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The Matriarchs and the *Me-Am Lo'ez*

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Digest

When Jacob Culi arrived in Constantinople from Jerusalem in the early eighteenth century, he found the Jewish community in economic, spiritual and social decline. The majority of Jews lived in terrible poverty with little or no knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish tradition. Thus, the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, Culi's seminal work, was his attempt to save the Ottoman Jewish community from complete and total assimilation and degradation.

The *Me-Am Lo'ez* was intended to be a verse-by-verse commentary of the Hebrew Bible written in the language of Ottoman Jews – Ladino. Culi did not live to complete this ambitious work; he was able to publish commentaries on Genesis 1:1 through Exodus 27:19. But, these few volumes were accepted immediately by the Jewish community and became a great success.

What is striking about this important work, is how the *Me-Am Lo'ez* reveals much about Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire. This thesis, "The Matriarchs and the *Me-Am Lo'ez*," is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one will provide further information about the background of Jacob Culi, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* and the Ottoman Jewish community. Chapters two through four will specifically discuss the status of Jewish women during Culi's time through the lens of the Biblical Matriarchs as depicted in the *Me-Am Lo'ez*. Chapters of this work will be devoted to deeper study of the characters Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Chapter five will look carefully at the daughter of the generation after the matriarchs and a type of anti-heroine, Dinah. Primary and secondary source material as well as various Bible commentaries – some of the very same material Culi himself used to construct this work -- will be consulted.

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather Henry (Haim) Soble. His deeply Jewish soul and great courage will always inspire me.

Special thanks to my advisor Martin Cohen for his wisdom, patience and caring guidance.

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I. Introduction

I recalled an anecdote that Rabbi Yosi told about a person who was in the midst of a journey. It became extremely hot, and he was tortured by thirst. Finally he came to a great spreading tree, with pleasure shade and sweet fruit. Next to it was a brook, flowing with excellent water. He sat down, ate and drank, and slept pleasantly in the shade of the tree. Before he left, he said, "Tree, tree, how can I bless you? You are perfect in every way, lacking in nothing. Therefore, I will say, 'May it be God's will that your offspring will be just like you.' God Himself gave Abraham a similar blessing, saying that all of his descendants should resemble him."¹

Thus Jacob Culi ends the introduction to his great work the *Me-Am Lo'ez*...May all the offspring of Abraham be worthy of his merit and covenant. Written in the 1730's Ottoman Constantinople, Culi was concerned with the issue of Jewish continuity. Thus the *Me-Am Lo'ez* was born as the last great literary attempt to save the Sephardic religious heritage from ignorance and ruin. The false Messiah Shabbatei Tsvi had come and gone and the majority of the Ottoman Jewish population lived in terrible circumstances. In a rapidly assimilating community, people no longer had knowledge of Hebrew or traditional Jewish practice, the primary language being that of Ladino, a Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew cognate (note the Jews of the Ottoman Empire never entirely adapted Turkish). The *Me-Am Lo'ez* was written in order to teach a vanishing culture, text and practice to people desperately in need of hope. Culi's message of Jewish chosenness and purity of the Jewish line greatly appealed to the disenfranchised.

The *Me-Am Lo'ez* was intended to be a verse-by-verse commentary of the entire Bible. Unfortunately, Culi did not live to complete the ambitious work. He was only able

¹ Culi, Jacob, *Me-Am Lo'ez* (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1979), Introduction. "A Final Word". **From now forward throughout this thesis the *Me-Am Lo'ez* will be cited as "ML."

to publish commentaries on Genesis 1:1 through Exodus 27:19 before his death. He left many unfinished manuscripts, however, which other writers used as the basis for their continuation of the work.² Through his work, Culi sought to reunify the Jewish community under the banner of knowledge and practice of traditional Rabbinic Judaism. Thus, Culi draws upon scores of traditional rabbinic sources from the *halakhah*, *aggadah*, Talmud and Midrash. Although Culi's efforts were not entirely successful; he was not able to save the Ottoman Jewish community from decline, his commentary was a success and is utilized in a great many settings even in the modern period. The Salonican scholar Michael Molho describes the *Me-Am Lo'ez* as, "a friend that leads by the hand, teaches you, amuses you, invites you to laugh and at time excites you emotionally and makes you cry. It enthralls and holds the attention of the least curious among its readers or listeners."³

This thesis will first discuss the life and times of Jacob Culi and take a closer look at his motivations in writing his seminal work the *Me-Am Lo'ez*. After some initial background information, the primary purpose of this work will be to discuss the juxtaposition between Culi's "ideal" Jewish woman and the reality of the present circumstances under which he lived. This will be accomplished through the lens of the biblical matriarchs. In particular, Culi utilizes these biblical women to teach about ideal female behavior and practice. Through his typical use of Rabbinic and medieval Midrash,

² Guttel, Henri, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Me-Am Lo'ez." (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971). Volume 11, 1158-1160.

³ Michael Molho, Le Me-Am Lo'ez. Encyclopedia Populaire du Sephardisme Levantin, quoted in Mair Jose Bernardete, Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews (New York: Hispanic Institute in the United States, 1953), 115.

stories and ethical directives, along with his own unique commentary, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* educates the reader about the modesty, beauty and saintliness of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Chapter Three of the thesis will discuss the classical historical significance of these four women; their usage in Rabbinic literature, secular culture and the arts. Finally, the body of the work will focus on each individual matriarch, utilizing Culi's own writings and original source material.

Most women of the Ottoman period and in particular Jewish women lived very circumscribed and private lives. Thus until recently, there has been very little information about female culture and tradition. Culi's work gives the reader a unique look into the social practices and mores of women of this time. Thus, the purpose of this thesis will be to generate a deeper understanding of how Culi attempted to reach those in need of education and hope for the future by envisioning his own perfect view of Jewish womanhood, while at the same time allowing us a small glimpse into the lives of women in the far-away and often overlooked past.

II. Jacob Culi and His World

I. A Short History of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire, established in the fourteenth century, was one of the most influential and vast empires the world has known. Primarily controlled by Muslims, people of many minority groups and nations lived under the dominion of its sultans. The origins of the empire are found in a Turkish tribe led by Uthman at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Uthman and his armies quickly began to conquer land and the empire spread throughout Asia Minor and the territories of the former Byzantine Empire.

The first Jewish community to come under the control of the Ottoman's was the community of Bursa, today a part of Turkey. Conquered by the Ottoman's in 1326, the Jews that lived in Bursa were moved to a separate district. However, so long as they paid special taxes, they were allowed to engage in trade and business.⁴ The policy of Ottoman tolerance towards minorities was based on cleverness as well as on good will. It was in the interest of the Turkish Muslims to be tolerant of other religions. The Ottoman conquerors came upon a vast area where the population was primarily Christian, especially in the Balkans. To these people, religion was the most important element of personal identification. Kings and emperors came and went, borders changed, but religion remained. The government was the property of rulers, often leaders who taxed the villagers into poverty and whom the people did not particularly like. But religion was the

⁴ Geller, Yaacov, Haim Hirschberg, Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky and Isaiah Friedman, "Ottoman Empire." Encyclopedia Judaica, Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 15. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 519-546.

property of the people and of God. By allowing Christians and Jews to practice their religions, the Ottoman Turks defended against the possibility of revolt. Farmers were unlikely to revolt in favor of a king they did not care about, but they would readily revolt in defense of their religion. On the other hand, the Ottomans rightly assumed, if religion were secure and taxes were not too high, people would be satisfied with their situations. Due in part to these open policies, the empire continued to grow throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Constantinople was captured from the Byzantine Christians in 1453, and the Sultan welcomed the Jews. Due to this encouragement and the relative freedom they were granted, many Jews began to move to Constantinople from throughout the empire.⁵

During this early period of Ottoman control, there were several diverse and distinct groups of Jews that lived within the conquered territory. First was the Romaniot Jewish community. These were Jews that had lived in Byzantium and Asia Minor from a very early period. In a sense they could be called the “native” Jewish population. This community tended to be very poor and insular. Second, there were Ashkenazic Jews of French or German ancestry. These Jews had settled in the empire mostly for purposes of trade with their families in Eastern Europe.

The third, and most significant Jewish community in the Ottoman empire arrived after the Spanish (and later Portuguese) expulsion of 1492 and later. When the news of the expulsion reached the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan Beyazit II issued a decree to welcome

⁵ Geller, Yaacov and Haim Hirschberg, “Ottoman Empire,” Encyclopedia Judaica.

the Jews. Bayazid II's offer of refuge gave new hope to the persecuted Sephardim. In 1492, the Sultan ordered the governors of the provinces of the Ottoman Empire "not to refuse the Jews entry or cause them difficulties, but to receive them cordially."⁶ Accordingly, "the Jews were not just permitted to settle in the Ottoman lands, but were encouraged, assisted and sometimes even compelled".⁷ Immanuel Aboab attributes to Bayazid II the famous remark that "the Catholic monarch Ferdinand was wrongly considered as wise, since he impoverished Spain by the expulsion of the Jews, and enriched Turkey."⁸ Hence, the Ottomans viewed the Jews as assets to their nation. A significant portion of those expelled thus came to the Ottomans and settled mostly in formerly European areas, in particular the cities of Istanbul, Izmir, Safed and Salonica.^{9 10} These Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal, were highly educated and wealthy. They considered themselves to be the elite of the Jewish community and engaged in all sorts of business activities. Many served as physicians and in other court positions in the court in Constantinople.

Finally, there was a fourth Jewish community peripheral to that of the Jewish victims of the Spanish/Portuguese expulsion. Many new Christians, also from Spain and Portugal, arrived in Ottoman areas to escape the Inquisition. Upon arriving in this new

⁶ Güleriyüz, Naim Avigdor. *Jewish History Tour of Turkey*. 2006.
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/vjw/Turkey.html>

⁷ Güleriyüz, Naim Avigdor. *Jewish History Tour of Turkey*. 2006.
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/vjw/Turkey.html>

⁸ Güleriyüz, Naim Avigdor. *Jewish History Tour of Turkey*. 2006.
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/vjw/Turkey.html>

⁹ Hanukoglu, Israel. *Turkish Jews: A Brief History*, 2001.
<http://www.science.co.il/hi/Turkish>

¹⁰ *The Life of Ottoman Jews*, 1996-2006.
http://www.mersina.com/lib/turkish_jews/history/life.htm

and more tolerant land, many of these new Christians converted to Judaism – as Christians were actually less welcome than Jews in the Ottoman Empire. These former Spanish and Portuguese Jews founded separate and special communities named after the country and/or town from which they had departed.¹¹ Many of these New Christians/Jews from Spain were very poor, having escaped Spain and the Inquisition with no wealth or resources (interestingly, the Jews who escaped Portugal tended to be wealthy, not having been obligated to abandon their money or assets as quickly).

