



## 5 Ways to interpret a text

When it comes to pondering Sarai's poor treatment of Hagar in Gen.16 the sages are tough judges. They allow no excuses for her mistreatment of the Egyptian slave, even though Sarai is elderly, suffering, and provoked by Hagar's disrespect. Why the harsh critique? The sages make the case that no one should embark on a high risk plan, no matter how well-motivated, if they do not have the capacity to see it through to completion. Sarai's outburst thwarts her own plan. Can you think of other reasons for her being held accountable? For instance:

**1. Great?** Sarai is the great matriarch of the chosen people. Given her revered role in the divine plan, she should know better. She of all people should be held accountable for her decisions.

**2. Unmerciful?** By contrast, Hagar is a slave. Sarai wields power over her life. The Torah is always critical of unmerciful behavior by those in power.

**3. Impatient?** Remember the conversation between Abram and God in 15:2-6? Neither seem to be

hurrying a solution. Does Sarai's plan suggest lack of trust in God's providence?

**4. Self-interested?** Recall the Hebrew of 16:2, literally, *'I shall be built up'*. Is Sarai's plan about improving her status? Is this why she reacts so badly to Hagar's disdain?

**5.** Then again, perhaps you feel inclined to defend Sarai. Perhaps you consider the criticism to some extent unjustified. With reference to the text, how would you bring this perspective to the discussion?



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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 12:1—17:27

*Lekh Lekha:*  
*'go forth'*

## Why reflect on Torah?

In the Jewish tradition Torah has both a specific and an expansive meaning. It can refer to the first five books of the bible. It can also refer to the whole bible, or even the whole corpus of Jewish teachings.

Torah is a Hebrew term which means 'teaching, instruction'. Often, through the processes of translation, Torah is referred to as 'the Law'. Unfortunately, when many Christians hear 'law' they think of 'legalism'. But for the Jewish people (from whom we received the Torah), Torah is viewed as a joy. To think that God personally teaches his people how to live, instructs them how to walk the paths of the divine... what an honor, a blessing! Thus the study and living of Torah is held in the highest esteem in Judaism.

*Light of Torah* invites its readers to a personal appreciation of Torah as joyful teaching, lifegiving instruction for our complicated human lives. Our approach is inspired by traditional Jewish methods. Each week, as we ponder a passage of Torah in conversation with the Jewish sages, we open ourselves to the delightful surprises and insights of God's Word.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 12:1–17:27

Our discussion today offers us a glimpse into the relationship of Abraham and Sarah [at this stage of the Genesis narrative they are known as ‘Abram’ and ‘Sarai’]. Even as the tradition reveres the great patriarch and matriarch for their saintliness, our Torah portion today reveals the complexities and struggles of their domestic life. As we enter the story in chapter 16, they are both a great age and still childless, a fact which Abram has already pointed out to God in 15:2-6. While God reassures Abram who seems content to wait on God, in chapter 16 Sarai is proactive in devising a solution.

## Tasting Torah

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” (Gen. 16:2)

Sarai’s solution to the dilemma of her barrenness may surprise us, removed as we are from the social norms of an ancient culture. But allowing for this, read the detail of the conversation and events in 16:1-6 carefully. What do you notice? How would you describe the relationships between the characters?

## Touching Torah

‘I shall obtain children.’ The Hebrew text does not actually use the word for children. Literally it reads, ‘I shall be built up’—presumably in the sense of establishing a family.

Note that Abram *listens* to Sarai. She has authority in the home. [Note too that the name of the child of his and Hagar’s union will be *Ishmael*, ‘let God *listen*’.] Further, Abram waits for Sarai to act. She *takes* and *gives* Hagar to Abram. In v.3 both Sarai and Hagar are referred to as *wife*. Obviously Sarai hasn’t given up on her own marital relationship, even as she generously makes way for another.

Yet despite Sarai’s good intentions, things do not go well. Hagar despises the one who raised her status, interpreting Sarai’s barrenness as ethical failure. Hurt, jealousy, resentment, power-plays... What is going on? How do you interpret the text? Where does your empathy lie?

## Depthing Torah

In the face of Hagar’s judgment, Sarai reacts badly. Very badly. In fact she seems to lay the blame on Abram, even though the whole plan was her idea. Of what does she accuse him? The text isn’t explicit, so the sages creatively ‘read between the lines.’ For Rashi<sup>1</sup> her accusations in v.5 can be read like this:

*When you prayed to God about our childlessness you prayed only for yourself! And when you hear my being disgraced by Hagar, you don’t speak up, you are silent!*

By now we may be wondering: is the conflict really about Sarai and Hagar, or is it the projected tensions between Sarai and Abram?

Abram, a fearless character with powerful negotiation skills, here adopts the tactic of avoidance. ‘You deal with it,’ he tells Sarai, once again deferring to her authority. The result is that Hagar is mistreated [‘overworked’ according to Rashi, ‘treated as a slave’ according to other commentators] to the point where she runs away. Remember: wandering the desert alone can be a death sentence. In just six verses, a noble plan to help God fulfill a divine promise has resulted in domestic warfare and an endangered life!

## Doing Torah

Sarah is loved and revered in Jewish tradition. Yet this does not mean she is perfect or beyond critique. A great strength of Jewish biblical interpretation is its capacity to embrace both the greatness and fragility of the human condition. Share your thoughts on this statement.



## Faith & Life

Later, in Genesis 17, as the lives of Abram and Sarai are about to take a dramatic turn, each undergoes a name change. Abram becomes Abraham (‘father of a multitude’). Sarai becomes Sarah (‘princess’). By the addition of the Hebrew letter *hey*, each is given a letter that is part of the Divine Name [represented by the letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*].

**Table topic:** Names are important to the telling of the biblical story. What about your own name, or the naming of your children? Do these names also tell a story? Share your ‘naming’ stories.

1. Rashi: 11th c. French Torah scholar. Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2000); Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.