



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

At home with Sarah

The biblical matriarch Sarah is loved and revered in Jewish tradition. Yet this does not mean she is perfect or beyond critique. A great strength of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation is its capacity to embrace both the greatness and fragility of the human condition. Let's explore this with reference to the complex domestic life of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 16.¹

As we enter the story both Abram and Sarai [note: these are their names at this stage of the narrative] 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.

"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, the detail of the conversation and events in 16:1-6 is revealing:

'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.

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.'] Abram waits for Sarai to act. She takes and gives Hagar to Abram. In verse 3 both Sarai and Hagar are referred to as wife. Sarai, it seems, hasn't given up on her own marital relationship, even as she generously makes way for another.

Yet despite Sarai's 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?

In the face of Hagar's judgment, Sarai reacts badly. Very badly. In fact she seems to blame 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 Rashi² her accusations in verse 5 could 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 [i.e., '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!

When it comes to pondering Sarai's poor treatment of Hagar the Jewish 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? Can you think of reasons for her being held accountable? Then again, perhaps you feel inclined to defend Sarai. With reference to the text, bring your perspective to the discussion. •

1. Works consulted: 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, 1994). Scripture quotations: NRSV.

2. Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac): 11th century French scholar revered as the 'prince' of Jewish Torah commentators.