As the Ottoman Empire grew and flourished, the various Jewish communities became acquainted with one another. Needless to say, there was a great deal of tension and debate between the different groups. However, for the most part, Ottoman policy allowed the Jews to govern themselves. The Ottomans organized governmental life around divisions. Each religious community (millet) kept its own courts, schools, and welfare system. Members of the millet even built roads, water fountains, and communal buildings for their own neighborhoods. The members of millets were pleased to have these functions in their own hands and the Ottoman government was relieved of the necessity of providing them themselves.¹² The Jewish community was extremely organized and the Ottomans rarely involved themselves in internal Jewish affairs.

As time passed, an ever-more diverse array of Jews continued to be added to the fold as the Ottoman Empire expanded. In sixteenth century, the Ottomans conquered Egypt,

¹¹ Geller, Yaacov and Haim Hirschberg, "Ottoman Empire," Encyclopedia Judaica.

¹² *Turkish Toleration*, 2000. The American Forum for Global Education.

<http://www.globaled.org/nyworld/materials/ottoman/turkish.html>

Eretz Yisrael, much of North Africa and Iraq. The Jews of these lands were allowed varying degrees of freedom and integration. However, overall, the lives of minorities were much better in these lands than in those of Europe. By the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks relied heavily upon the Jews for commerce, diplomacy and many fiscal matters. This was due to the fact that Jews were a landless minority and because of this could be trusted. Jews additionally, although not Christian, but had connections and trade routes with the Christians.¹³ During this time, many commercial trade routes were under complete Jewish control due to strong family partnerships. Jews were involved in a considerable amount of the Empire's commerce and development. One of the most significant innovations that Jews brought to the Ottoman Empire was the printing press. In 1493, only one year after their expulsion from Spain, David and Samuel ibn Nahmias established the first Hebrew printing press in Istanbul.¹⁴ Jews were also involved in the textile industry, the leather trade, wine production, gemstones and jewelry making, cheese preparation and medicine. A large minority of the Jewish community achieved great wealth and the trust of the Sultans. Jews often carried out Ottoman diplomacy. Joseph Nasi, appointed the Duke of Naxos, was the former Portuguese Marrano Joao Miques. Another Portuguese Marrano, Alvaro Mandes, was named Duke of Mytilene in return for his diplomatic services to the Sultan. Salamon ben Nathan Eskenazi arranged the first diplomatic ties with the British Empire. Jewish women such as Dona Gracia

¹³ Geller, Yaacov and Haim Hirschberg, "Ottoman Empire," Encyclopedia Judaica.

¹⁴ *The Life of Ottoman Jews*, 1996-2006.

http://www.mersina.com/lib/turkish_jews/history/life.htm

Mendes Nasi "La Senora" and Esther Kyra exercised considerable influence in the Court.¹⁵

After the expulsion from Spain and later Portugal, Jews also brought their great tradition of literature and philosophy to Ottoman lands. Joseph Caro compiled the *Shulhan Arukh*. Shlomo haLevi Alkabes composed the *Lekhah Dodi*, a hymn that welcomes the Sabbath according to both Sephardic and Ashkenazi ritual. Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac Assa became known as the father of Judeo-Spanish literature.¹⁶ Finally, as we will learn later, Jacob Culi began his work on the *Me-Am Lo'ez*.

However, this idyllic period in the history of the empire did not endure. Beginning in the seventeenth century – in 1620 and especially after 1666 under Sultan Sulieman the Magnificent, the power of the Sultanate began to decline. Along with this was a weakening of military prowess and a breakdown of centralized control over the empire's vast land holdings. With this decentralization came a greater number of restrictions and troubles for the minorities of the empire. Creativity and openness were no longer encouraged and very little new thought and work were created. During this period, although there were wealthy Jews, the majority of the Ottoman Jewish population was very poor and lived under terrible circumstances. Many Jews no longer had the means to engage in study and leisure activities such as philosophy and writing. In desperation, many Jews turned to Messianism and the figure of Shabbetai Tsvi to guide them. Born in

¹⁵ *The Life of Ottoman Jews*, 1996-2006.

http://www.mersina.com/lib/turkish_jews/history/life.htm

¹⁶ *The Life of Ottoman Jews*, 1996-2006.

http://www.mersina.com/lib/turkish_jews/history/life.htm

1626, Shabbatei Tsvi had himself declared the Messiah and his fame spread among Jews throughout the world.¹⁷ Desperate for a shred of hope during dark times, many Jews gave up their earthly possessions simply to follow him on his travels throughout the empire. However, soon it was reported to the Sultan that Tsvi was a troublemaker who intended to overthrow Ottoman rule. Threatened with death by the Sultan, Tsvi quickly renounced Judaism and turned to Islam. Tsvi's conversion was a fatal blow to many Jews already living in despair. Faced with crushing poverty and a faith they could no longer sustain many turned to the outside world and the powerful forces of assimilation. This was the state of the Jewish world when Jacob Culi chose to embark on his masterpiece, the *Me-Am Lo'ez*.

II. Jacob Culi: His Life and Vision

We are likely to think our own twentieth and twenty-first century adjustment to modernity and recovery of "continuity" is unique to our own Jewish struggles in North America. The origins of the *Me-Am Lo'ez* challenge this notion. Rabbi Jacob Culi began writing his commentary in the late seventeenth century for the Ladino-speaking Jewish community of Turkey. These Jews were rapidly assimilating and still reeling from the apostasy of Shabbatai Tsvi, the proclaimed Messiah. Culi became for that community both a Sephardic Rashi (commenting on every detail of the Torah) and Baal Shem Tov (encouraging the community to reclaim its Jewish soul). In the introduction to the Genesis volume of the *Me-Am Lo'ez* it is written, "Many people do not know Hebrew, and cannot even read the Torah in the original. Even those who know the words cannot

¹⁷ Mansoor, Menahem, Jewish History and Thought: An Introduction (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1991), 328-331.

comprehend the meaning of what they read. Every day, fewer and fewer people study Torah, and the ways of Judaism are gradually being forgotten.”¹⁸ Culi lamented about the many Jews who had become forgetful and ignorant of their own religion. His is a reaction to not only to the spiritual damage Tsvi brought to the world of Ottoman Jewry, but to the general malaise of the Jewish people. Culi’s declaration above tells of the waning knowledge of Hebrew in the population. So, Culi set out to develop a book that would revitalize the Jewish population. Not a work in Hebrew (which an increasing number could not read), but a work in the everyday language of the people, Ladino. This Hispanic language had been the primary language of the Balkan, Greek and Levantine Sephardim since their expulsion from Spain. Printed in Rashi characters, the Ladino language text made the material available to the broadest audience and the vast majority of Sephardim from Croatia to Cairo and beyond. A religious text specifically tailored in the day-to-day language of the Jewish people was not only needed, but was received with open arms. In Turkey printing of the work was done a few pages at a time, and then distributed prior to Shabbat.¹⁹ Afterward, the pages were bound, completing the various volumes.

The author of the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, Jacob Culi, enjoys a reputation as one of the giants of his generation. He was born in Jerusalem around the year 1689 to Rabbi Makhir Culi (1638-1728), a well-known scholar who was a scion of one of the leading Jewish families of Crete.²⁰ Additionally, Culi’s grandfather was Moses ibn Habib, a great Jewish scholar.

¹⁸ ML, “Introduction to Genesis” 10.

¹⁹ Alfassa, Shelomo. *The Sephardic Classic of Constantinople: Me-Am Lo'ez*, 2006. International Sephardic Leadership Council. <http://www.sephardiccouncil.org/meam.html>

²⁰ Kaplan, Aryeh. *The Me-Am Lo'ez, Rabbi Yaakov Culi*. <http://www.famousrabbis.com/meam.htm>

After his grandfather's death, Culi's first academic venture was the publication of his grandfather's writings. However, at the time there was no printing press in Eretz Yisrael, so Culi traveled to Constantinople to pursue his goals. In 1714, while engaged in the work of his grandfather's legacy, he entered into a close relationship with the chief Rabbi of Constantinople, Judah Rosanes, one of the greatest Ottoman-Jewish thinkers and scholars of the late middle ages.²¹ Rosanes eventually appointed Culi *dayyan* or "judge", which with his portion as a teacher secured him a sufficient livelihood. In 1727, Culi officially published his grandfather's work "Shammot ba-Arez" (notes on various portions of the Talmud) with an index. Shortly thereafter, his mentor Rosanes passed away leaving his literary legacy in a chaotic condition. Culi was entrusted with the task of sorting and cataloging Rosanes's work. "Parashat Derakim" and "Mishneh la-Melek" were each published several years later with introductions written by Culi.

Finally, when he reached the end of his obligations to both Rosanes and his grandfather, it was time for Culi to complete a work of his own. This work became the *Me-Am Lo'ez*. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* was originally planned to consist of seven volumes, encompassing all the books of the Bible. In the two years that the author worked on it, he completed the entire book of Genesis and two-thirds of Exodus, a total of over eleven hundred large printed pages. (In the current Hebrew translation, this fills over 1800

²¹ Ginzberg, Louis, Lazarus Grunhut and Meyer Kayserling. *Culi, Jacob*, 2002 copyright. Jewish Encyclopedia. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=919&letter=C>

pages).²² Then, at the age of 42 in the year 1732, Jacob Culi passed away, leaving his work unfinished.

The contemporary Ottoman-Jewish leadership saw the popularity of the *Me-Am Lo'ez* and thus looked to others to complete the work. Culi had left voluminous notes, and these would be incorporated into the continuation. The first one to take on this task was Yitzhak Magriso, who completed Exodus in 1746, Leviticus in 1753, and Numbers in 1764. Yitzhak Bekhor Agruiti finished Deuteronomy in 1772.

The title of Culi's masterpiece *Me-Am Lo'ez*, is indicative of the work's purpose. Literally, the phrase means, "from a people of different, strange tongue." Its most famous usage is in the Hallel prayers (Psalm 114) that begin, "When the people Israel left Egypt, they left a people of a foreign language." Hence, the title of the work indicated that it was meant for people living in lands not their own, losing sight of the language, culture and religion that once belonged to them. Judaism, to Ottoman Jews, was becoming in and of itself a foreign language. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* was intended to bring Jews back to the heart and soul of their religion, language and traditions.

