals all flesh and works wondrously.”

It is our prayer,

○ God, that women with fistula find healing and wholeness, that they may stand before You and praise Your Name.

May they, and we, find within ourselves the courage of Hannah, the fortitude of Rebekah,

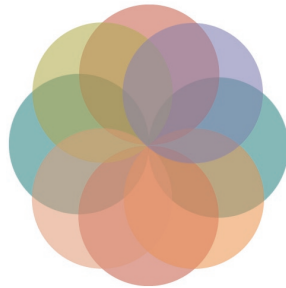
...to speak out for what we need

...to take action and demand action

...to stand up before the world and tell our stories and the stories of women with fistula

May our words and our actions help to bring an end to fistula in our generation,

And let us say, Amen.



fistula STORIES

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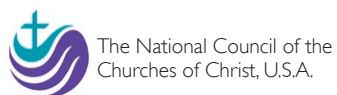
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DESIGN

Special Thanks To:

THE UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND
OPERATION HEALING HOPE



The National Council of the
Churches of Christ, U.S.A.



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