Today, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* is considered one of the most popular Sephardic Bible commentaries in existence. It is an easy to understand, useful compendium of laws, tales of Jewish life and culture, and explanations of the Torah. With this work, Jacob Culi established a living legacy for a crumbling empire. The great Sephardic sage of Constantinople and friend Rafael Isaac Yerushalmi declared about Jacob Culi: "Never

²² Kaplan, Aryeh. *The Me-Am Lo'ez, Rabbi Yaakov Culi*.
<http://www.famousrabbis.com/meam.htm>

before has there been one whose soul yearned to teach all the children of Israel the rules and laws...the man of Jerusalem was the one who taught in a clear language...he worked so that the Torah not be forgotten among Israel.... From the time the sun rose until it set, words of Torah never left his mouth.”²³

²³ Alfassa, Shelomo. *The Sephardic Classic of Constantinople: Me-Am Lo'ez*, 2006. International Sephardic Leadership Council. <http://www.sephardiccouncil.org/meam.html>

III. Who Were the Matriarchs?

An Introduction to the Role of Biblical Women

The role of women in the Bible is contradictory: few women are mentioned by name, suggesting that they were rarely in the forefront of public life in the Ancient Near East. However, there are numerous exceptions to this rule, notably the four matriarchs mentioned in Genesis: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. These four women played important roles in both the domestic and the public spheres. In fact, the book of Genesis does not just mention the four matriarchs, but contains the greatest concentration of female figures in the Bible (32 named and 46 unnamed women). The fact that Genesis consists of a series of family stories (including several genealogies) accounts for the remarkable concentration of female figures. Scholars generally understand these stories as legends, but that does not sever their link with religion and history. The families depicted in Genesis may or may not represent actual people, but these literary portraits are timeless, valuable sources for understanding the evolution of the role of women and their influence on traditions throughout history. This chapter will attempt to answer the following questions: Who were the matriarchs of the book of Genesis? What is their role in the context of the greater ancient Near East and religious history?

Sarah

Biblical Sarah, Abraham's wife and the original matriarch of the Jewish people, is a strong and independent character. She is first mentioned in Genesis 11:29 and

exceptionally, her genealogy is not given.²⁴ According to Genesis 20:12, Sarah was Abraham's half-sister, the daughter of his father, but not his mother. However, Genesis 11:31 tells us that Sarah was Terach's daughter-in-law (Terach was Abraham's father). Abraham himself during the sojourn in Egypt (citation) also mentions that Sarah is not just his wife, but his sister as well. Where Sarah and Abraham actually related? The seeming contradiction between Genesis 20 and Genesis 11 can be better understood after looking at other sources from the ancient near east. The Nuzi documents, which date from around 1400 BCE, attest to the existence in Hurrian society of a judicial status of wife-sistership, whereby a woman, in addition to becoming a man's wife, was adopted by him as his sister and thereby merited higher social status and greater privileges than an ordinary wife.²⁵ This is perhaps how the Bible's explanation of Sarah's lineage is derived. It seems that Sarah could have been Abraham's actual blood-kin or sister, but it is more likely that perhaps Sarah had obtained the status of sister-wife, as was common in other places throughout the ancient near east. The relationship between Abraham and Sarah is significant, because these two figures will produce the next heir and progenitor of the Jewish people: Isaac.

Another important aspect of the Sarah story is the history of her infertility and subsequent actions. The theme of the "barren-wife" that at long last gives birth to a people is a critical motif throughout the Bible, as well as in other ancient Near-Eastern

²⁴ Gelfman, Rachael. *Sarah: Priestess or Paradigm?* My Jewish Learning.com. http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/Ancient/TheStoryTO/Patriarchs/BiblicalSarah.htm.

²⁵ Siff, Myra, S. Sperling, and Aaron Rothkoff. "Sarah." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 18. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 46-47.

literature. In Sarah's story this theme foreshadows the later narrative of Rachel and Leah and helps to explain the (much later) presence of the various tribes of ancient Israel. Also attested to in ancient Near Eastern literature is Sarah's curious action of lending her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham, in the hope that they will produce children in her name. The source for this motif is also found in the Nuzi documents, where it is stipulated that if a wife remains childless, she must provide her husband with a female slave or concubine.²⁶ Hence, we see that Sarah acts in the manner that is expected of her within the cultural context.

In Biblical commentary and in the Bible itself, Sarah is noted for her exceptional beauty and power of prophecy. She is an important figure in both Islam and Christianity. Both religions, similar to Judaism, see her as the progenitor of the Jewish people.²⁷ As we shall see later in the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, a great deal of *Aggadic* literature and teachings have been created throughout the ages that fill in the gaps of Sarah's story.

Rebecca

Rebecca, as it is noted in Genesis 24:15, was the wife of Isaac, daughter of Bethuel, granddaughter of Nahor (brother of Abraham) and sister of Laban. In contrast to Sarah, her genealogy is extensive and clearly delineated. Genesis also makes clear to us the providential nature of Isaac and Rebecca's marriage. As seen in the incident with Eliezer at the well and Rebecca's own determination to marry Isaac sight-unseen, we are clearly

²⁶ Siff, Myra, S. Sperling, and Aaron Rothkoff. "Sarah." Encyclopedia Judaica.

²⁷ Rippin, A. "Sirah." Encyclopedia of Islam (Brill Academic Publishers, 1980), 26-27.

taught that this alliance was determined by God almost before either Rebecca or Isaac was born and brought about by God in the clearest manner possible.

The Bible takes care to note that Rebecca had several outstanding qualities: hospitality to strangers, kindness to animals, chastity and, of course, beauty (this goes almost without saying). In combination with Sarah, these are traits that make up the ideal woman. Rebecca as well as Sarah also receives oracles from God, most notably when her two twins, Jacob and Esau, struggle within her womb. The prophecies of both Rebecca and Sarah are significant in that they represent that not just men in the ancient near east had access to the God-head. Great women were granted this privilege as well.

Rachel

Rachel is one of the most significant women depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Wife of Jacob, mother of Joseph and Benjamin, daughter of Laban and sister of Leah, her genealogy marks her as one of the heirs to the Abrahamic tradition. It is a small wonder and the great work of providence that Jacob falls deeply in love with her. Rachel is depicted throughout the Bible as a great beauty. Shapely and good to look-upon, Rachel is a shepherdess and she watches over her uncle's flocks (an often-times dangerous task).²⁸ Beloved by Jacob, Rachel has one great foil – her sister Leah. Also married to Jacob, Leah is fertile and bears Jacob many of the sons that barren Rachel is unable to conceive. The Bible is clear and explicit that the matriarch Rachel, although a saint, also has one great sin – that of jealousy. Rachel is jealous of her sister Leah for her ability to

²⁸ Genesis 29:9

conceive and bear Jacob sons. As foreshadowed by the story of Sarah and explicated in the Nuzi documents, Rachel lends Jacob her concubine Bilhah in order to bear children in her name. Although, Rachel later in life does bear Jacob two sons, she is always seen as the barren wife.

The traditions regarding Rachel's barren state serve a greater purpose when studying the larger, political picture of ancient Israel. These stories are generally regarded as reflections of Israelite tribal history – though there is no unanimity as to the period involved. It is thought by some scholars that at some stage in the development of the twelve-tribe league the tribes associated with Rachel and Bilhah constituted a distinct confederation. Just as the tribes associated with Leah and Zilpah also served as an earlier, separate entity as well. Hence, the story of Rachel and Leah sets the stage for the later tribal divisions that appear in ancient Israel.²⁹

Notably, Rachel appears in two other places later in the Bible: She is mentioned with Leah as the matriarch of Israel in the marriage blessing of Ruth (Ruth 4:11) and Jeremiah poetically depicts her weeping in Ramah for her children who are in exile (Jeremiah 31:15). It is this image that has captured the hearts and minds of many artists, most importantly Rembrandt, who throughout the ages have attempted to capture stories from the Bible. Additionally, the account of Rachel's marriage to Jacob forms the basis of a great deal of Christian thought. Many works have been written about the sister-wife

²⁹ Sarna, Nahum, Aaron Rothkoff, Joseph Braslavi, and Bathja Bayer. "Rachel." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 17. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 47-49.

theme associated with Jacob. Christian iconographers of the middle ages associated the two wives of Jacob with the New Testament figures of Martha and Mary (representing the active and contemplative life), since Jacob favored Rachel, as Jesus preferred Mary.³⁰

Leah

Rachel's rival and elder sister Leah was also the wife of Jacob and shares Rachel's extensive and honorable genealogy. Leah has the distinction of giving birth to six of Jacob's sons (as well as the one daughter that is mentioned in the Bible). Additionally, not to be outdone by her sister, Leah also provides Jacob with a concubine, Zilpah, who bears him two sons. Leah's defining attribute in the Bible, besides her fertility, is her eyes. Biblical interpreters and scholars throughout the ages have speculated on what the Bible exactly meant when it mentions Leah's eyes in Genesis 29:17. To this day, the mystery has not been solved. However, what is clear about Leah and her story is the fact that she is truly the matriarch of the Jewish people. Leah, along with Rachel is mentioned in Ruth 4:11 as one of the mother's of the nation who built up the House of Israel. As the elder sister, Leah's progeny retain their leadership status. Leah is the mother of the line of King David and the priest Aaron. Rachel's progeny can boast no such connections.

Unlike the earlier accounts of Sarah and Rebecca, the Bible gives us less information about the actual attributes of Rachel and Leah. The Bible is more interested in establishing their fertility and the line of Abraham that extends to the kingdom of Israel and King David. Hence, more time is spent depicting the complicated relationship

³⁰ Sarna, Nahum, Aaron Rothkoff, Joseph Braslavi, and Bathja Bayer. "Rachel." Encyclopedia Judaica.

between the sisters, and the birth of Jacob's numerous sons. However, this does not make Rachel and Leah any less important or unique in the annals of Biblical history. The Bible uses the two women to further reinforce the line of tradition that leads from Abraham to King David.

Throughout later periods, notably during the middle Ages, the four matriarchs came to represent different aspects of the ideal woman. Christianity typically uses the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs to foreshadow the story of Jesus. Most notably, Sarah, during the Akedah (Sacrifice of Isaac), is shown as the precursor to the Virgin Mary, who holds and comforts Jesus at various points during the Passion. Joseph Culi in the *Me-Am Lo'ez* continues this tradition by using the four women as paradigms to explicate how Jewish women in Turkey were expected to act and behave. Hence, for example, Rebecca's modesty and chastity becomes a model for all Jewish-Turkish wives. Just as Rachel is criticized for her jealousy of Leah, women are exhorted not covet, but rather to behave in a selfless and saintly manner.

Perhaps the women of Genesis were merely legend and paradigm. However, after thousands of years, as we can see, the personalities, hopes and dreams of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah remain with us. We can derive great inspiration from their long-ago voices. Our matriarchs were women of great strength, but also weakness. They were ordinary women who through providence and their own personal strength were able to achieve immortality.

IV. Sarah as the Archetypal Mother

In the Bible, the most significant role played by women is that of mother. As we shall see, biblical women for the most part were "cursed" when barren and "blessed" when their wombs were full, preferably with male children. The rabbis of later generations chose to carry on this tradition of the ideal woman and mother and in fact amplified it with messages of their own which fit their unique cultural contexts. In general, the rabbis of past history viewed women as rather insignificant. At times, they would rouse themselves, as seen in *Bereshit Rabbah* to go so far as to defame women as a sex, "Women are said to possess four traits: they are greedy, eaves-droppers, slothful, and envious."³¹ However, in pre-modern Turkey of the eighteenth century, Jewish women in particular lived in degraded circumstances, without hope. The opinion of a classic work such as *Bereshit Rabbah* was not enough to inspire Jewish women to keep the commandments and live righteous, Jewish lives. Culi, the author of *Me-Am Lo'ez* was well aware of this and so strove to teach women about the importance of their roles throughout history. Gone from his work are the cutting comments of earlier generations and readily apparent in their place is Culi's stylized and archetypal vision of women through the lens of the Biblical matriarchs. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* teaches that the motherhood of a married woman was the most acceptable and rewarding role for women to attain. Women who in fact attained this status were worthy of prophecy, praise and great merit in the world to come. In an age of despair, Culi attempted to bring light to Jews living in darkness; just as Sarah suffered and was rewarded, so too would the righteous Jewish women of his own time.

³¹ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 383.

The Role and Importance of Marriage

We learn from Culi, early on in his commentary on Genesis that there are four distinct advantages of taking a wife:

- a) If there is love and peace between them they are saved from all evil because God guards over them.
- b) A blessing abides in the house because there is someone who manages the household.
- c) Therefore, the man is saved from sin.
- d) A married man is able to study Torah and to keep the commandments. When he returns from work he finds his meal ready and is therefore able to study an hour before sleeping.³²

Thus we are taught that the role of a proper wife is to ensure that her husband derives all of the benefits from marriage as discussed above. Women exist to help men perform commandments or refrain from sinning. When looking for a wife, Culi teaches that a man, "Should not pay attention to the dowry or alimony for all this is foolishness. One who marries a woman who is not compatible with him will not be blessed in his marriage."³³ Marriage is a value so important to Culi that he is careful to establish early on in Genesis the criteria and need for successful marriages. Once this criterion is established, Culi then goes on to discuss the matriarchs as the archetypes for successful marriage and womanhood. Through the Biblical account of Sarah, Culi teaches us a great deal about the role of the wife and her importance to Jewish survival.

³² ML Genesis 1:165-166

³³ ML Genesis 1:93

Beauty

The first of the matriarchs, Sarah, is treated in the *Me-Am Lo'ez* as the ultimate archetype of Jewish womanhood. Although in truth, a character of many dimensions, Culi has an extremely strong point of view regarding Sarah and her many attributes. The first thing we learn about Sarah vis-à-vis Culi, is that she is extremely beautiful even in her old age. Not only does Abraham value Sarah for her beauty, but two separate kings also desire her. As we learn from Culi (and also Rashi), "In Egypt, people were not used to seeing beautiful women. They were all black and ugly, since they were related to the descendants of Cush. Because of this, Sarai would appear to them to be many more times beautiful than she actually was."³⁴ From this, Culi teaches us that beauty is an important feminine attribute. A woman's value on the marriage market is in fact derived through her beauty.

Obedience, Respect and Honor

However, once married, there are other, more important attributes besides beauty that a woman must possess. A woman must be obedient and respectful towards her husband and in return, a man must always strive to honor his wife. Unlike Muslim households of the time, where men were the absolute rulers and violence against women was not only allowed, but also pervasive, Culi writes,

A man should always strive to honor his wife, since blessing comes to a home only because of the woman of the house...it is important to tell this to the ignorant who often curse and insult their wives. This is a serious sin. When there is no peace between husband and wife, the Divine Presence leaves them...When a man strikes his wife, it is as if he struck a stranger, which is a serious sin.

³⁴ ML Genesis 12:11-13

A Jew simply does not do such things...If, however, she behaves like his enemy, and curses him to his face or insults his mother in his presence, then it is permitted for him to strike her.³⁵

Hence we learn, that although Culi does treat the woman of the house as the property of her husband, so long as she conforms to certain standards of behavior, she retains certain rights, in particular the right to not be beaten. In essence Culi is granting considerable status to Jewish women, much more so than their Muslim counterparts. In fact, men are not allowed to beat their wives, but they are encouraged to consult with them. As Culi alludes to Bava Metzia 59a:

A person must always be wary of (verbally) wronging his wife, for since her tears come easily – (the punishment for) wronging her is nearby – (i.e. not long in coming)...Rav Pappa said to Abaye: There is a popular saying: If your wife is short, bend over and whisper to her.

Culi did not just expect men to pay attention to their wives. Additionally, Culi maintains that the husband must be aware of his wife's feelings. For example, Culi writes, that upon leaving Haran, "Abram took his wife Sarai with gentle, pleasant words. This teaches that a man should not try to talk his wife into leaving her hometown to settle in another city. It must only be of her own free will."³⁶ A wife cannot be commanded, but deserves explanations for particular behaviors. If a man is reasonable with his wife, then he himself makes it easy for her to obey him. However, in the end, no matter how progressive Culi appears to be, the wife is still afforded a lesser status than her husband. If she misbehaves, in particular cases, like a child or chattel, the husband is expected and encouraged to discipline her.

³⁵ ML Genesis 12:16

³⁶ ML Genesis 12:5

The Power of Prophecy

In keeping with his vision of women, Culi teaches that Sarah is the first woman in the Bible to have prophetic powers. Hence, she, more than any other, is worthy of Abraham's regard. In her own voice, Sarah relates to the *Me-Am Lo'ez* reader, "I believe that I have been able to determine prophetically why I cannot have children. People tell me that I can become fertile through medical treatments or magical charms, but I will not make use of them. I am certain that God prevented me from having children because of some sin that I have committed."³⁷ Through this passage, Culi not only discusses Sarah's power of prophecy, but he preaches against the use of charms and magic to promote pregnancy – a common female folk practice in Turkey at the time. Although commentaries such as the *Midrash Ma'Vo'Ar* and the *Hazal* allow the use of charms, Culi derives his hatred of them from the commentary *Yafeh Toar* that states, "The use of amulets is outside the natural order." Instead, "if a person has faith in overcoming his illness and puts his trust in God, a miracle can come to him through God's compassion." Hence, by not using charms, Culi teaches women that Sarah adds to her merit and is deserving of the prophecies she receives from God.

In regards to Sarah's abilities of prophecy, Culi is quick to point out that in fact, Sarah is a more powerful prophetess in many ways than even Abraham himself. However, as usual the husband must dominate over the woman, as we learn, "Sarah was actually greater in prophecy than Abraham. However, when her period returned, she became

³⁷ ML Genesis 16:2

ritually unclean, and lost the gift of prophecy."³⁸ We learn from this that the archetypal woman is a person who has a strong connection to God, but because of her innate woman-hood must rely on her husband as her ruler and guide through life.

Prayer

Culi not only speaks of Sarah as a prophetess, but he remarks on her many prayers to God. In particular he tells us that when Sarai was taken to Pharaoh's palace, she considered herself to be in great spiritual danger and intones a particularly long prayer. Culi also tells us that while in Pharaoh's keeping she prays and weeps.³⁹ Sarah does not just pray while she is in captivity. Culi uses another incident when Sarah prays to explicate his own views of female prayer. When the angels visit Abraham in his tent in Genesis 18, after the meal, Culi explains, the angel also inquires about Sarah in order to pass her the cup over which the Grace after the Meals had been said. Culi then goes on to state:

If a woman cannot recite the Grace herself, she should listen to every word when it is being recited, in order to fulfill her obligations....In the days of Sarah, women were extremely careful to keep the commandments. They were not like women today who finish eating and leave the table without even saying Grace. If a woman does not know how to read the Grace after Meals, her husband or son should say it in a loud voice, and she should listen to every word.⁴⁰

Culi then goes on to provide the actual text of several of the blessings. From all of this we learn, that Culi thought a proper Jewish woman must have enough education to be able to recite the proper blessings at the proper times. Even if she was illiterate, it was a wife's

³⁸ ML Genesis 18:13-14

³⁹ ML Genesis 12:16

⁴⁰ ML Genesis 18:9

obligation to respect and obey Jewish tradition by listening to the blessings said on her behalf. Culi's ideal wife was an extremely pious woman who was always careful to pray and obey the commandments.

Motif of the Barren Woman

Sarah, like many of the women depicted in the Bible is barren. This motif of the "barren woman" is a common theme in biblical literature. *Bereshit Rabbah*, as alluded to by Culi, asks, "Why were the Matriarchs barren? So that they might lean on their husbands in (spite of) their beauty." In this, Culi is simply expressing the general Jewish view, that the example of the matriarchs teaches that a woman's status is measured by her ability to produce sons. The archetypal woman is a person who will sacrifice for her family and her sons over her own personal well-being. This is evinced by the fact that Sarah, despite her feelings, allows Hagar to bear Abraham's son because she herself is barren. In fact, Culi tells us that Sarah teaches Hagar, "My anguish at seeing you (Abraham) take a second wife, should atone for my sin, and God should have mercy on me (and maybe now I will conceive)."⁴¹ Time passes, and later we watch as Sarah's prophecy does come to pass. For her sacrifice, she is able to carry and bear Isaac, Abraham's true heir. We also learn from the *Me-Am Lo'ez* that no matter how terribly Hagar acted towards Sarah, Sarah bore her insults and did not lash out. Instead, as a devoted wife, Sarah complains to Abraham in private. She does not speak about her pain and troubles in public. From this Culi demonstrates, "This teaches that a wife should not do anything without consulting her husband. We see that although Sarai was furious at

⁴¹ ML Genesis 16:2

Hagar, she did not punish her before discussing it with Abraham.”⁴² Culi’s ultimate message about Sarah is the fact that “She believed in God and trusted in His miracles. She realized that if it was God’s will, even such an old woman could have child. It was in the merit of this faith, that she conceived...One must trust that God will reward them in the end.”⁴³ It is not only for this reason that Sarah was seen as fit to have a son. From the *Yafeh Toar*, Culi quotes, “Sarah also suffered because the scoffers of the generation said that Sarah had become impregnated by Abimelech. In order to defuse their words, the Holy One Blessed be He, fashioned the features of Isaac just like the features of Abraham. And everyone said that Abe had fathered Isaac.”⁴⁴ Hence, because she suffered the stain of the *sotah* (adulterous woman) and was innocent, Sarah was able to conceive. In this manner, we are taught that to truly be a righteous woman in this world some suffering is perhaps required. Culi’s message here is perhaps a metaphor for the difficulties that Jewish women under the Ottoman’s faced. These women themselves suffered the degradations of poverty. However, as Culi implies, if they led righteous lives and had faith in God, in the end they too had the chance to be rewarded. It is in this manner, that Culi teaches that a good Jewish woman is honored for her ability to bear hardship without complaint and to sacrifice her own needs before those of her husband, family and household.

⁴² ML Genesis 16:6

⁴³ ML Genesis 21:1

⁴⁴ ML Genesis 21:1, *Yafeh Toar*

Modesty

Sarah had several other attributes that Culi found to be extremely significant. By mentioning these other factors, Culi again teaches about his ideal of womanhood. We are taught that Sarah was an extremely modest woman. In Genesis 18:9, the angels visit Abraham and Culi writes, "After the meal, the angel Michael began by asking Abraham where Sarah was. The Torah relates this to teach how modest Sarah was: although she was ninety years old, she remained inside her tent and did not say a word." We are also taught, "Sarah was extremely modest (after the birth of Isaac); she barely exposed the tip of her breast..." Culi goes on to extemporize, "This teaches us a lesson in modesty. A nursing woman should not expose her breasts even when there are no strange men in the house. Some women expose their bosoms and say that these words do not frighten them. They are wrong and will be punished."⁴⁵ Culi also teaches that a married woman must cover her hair and never go bareheaded. In fact, even her husband must not see her hair. Even when a woman is home alone, she must behave in a respectable and modest manner. Evidently, in Turkish society, women had grown, at least in Culi's mind, increasingly immodest. Hence, Culi uses the Me-Am Lo'ez to idealize a certain type of modesty, lost in his age.

There is one case however, according to Culi when a husband's request is more important than modesty. Upon the birth of Isaac, it seems that many neighbors found it hard to believe that a ninety-year old woman had given birth. Hence as Culi writes, Abraham commands Sarah, "This is no time for modesty. You must show God's

⁴⁵ ML Genesis 21:5

greatness to all. Show them how the dried up breasts of a ninety-year old woman are suddenly full of milk. So Sarah exposed her two breasts. They gushed like two streams, providing milk for all the children."⁴⁶ It is in this manner, that Sarah is truly the mother of all people, just as her name: Sarah – "Princess" depicts.

Proselytizing

Interestingly, Culi also idealizes Sarah's abilities at proselytizing. As he writes,

Abram was very good at convincing people to believe in God. When he was 52 years old, he began spreading his doctrine in the world. Sarai spoke to the women, bringing them to true belief. In this manner, the two of them proselytized many people...this teaches us that one who teaches Torah to another is counted as if he had brought him into the world since he brings him to life in the World to Come.

Thus, we are told that just as the Muslims had a careful and long standing tradition of proselytizing to those of other faiths, an ideal woman was someone who knew how to pass the wisdom of Judaism on to others. In a world where Jews lived with a great of suspicion and resentment from Muslims, this was quite a statement for Culi to make.

Hagar as a Foil

Culi depicts Sarah as the perfect, Jewish woman. However, how are we to know what type of woman is considered dangerous and evil? Sarah's perfect foil is found in her counterpoint, Hagar. Hagar is first introduced to us in the *Me-Am Lo'ez* as "Pharaoh's daughter" and "Nimrod's granddaughter."⁴⁷ Before giving her to Abram, Culi tells us that Pharaoh consoles his daughter by telling her, "My daughter, it is better for you to be a

⁴⁶ ML Genesis 21:5

⁴⁷ ML Genesis 16:2

servant in Abram's house, so highly is he blessed, than for you to be a princess in my palace. After seeing Sarai's greatness with my own eyes, there is nothing I can say. I want you to serve her with your heart and soul; in this manner, you will gain great benefit from her."⁴⁸ Thus Hagar is sent out of Egypt to serve Sarai. However, life was not to be good to Hagar. Sarai determines that Hagar is the woman through whom Abram will bear a child, as she herself is barren. Before giving Hagar to Abram, Sarai "took" Hagar and consoled her, "You are a daughter of kings, and it may not appear seemly for you to marry an old man, especially when you will be only his concubine. Still it is a true honor for you to be the wife of such a great man. He is a holy person...you are very fortunate to be his wife."⁴⁹ Culi goes on to teach us that after Abram takes Hagar, friction develops between the two women on account of Hagar's disrespect for Sarai. She in fact announces publicly, "My mistress Sarai is not as good as she seems to be. You consider her a saint, but this is not the case. Look how many years she has been married to Abram without having any children. I, on the other hand, have become pregnant my very first night with Abram."⁵⁰ As we learned earlier, Sarai, the true saint, remained modest and did not engage her. She instead, as a good wife should, took her troubles to Abram in private. Culi is careful to point out that Sarai never once condemns Hagar publicly. Sarai is so distressed that she unconsciously curses Hagar. Abram himself, also condemns Hagar when he states, "She is so disrespectful she deserves to be a slave."⁵¹ Once again, we are taught of Sarai's merit. She does not punish Hagar in any way until she has

⁴⁸ ML Genesis 12:20

⁴⁹ ML Genesis 16:3

⁵⁰ ML Genesis 16:4

⁵¹ ML Genesis 16:6

discussed things with Abram and he advises her to move forward. It is only then we are told that Sarai punishes Hagar by beating her.

Later, after the birth of Isaac, Culi tells us that Sarah sees Ishmael, Hagar's son, committing three of the worst possible sins: adultery, idolatry, and murder.⁵² In addition, Sarah becomes concerned that Ishmael and his plotting mother Hagar are attempting to steal Isaac's inheritance. Finally, Sarah becomes concerned that Isaac, her perfect son, would learn some of Ishmael's "evil ways." Thus Sarah asks Abraham to send Ishmael and his perfidious mother away. Abraham is distressed, but Culi relates that God speaks to him, saying, "You should listen to Sarah, since in prophecy she is on a higher level than you. Isaac alone shall be considered your son."⁵³ So Hagar and Ishmael are forced to leave. As they wander in the desert, Hagar deserts Ishmael who begins to die of dehydration. Culi then teaches us that Ishmael is saved from death because of his own merit, not the merit of his mother Hagar, who also prays for him. In fact Culi writes,

Actually, Hagar could have seen the well before the angel came and spoke to her. But Hagar saw how much Abraham must have hated Ishmael, to drive him away with nothing but bread and water. Out of frustration, she threw him under a bush and said, "Why should I have more pity on him than his father?" She was ready to abandon her dying son in the desert, and run away and marry another man. "Let Abraham take care of him..." The angel then appeared and comforted her, "You should take care of your son, since I will make of him a great nation."⁵⁴

Hagar is not only a terrible mother, but she appears to be opportunistic, only agreeing to save Ishmael because he will father a great nation, not simply because of the fact that he

⁵² ML Genesis 21:9

⁵³ ML Genesis 21:12-13

⁵⁴ ML Genesis 21:18-19

is her son. From this passage, Culi aptly demonstrates the differences between the selfless Sarah who thinks only of her family and never of her own personal feelings and Hagar who thinks only of herself.

This is not the end of Hagar's story. Culi soon teaches us that even the evil and wicked have a chance to be redeemed. Soon after Ishmael's life is saved, Hagar travels home with him to Egypt. There she marries him to an Egyptian woman and she returns to her old ways.⁵⁵ However, over time both she and Ishmael come to see the error of their ways. Hagar changes her name to "Keturah" and after Sarah's death is permitted to remarry Abraham by merit of her reformation and commitment to follow all that is moral and good.

Regarding Hagar, Culi has a very specific point of view. There are many pieces that he chooses to leave out of his Hagar narrative. For example, he purposefully does not quote the actual Bible when speaking of Hagar's treatment of Ishmael after they are cast forth from Abraham's camp. The translation of Genesis 21:15-16 is as follows:

The water from the skin was finished and she (Hagar) sent the lad under one of the bushes. Then she went and she sat opposite him, about the distance of a bowshot away. Then she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." She sat opposite him, and cried in a loud voice.

Thus we can clearly read that in the original text, Hagar shows great emotion in regard to Ishmael. She cries aloud at the sight of his death. In fact, other Midrash and commentaries such as *Bereshit Rabbah* remark particularly on Hagar's distress over Ishmael. Culi however, for his own purposes, chooses to ignore these interpretations.

⁵⁵ ML Genesis 21:20-21

They do not fit with his vision of Hagar as the counterpoint to Sarah, the saint and perfect wife. Hagar's redemption only comes later, after she repents and changes her life. Culi has a very particular agenda in his portrayal of Hagar. He teaches that even those that have strayed from the Jewish path of righteousness, like many Jews during Culi's time in Turkey, can return, live Jewish lives and ultimately find peace.

Culi's interpretation of Hagar and her story have yet another layer of meaning. Traditionally, the Rabbis view Ishmael as the forefather of Islam. Islam is the religion that is referred to when God prophesies that Ishmael will father a great nation. Hence, Hagar can be seen as the ultimate mother of Islam. From all of this, it is clear that Culi's discussion of Hagar in the *Me-Am Lo'ez* is a subtle polemic against Islam, the religion under which he lived. For example, after Isaac is born, Sarah sees Ishmael, committing three of the worst possible sins: adultery, idolatry, and murder. Thus we are taught that the father of Islam is an adulterer, an unbeliever and one of questionable morals. Hagar herself is portrayed as an evil woman who has no compunction about abandoning her dying son. Ultimately, Hagar is only redeemed when she rejects her "evil ways (Islam)" and follows the one true path "Judaism."

The Lesson of Sarah's Death

Sarah was not just a righteous woman, emblematic of the behavior of all Jewish women, but with her death, she once again demonstrates the Jewish values that Culi hopes to inculcate in the Turkish Jewish population. In the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, chapter *Chayei Sarah*, Culi paraphrases the popular Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni/Tanhuma*) of Satan who visits Sarah shortly after the Akedah. He tauntingly asks Sarah, "Where is your

husband?" "He went on a journey and he took his son with him." The Satan retorts, "You will never see your son again!" The saintly Sarah replies, "If that is God's will, so be it."⁵⁶ Once again, Culi idealizes the woman who trusts in God and her husband as the ultimate authority. Later, in an additional story about Satan (*Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*), we are taught that Sarah cries out in misery upon learning that Abraham has slain his son upon the altar. She then wanders throughout the hill country looking for her husband and son. The crafty Satan appears once again only to inform Sarah that Isaac is still alive. Overcome with emotion, Sarah goes into shock and dies.⁵⁷ However, Culi is quick to quote the *Yafeh Toar* when he points out,

The Holy One blessed be he, sits and checks on and completes the years of the righteous on a daily and monthly basis. Like the Rabbis explained in the first chapter of *Kiddushin*, explaining the verse, "I shall fulfill all your days." I, God, just fulfill everyday, there are no blanks. The years of the righteous are not cut down. But the years which God has apportioned are fully fulfilled daily and monthly. Even though it says in this *parasha* that her days were full. It is not contradiction...even though her end had come, the proximate cause for her death was her anguish. And this was decreed upon her. And others say the angel of death was looking for a reason to take her soul. And if he didn't have an excuse he wouldn't have been able to bring her to her end.⁵⁸

Even at her very end, Sarah is given a righteous and deserving death as befits her saintly status during her lifetime. She spends no more or less time on this earth than she deserves.

⁵⁶ ML Genesis 22:5-8

⁵⁷ ML Genesis 23:1

⁵⁸ Genesis 23:1, *Yafeh Toar*

Summary

Sarah, the first biblical matriarch, lives a very full and complete life. Although we know nothing of her early years, we are taught that although she remained barren through most of her marriage, she was deserving of her husband's respect. As her own person, Sarah was found worthy of the gift of prophecy and decried by Culi as a saint. Sarah was a pious woman who was careful to pray to God and observe the commandments (i.e. she always recited the Grace over Meals). On the other hand, Culi describes Abraham as a man who is not as gifted in prophecy as his wife. In fact, although he is a saint, he is not as saintly as Sarah. Unlike other rabbinic traditions, Culi does not condemn Sarah for her treatment of Hagar. Hagar was an evil woman, who did not live a righteous life. Therefore, she was deserving of the punishment she was to receive. Sarah, like a good wife, although provoked by this evil woman, remained modest and never acted without her husband's permission or approval.

Although Culi clearly maintains traditional views of women as wives and mothers and could never be called a feminist, he is very careful to afford women status as human beings. A good Jewish husband cannot beat his wife (unless she insults his own mother). Culi insists that if a man's wife is short, he must "bend over and whisper to her." Hence, so long as a woman conforms and does what is expected of her, she deserves to be treated with respect by her husband. Additionally, Culi clearly states that women have the ability to pray for themselves and fulfill particular commandments in their own right. In truth, the sanctity of a woman's home depended on her ability to properly fulfill the commandments. In many ways, Culi allowed women a great deal of autonomy within very particular social strictures. Muslim women were not afforded the same treatment

and respect from the men of their milieu. Although Culi's views may seem antiquated to our modern sensibilities, through the archetype of the matriarch Sarah, Culi progressively advocates that women were deserving of respect and were people in their own right.

V. The Extraordinary Rebecca

Just as the *Me-Am Lo'ez* views the biblical character of Sarah as the archetype for Jewish womanhood, the character of Rebecca is also utilized as a teaching tool. However, Rebecca's biblical narrative varies from that of Sarah, thus, Culi perceives her purpose to be quite different. The late Ottoman period was a time of great upheaval for Judaism. As was stated earlier, many Jews were choosing to live secular lives or to convert to Islam. The break down of Jewish communal values especially among the upper class, is attested to in the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Montagu visited Turkey in 1717 and wrote a great many letters home documenting Jewish as well as secular Turkish life. Lady Montagu's letters suggest that adultery and "loose" social mores was a widespread phenomenon among the upper classes of Ottoman society in Culi's day.⁵⁹ The common occurrence of childhood marriages, arranged by parents for social and economic reasons, may have added to the frequency of adultery in the Jewish community as well as it did in the general one.⁶⁰ Hence, one goal of the *Me-Am Lo'ez* is to teach Jews about the importance of the perpetuation of the Jewish people and Jewish family life as defined by Halachah. Not only did traditional Judaism view adultery as immoral, but many including Culi were concerned about the continuation of the Jewish line of descent (only valid through a fully Jewish mother). Culi uses the character of Rebecca and her "dynastic" marriage to teach about the boundaries of proper Jewish marriage protocol and behavior.

⁵⁹ Montagu, Mary Wortley. The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Edited by Robert Halsband (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Vol. 1, 1708-1720. 328.

⁶⁰ Talve, Susan. "Images of Women in the *Me-Am Lo'ez*" (Rabbinic Thesis., Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981), 83.

Choosing A Spouse

At the very outset of the "Rebecca narrative," in Genesis 24:2-4, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* is quick to point out, "This entire section teaches us how careful a person must be when choosing a spouse. One who marries into a family of questionable background is like one who plows the entire world and then sows salt."⁶¹ Culi even goes so far as to say that when one marries a person of blemished background, "his action blemishes the entire family line. The Divine Presence only rests upon families with an unambiguous background, without any blemish." With these statements, Culi sets the scene for the marriage of Isaac. Isaac, Abraham's treasured son is to be the first link in the chain of a nation ordained by God, the line that will eventually produce the Messiah. Hence, it is critical that Isaac marries a woman of unquestionable background. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* goes on to teach, "[An unblemished background] is particularly important with regard to the mother of one's children, who is home and teaches them how to be good Jews." With this, we are then introduced to the Biblical text in which Abraham sends Eliezer, his servant, to his family in Haran to find a wife for Isaac, rather than to the neighboring Canaanites. Culi explains Abraham's logic by stating, "It is always best to marry someone whose family is known to one's parents. One should not marry into a family living in distant city even if they have a good reputation. It is not advisable to depend on reputation alone, since an unworthy person can gain a good reputation. Abraham therefore sent Eliezer to his own relatives in Haran."⁶²

An Unblemished Woman. Who Can Find?

⁶¹ Culi quotes here from the Talmud, Kiddushin 70a

⁶² Culi quotes here from the *Yafeh Toar*, 354.

With his marital advice dispensed with, Culi then focuses on the Biblical text and establishing Rebecca's credentials as the proper woman, fit to be the wife of saintly Isaac. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* once again makes clear, that the right wife for Isaac must be a woman unblemished, with no deformity. This is demonstrated when Eliezer arrives at the well in Haran. Eliezer devises a test in which the right mate for Isaac will offer to provide himself and his camels with water. Culi then teaches,

Eliezer made a big mistake in making use of such a sign. He should not have said that the first girl to give him the proper answer would be Isaac's bride. Obviously, there was no danger that the girl would turn out to be a bastard or slave. God would not have let such a girl marry Isaac; in heaven, righteous and wicked are not mixed. Still, the first girl could have had a wooden leg, or she could have had beautiful but sightless eyes.⁶³

Thus we learn, that a mother of the Jewish people must be without deformity. If she does not fulfill this basic criteria, she must immediately be eliminated as the proper wife for a God-fearing Jewish man.

A Virgin Bride

Of course, Rebecca was not just a woman with a healthy body and visage, as the Bible states, "the girl was extremely good looking – a virgin – no man had known her."⁶⁴ Culi elaborates on this theme,

Rebecca was such a saint that her parents had never even tried to make a match for her. Normally, when there is a daughter in a family, her parents are constantly trying to match her up. But Rebecca was so virtuous that none of the immoral people in the area wanted to have anything to do with her.⁶⁵

⁶³ ML Genesis 24:11-14, also in *Yafeh Toar*, 360.

⁶⁴ Genesis 24: 16

⁶⁵ ML Genesis 24:16

From this, it is clear that Culi is attempting to impress the importance of virginity and purity upon his readers. In a society where adultery and loose sexual morays were rampant, Culi teaches that a woman should come to her marriage as an untouched virgin. Only in this way, could the unblemished nature of the Jewish people be continued. Rebecca, a woman so saintly that no one in her community was fit to marry with her, was the epitome of Culi's ideal Jewish woman. Culi goes on to expound on the exact level of depravity in Haran,

Her (Rebecca's) neighbors were so immoral they could only look upon her as a sex object; therefore none of them knew what a saint she actually was. On high, however her true nature was well known; it was recognized that she was destined to become one of the Matriarchs. The Torah thus says, "no man knew her." No man knew her true exalted nature.⁶⁶

Thus Culi teaches that God always knows and rewards those who live virtuously. Although the neighborhood did not recognize Rebecca for who she was, God would always know and reward accordingly.

Fate Intervenes – the Miracle of Water

The Biblical narrative of Rebecca continues with the second half of Genesis 24, verse 16, "The girl went down, filled up her jug, and came up again." Here the *Me-Am Lo'ez* draws upon the text *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, teaching us that Rebecca was Bethuel's daughter and from a family of great wealth. She had many servants and did not normally go out to draw water. However, fate saw to it, that Rebecca drew water that day from the well. The message to be inferred here, is that a proper Jewish woman might be one of great wealth, but she should not be afraid to get her hands dirty in the ordering and

⁶⁶ ML Genesis 24:16

maintenance of her household. If she worked hard for the betterment of her family, fate would reward her. The role of fate in this narrative continues to be important as Culi then comments on the role of the water during Rebecca's encounter with Eliezer.

When Rebecca arrived (to draw water) water began to gush out of the spring...and rising to greet her. When Eliezer saw that the water rose to prevent her from going to the trouble to climb down the stairs [to reach the water], he realized that this girl was an unusual saint.

Once again, God's hand in the dynastic match between Rebecca and Isaac is clear. Even a fool -- and Eliezer was not a fool -- would be able to determine that Rebecca was the woman ordained for Isaac. The text Culi bases this teaching upon is *Bereshit Rabbah*.

Here, the significance of the well water is also emphasized,

All women went down and drew water from the well, whereas for her the water ascended as soon as it saw her. Said the Holy One Blessed Be He, to her: Thou hast provided a token for thy descendants: as the water ascended immediately it saw thee, so will it be for thy descendants: as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately rise; thus it is written, Then sang Israel this song: Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it. (Num. XXI, 17)

Thus, the incident at the well reflects the miracles God will continue to bestow upon the people of Israel, so long as they maintain the chain of tradition established by the dynasty of the matriarchs and patriarchs.

Far Above Rubies

In Culi's time, it was clear that material wealth went along with sexual immorality and loose values. Hence, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* uses Rebecca to once again demonstrate the depravity oftentimes derived from material wealth. Upon realizing in Genesis 24, verses

22 and 23 that Rebecca is the woman ordained for Isaac, Eliezer rewards her with jewelry. Culi is quick to point out,

Obviously, for someone as wealthy as Abraham, these gifts were mere trifles. Rebecca was given modest gifts indicating that she should marry Isaac even if he were poor. This teaches that a man should not marry a woman who has too strong a liking for jewelry and precious stones. [A girl who pays more attention to her engagement ring than to the character of the man who gives it to her is an unworthy bride.]

So, if jewels are a vice to be avoided, why did Eliezer reward Rebecca with jewelry in the first place? These gifts alluded to the fact that Rebecca's descendants would be the ones to receive the Torah. As the *Me-Am Lo'ez* quotes from the commentator Rashi:

Half a shekel. This is an allusion to the shekels of Israel, half a shekel each head. And two bracelets. This is an allusion to the two tablets of Revelation which were joined. Of ten of gold and their weight. This is an allusion to the Ten Commandments that were in them.

Rebecca the Modest Maiden

Rebecca was not just a young woman of intact virtue, but as the *Me-Am Lo'ez* describes her, she was also exceedingly modest; an attribute that many upper class Ottoman-Jewish women did not appear to possess as they ran from man to man and bed to bed. The Torah tells us, "[When Rebecca gave Eliezer] the water [to drink], she quickly lowered her jug to her hand and let him drink."⁶⁷ Culi explains this strange action by stating that the normal practice was to carry a jug on one's shoulder. However, if Rebecca had let Eliezer drink from the jug on her shoulder, he would have had to stand extremely close to her and their faces would have been in close proximity. Since Rebecca was such a modest young woman, she lowered the jug so Eliezer could drink without

⁶⁷ Genesis 24:18

standing too near her person. As Culi continues to explain, Rebecca's action of lowering her jug did not go unnoticed by Eliezer. Another example of Rebecca's modesty takes place during her first meeting with Isaac. Upon being told that the man walking towards her is her bridegroom, she immediately covers her face with a veil.⁶⁸ From all of this, Culi explains that a young woman of marriageable age should not just be physically pure, but she must also be of modest and pure character. In his society of questionable mores and values, Culi advocates that the young should be kept innocent – and sexual activity, especially for woman, should take place only within the confines of a good and true Jewish marriage.

An Intelligent Woman. Who Can Find?

Culi goes out of his way to comment upon the fact that Rebecca was not only modest and kind, but she was also intelligent. This is the one attribute Culi does not also associate with the earlier matriarch Sarah; not once does Culi refer to Sarah as intelligent. This is perhaps related to the role that Rebecca will play later in the biblical text when she manipulates her son Jacob into stealing the birthright blessing from his brother Esau. Although we are told that Rebecca's actions were "fate" and "ordained by God," they did necessitate wile and cunning. It is not entirely clear if intelligence was an attribute Culi truly valued in Jewish women. He is always careful to refer to Rebecca as "quite intelligent" or her intelligence as "subtle," but, at the same time, it is significant that he includes a discussion of her intelligence at all in his commentary. For example, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* states,

⁶⁸ Genesis 24:65

Eliezer was able to determine that Rebecca was...quite intelligent. When she offered water to Eliezer, she was in a quandary as to what to do. What if this stranger had a serious contagious diseases? He had put the jug to his lips; now all the water in it would be contaminated...If she were to spill the water out [of the jug], it would embarrass him, since it would appear that she could not stomach using water after he had tasted it. She immediately came up with an idea. She would offer to give his camels all the water they could drink, spilling water into the trough. Still, she was concerned that he would demure and tell her that he had already watered his animals. The Torah therefore says that, "she quickly emptied her jug into the trough." (24:20)⁶⁹

Culi also describes another marker of Rebecca's intelligence:

In Rebecca, Eliezer also noted another subtle quality of intelligence. Rebecca was sensitive enough not to reply [regarding his need for water] in such a manner as to put him on the same level as the camels. Instead, she said, "Drink *my lord*." She then waited for him to finish drinking, whereupon she then agreed to draw water for the camels.⁷⁰

Rebecca, it is also accounted by Culi, possessed social acumen/intelligence; she could manage tricky social situations. This is demonstrated by various examples: Rebecca's handling of Eliezer's gifts (jewelry), her management of accommodations for Eliezer in her parent's home and her decision to accompany Eliezer immediately to Canaan to marry Isaac.⁷¹ The *Me-Am Lo'ez* even goes so far, in one very limited instance, as to call Rebecca "Extremely intelligent...We see this from her rapid understanding of Eliezer's intentions [to bring her back to Canaan and Isaac without delay]."⁷²

Bethuel Foiled

⁶⁹ ML Genesis 24:26

⁷⁰ ML Genesis 24:26

⁷¹ ML Genesis 24:28 and ML Genesis 24:61

⁷² ML Genesis 25:20

Both the Bible and Culi state clearly that Rebecca's father, Bethuel, and her brother, Laban, were evil men bent on delaying God's marriage plans. In fact, outrageously, Culi quotes from *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Bereshit Rabbah*, teaching the reader:

Bethuel was liege of that area. One of his privileges was that of *droit de signior*, the right to take a new bride before her husband. People might complain, but there was nothing they could do. Now, however, when Rebecca was married, the people were saying, "If Bethuel performs *droit de signior* with Rebecca, it would be fair. But if he does not, we will kill him, together with Eliezer and Rebecca." In order to avoid this, he (Bethuel) was killed.⁷³ According to another opinion, Bethuel would not give his consent for Rebecca to leave. He said, "Let Isaac come and marry her here." He therefore died of a sudden infection that night.⁷⁴

Not only of course, does this passage give new meaning to the Hebrew name "Bethuel," but Culi is once again demonstrating that the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca was ordained by God. Nothing would be allowed to stop the perpetuation of the dynasty that would give birth to the Jewish people, not even Rebecca's father. Instead, characters that stood in the way of God's plan were dispensed with, with very little evident concern on the part of the primary characters of the narrative.

Like Father Like Son

Earlier on in Genesis, Culi establishes Abraham and Sarah as the prototypes for all righteous Jewish men and women. If these two characters are the prototypes, then it follows that their offspring must continue on in their footsteps, by establishing a dynastic heritage based upon their values and teachings. Thus, Ginzberg in *Legends of the Jews*, as quoted from the *Zohar I, 133a* and *Tanhuma*, teaches us that Isaac was the counterpart of his father, Abraham, in body and soul. He resembled him in every particular – in

⁷³ ML Genesis 24:54 and *Yalkut Shimoni*

⁷⁴ ML Genesis 24:54 and *Bereshit Rabbah*

beauty, wisdom, strength, wealth and noble deeds. It is also said that through Isaac these virtues came to Jacob, and through him to Joseph.⁷⁵ Here we see the pattern of the generations established and the values of the Jewish people perpetuated. If it is necessary for Isaac to follow the prototype established by his father, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* is also careful to point out just how much Rebecca resembled Sarah. As Culi quotes from *Bereshit Rabbah*:

You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent (signifying the divine presence); when she died, that cloud disappeared; but when Rebecca came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that liberality ceased; but when Rebecca came, that openhandedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased, but when Rebecca came, they returned. And so when he saw her following in his mother's footsteps, separating her hallah in cleanness and handling her dough in cleanness, straightway, and Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother.⁷⁶

In this passage, Culi harkens back to other commentators who also liken Rebecca to Sarah in an even more stark fashion. Rashi writes, "He brought her into the tent and behold, she was Sarah his mother." In the *Zohar I, 133a* and *Midrash HaGadol I, 389*, we read, "For she (Rebecca) was the counterpart of Sarah in person and in spirit." Just as Isaac is Abraham's counterpoint and therefore worthy to sire the next generation, Rebecca as Sarah's counterpoint, is equally as worthy. It is in this spirit, that Culi encourages Turkish Jews to remember their forebears and treat their marriages and the Jewish line of descent with the respect he thinks it deserves.

⁷⁵ Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1947).

⁷⁶ ML Genesis 24:67 and *Bereshit Rabbah*

The Next Generation

Once Rebecca and Isaac are safely married, the next step in the line of tradition is the creation of a new generation. In regard to infertility and a miraculous birth ordained by God, Isaac and Rebecca once again follow in the footsteps of their esteemed forebears. As Culi explains, "Although Isaac and Rebecca were both perfect saints, God did not allow them to have children. She was as barren as a stone."⁷⁷ So what did they do? The *Me-Am Lo'ez* quotes *Bereshit Rabbah*,

They prayed. Isaac pleaded to God opposite his wife. He stood in this corner and prayed, and she stood in the other corner and prayed. And He (God) let himself be entreated of him (Isaac), but not of her (Rebecca), for the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person is superior to the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a wicked person; therefore He let himself be entreated of him, but not of her.

With the prayer of Isaac, God grants the couple's request, and Rebecca becomes pregnant with twins. It is important to point out that Rebecca's pregnancy is not due to Rebecca's own merit -- but rather the merit of Isaac -- the son of the progenitor of the Jewish dynasty -- Abraham. Hence, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* teaches, that men as well as woman in Turkish society, bore the responsibility to ensure that children were born under circumstances proscribed by Halachah. God does not just notice the actions of woman -- but of men as well and also rewards them accordingly.

Rebecca the Prophet?

Although Rebecca was chosen by God to be a mother of the Jewish people, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* makes very clear, that she does not have the same status and importance as Sarah. From this, it can be derived that all women to come after Sarah, are significant, but

⁷⁷ ML Genesis 25:21

can never bear the same status. Culi states very clearly at points in Genesis (see the chapter on Sarah in this thesis) that Sarah was a prophet who actually spoke with God. However, he quickly dispels any conjecture that Rebecca might have been granted the same privilege. Genesis 25:23 tells us, "The children clashed inside of her, and she (Rebecca) said "If this is the way it is, why should I go on?" She went to inquire of God. God said to her, "Two nations are in your womb..." Clearly, the Biblical account tells of Rebecca and her conversation with God. However, Culi explains, "Rebecca went to the academy of Shem, son of Noah, to inquire how these unborn children would turn out...Shem understood all that was happening through divine inspiration, and gave Rebecca God's message."⁷⁸ Culi derives this theory from *Bereshit Rabbah*, "R. Judah and R. Simon and R. Johanan in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon said, The Holy One, Blessed be He, never engaged in speech with a woman save with that righteous woman (Sarah) and that too was due to a special cause." Thus, Culi can hardly allow for Rebecca to have a special conversation directly with God. This must be done through a medium.

Rebecca the Heroine; The Sum of a Matriarch

Near the end of Rebecca's narrative, the *Me-Am Lo 'ez* as well as other commentators teach about her greatest role as a matriarch; Rebecca alone, is held responsible for the perpetuation of the next generation of Jewish life. Genesis 27:11-12 teaches that after the birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau, Rebecca clearly favors her younger son, Jacob. As Culi derives once again from *Bereshit Rabbah*,

Rebecca was more clear sighted. She knew her sons as they really were, and therefore her love for Jacob was exceeding great. Abraham

⁷⁸ ML Genesis 25:22-23

agreed with her and he said to Rebecca, "My daughter, watch over my son Jacob, for he shall be in my stead on the earth and for a blessing in the midst of the children of men, and for the glory of the whole seed of Shem." He called for his grandson and in the presence of Rebecca he blessed him..."⁷⁹

Thus, with the blessing of Abraham, Rebecca denies the birthright blessing to her son Esau and instead encourages Jacob to deceive his father in order to receive it himself. When Jacob complains that this deception might bring a curse down upon his head, she holds strong and tells him,

Upon me shall be your curse, my son. If you fear, you should also fear my curse. If you do not heed me, you will be cursed for your disobedience. It is far from certain that your father will curse you... But if do not heed me, you will definitely be cursed.⁸⁰

This statement truly shows Rebecca's strength as a mother and leader of her people. Although most of the men in her life are weak – Bethuel and Laban are evil, Isaac never really has a voice, Esau is evil, and Jacob complains and worries – she never hesitates to act, even when faced with derision from her father, brother, husband or sons. The only man with whom she ever discovers real support is her father-in-law, Abraham. Rebecca does not allow herself to be cowed by anything or anyone. Although he often mitigates her dominance (i.e. he finds it hard to admit to her great cunning and intelligence), Culi does not stint in depicting Rebecca as a strong, powerful mother figure. Through this character portrait, Culi does indeed show a great deal of respect for women – so long as they remain in the traditional roles allotted to them. Rebecca does this and more; as the *Me-Am Lo'ez* teaches, Rebecca is a powerful role model for Jewish women, a buoy among the morass of a turbulent, decadent time.

⁷⁹ ML Genesis 27:11-12

⁸⁰ ML Genesis 27:13

VI. Leah and Rachel: Sisters and Enemies

Culi does not depict the Biblical figures of Rachel and Leah as actual women with personalities and life-stories, but rather as archetypes representing the growth and regeneration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The two women are not people so much as they are wombs that give birth to a nation. Hence, the various incidents in the Bible depicting these two figures are generally used by the *Me-Am Lo'ez* to predict the future, or to explain a greater significance for the Jewish people. Leah in particular, as we shall see, is viewed by Culi with great favor for her ability to give birth to sons, while Rachel, although the most beloved, is seen as ill favored and unlucky to only bear two children. However, although these women are constructs, Culi, in his usual manner, uses the example of their lives to demonstrate the proper "Jewish way" of living even until his own day.

The Birth of Rachel and Leah

Once again, similar to Rebecca, the birth of Rachel and Leah is pre-ordained and the marriages of the two sisters planned for the particular purpose of continuing the Israelite nation. As Culi writes, "When Jacob was fifty-six years old, he received word about Laban's wife, Dinah. Although she had been childless, she now had twin daughters. Upon hearing this news, Rebecca was elated."⁸¹ Rebecca was not only elated that her brother was now the father of children, but she was thrilled about the prospect of her sons marrying his two daughters. Originally as Culi quotes from Bava Batra 123a, "Rebecca

⁸¹ ML Genesis 26: 30-33

has two sons and Laban has two daughters: The older daughter will be married to the older son and the younger daughter will be married to the younger son."⁸²

Meeting at the Well

Despite the best hopes of the earlier generations, the marriage of Esau to Leah and Jacob to Rachel was not to be. After stealing the birthright and blessing from his brother, Jacob flees to his uncle Laban's house. There, at the village well, he meets Rachel and is immediately smitten. Culi writes, "Rachel is described as being beautiful and good-looking. She was so outstandingly beautiful, that she was often simply called 'the lovely one.'"⁸³ The *Me-Am Lo'ez* gives several more reasons for Jacob's infatuation. As quoted from *Bereshit Rabbah*, "

Come and see the difference between one environment and another! In the other place, (in Midian when Jethro's daughters came to water the flocks) there were seven, and the shepherds wished to assault them. Whereas here there was but one (Rachel), and no man touched her, which means those who live in the environments of those who fear Him, i.e. those who live in the environment of the righteous, are influenced by them.⁸⁴

From this we learn of Rachel's character. As was necessary for a matriarch, she was more righteous than the members of the community in which she lived. In fact, she was so righteous that she influenced those around her to also be God-fearing, good people.

Upon encountering Rachel at the well, Jacob kissed her and wept. From this, Culi teaches an important lesson about modesty. He states,

Jacob wept out loud because he had kissed Rachel publicly. This was not

⁸² ML Genesis 29:17

⁸³ ML Genesis 29:17

⁸⁴ ML Genesis 29:17, also *Bereshit Rabbah*

correct behavior. Men and women should not be unduly familiar with each other. A man should not gaze at a woman or even smell a flower that is in her hair. Our sages taught that it is forbidden for a man to kiss even his sister or cousin, since it is meaningless and foolish. A man should not even kiss his daughters and granddaughters, and a woman should not kiss her sons, unless they are young children. When they are mature it is forbidden.⁸⁵

Culi takes this opinion from *Bereshit Rabbah*, which teaches, "All kissing is indecent except in three cases: the kiss of high office, the kiss of reunion, and the kiss of parting."⁸⁶ All of this does lead one to wonder about the amount of kissing going on in Culi's day in the Ottoman Empire. Obviously he was distressed by the degree of physical contact between the sexes.

Culi offers another explanation for Jacob's weeping upon meeting Rachel for the first time. As he quotes Rashi, "He wept because he foresaw through Divine Inspiration that she would not be buried together with him. Another explanation: Because he came empty-handed. He thought: My grandfather's servant, Eliezer, had with him rings, bracelets and delicacies, whereas I have nothing with me."⁸⁷ In this instance, we once again see the divine hand in the marriage of Jacob and Rachel. God had meant this marriage to come about.

Marriage and Trickery

Culi teaches us, "The Torah forbids a man to marry two sisters, as it is written, 'You must not marry a woman in addition to her sister, to be a rival to her, having sexual relations with the second sister during the lifetime of the first' (Leviticus 18:18)." Despite

⁸⁵ ML Genesis 29:11

⁸⁶ *Bereshit Rabbah* on Genesis 29:11

⁸⁷ ML Genesis 29:11

the fact that there is a biblical prohibition, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* teaches that God ordained the marriage of Jacob to both Leah and Rachel. Culi explains, "Jacob told Laban: the only thing I want is your two daughters. God has granted me permission to marry them both, even though they are two sisters."⁸⁸ However, although the Biblical text makes it clear that Jacob wants to marry the younger daughter, Rachel, first, Culi explains the benefits of a marriage with Leah,

Rachel is called the younger one. She was called the younger one because Joseph and Saul, the two kings who would descend from her would not reign for very long. Leah, on the other hand, gave rise to King David and all the others kings of Judah, as well as such great men as Moses, Samuel and Isaiah. She is therefore called the older one. Her descendants would have lasting influence.⁸⁹

From this, we once again can see the true import of the characters of Rachel and Leah. According to the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, the women exist for the sole purpose of continuing the Jewish line. Culi is less interested in the character and story of the young women, then establishing the line of the Messiah that they will bear.

The Biblical text spends a good amount of time establishing just why Jacob would originally choose the younger sister over the elder. The Bible assumes that the fact that Leah's eyes are "soft" is a good enough explanation. On the other hand, Culi doesn't exactly see "soft" eyes as a negative. He uses this opportunity to once again explain why the marriage of Jacob and Leah was actually preordained. As he quotes from Bava Batra 123a:

For it is written, "and Leah's eyes were soft." What is the meaning of this word? If you will say that it means literally, tender/soft, that cannot

⁸⁸ ML Genesis 29:15

⁸⁹ ML Genesis 29: 16

be. Rather, R. Elazar said "tender" can be ascribed as a tribute to her, rather than a shortcoming! For she would overhear people at the crossroads saying, "Rebecca has two sons and Laban has two daughters: The older daughter will be married to the older son and the younger daughter to the younger son." And Leah would sit by the crossroads and ask passersby – "the older son, what is his behavior?" They would answer her: "He is an evil man who robs people." "The younger son – what is his behavior?" "He is a wholesome man, abiding in tents." And Leah would cry until her eyelashes fell out.⁹⁰

Hence, Leah would do anything to not have to marry an evil man, thus her deception of Jacob can be excused.

Jacob is very clear about requesting of Laban that Rachel and not Leah be his first wife. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* states,

I am agreeing to work for you seven years for your *younger* daughter Rachel. I don't want you later to bring me a girl from the street whose name is Rachel. I don't want you to change the name of your older daughter to Rachel. I know these tricks. Therefore I am stipulating that my agreement involves the Rachel who is your younger daughter.⁹¹

Jacob is careful to apply for Laban's youngest daughter in such clear terms, because once again he is terrified of invoking his elder brother, Esau's wrath. From Culi we learn,

Jacob wanted to marry Rachel first because people were saying that Leah was destined for Esau. He was afraid that if he married her, Esau would attack him, and complain, "Isn't it enough that you took my birthright and blessing. Do you also have to take my destined bride?"⁹²

Although Jacob stated very clearly that he wished to marry Rachel first, Culi suggests that Jacob himself was at least slightly aware of the substitution of Leah for Rachel at his wedding. During the ceremony itself, Culi explains that the townspeople sang a song

⁹⁰ ML Genesis 29:17

⁹¹ ML Genesis 29: 18

⁹² ML Genesis 29: 18

using the words "Hialeah, Hialeah (Here is Leah, Here is Leah)" pointing to the fact that the bride was Leah and not Rachel.⁹³ But Jacob went through with the marriage.

Rachel also helped to bring about Jacob's marriage to Leah. Although she loved Jacob, she did not want her sister to be embarrassed by Jacob's rejection. Hence, Culi states that Rachel gives Leah the secret passwords that tell Jacob that she is Rachel. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* even takes this a step further by stating, "Rachel actually sneaked into the bridal chamber. When Jacob spoke to Leah, Rachel replied so that he could not recognize Leah by her voice."⁹⁴ Jacob was deceived for the entire night.

In the morning, upon discovering his new bride was not Rachel but rather Leah, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* states, "Jacob says to her,

What you are is a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver!" "Is there a teacher without pupils," she retorted, "Did not your father call you Esau and you answered him?! So too you did call me and I answered you. Your example taught me that it is permissible to lie for a good cause."⁹⁵

From all of this we learn of Leah's strong personality. Her marriage to Jacob is preordained and Leah must teach Jacob of this fact.

Although the Bible states that Jacob hated Leah for her deception, Culi has a different opinion. How could Jacob hate a marriage that was ordained by God? Here we see the rabbis' distinct preference for the character of Leah over the character of Rachel. Leah is in truth the progenitor of a nation. She gives birth to six of the twelve tribes; hence the

⁹³ ML Genesis 29: 23

⁹⁴ ML Genesis 29: 24

⁹⁵ ML Genesis 29: 25

rabbis, if not the Bible, treat her with respect. The greatest goal a woman can have is to bear children. Thus Leah must be rewarded for her ability to do so. Culi himself, states many times that the goal of women should and must be motherhood. Thus Culi himself, is duty bound to honor Leah. Culi quotes from Bereshit Rabbah to explain the issue:

And the Lord saw that Leah was hated. All hated her: sea-travelers abused her, land-travelers abused her, and even the women who crushed grapes abused her, saying: "This Leah leads a double life. She pretends to be righteous, yet it is not so, for if she were so righteous, would she have deceived her sister? When the Patriarch Jacob saw how Leah had deceived him by pretending to be her sister, he determined to divorce her. But as soon as the Holy One, Blessed be He, visited her with children, he exclaimed, "Shall I divorce the mother of these children! Eventually he gave thanks for her." Everyone then admitted that Leah was a saint. If there was anything sinful about her marriage, she would have remained childless.⁹⁶

Not only was there nothing sinful about Leah's marriage; the *Me-Am Lo'ez* even teaches us that Leah conceived on the very first night of her marriage to Jacob. From this, Culi explains further, "Rachel was actually destined to have her son be the firstborn, but Leah preceded her with prayer."⁹⁷ Thus, it is Leah and not Rachel who becomes the mother of six sons.

The Concubines

The next section of the *Me-Am Lo'ez* depicts the birthing of children by Leah, Rachel and the concubines Bilhah and Zilpah. Very little is said about the actual narratives of these four women, in particular the two concubines. Culi is much more interested in establishing the line of descent. However, we do learn that "Bilhah and Zilpah were Laban's daughters from his concubines. Leah and Rachel were daughters from his wife.

⁹⁶ ML Genesis 29: 31, *Bereshit Rabbah*

⁹⁷ ML Genesis 29: 31

Bilhah and Zilpah were treated like servants, although they were sisters. The concubines were also given to Jacob."⁹⁸ It is significant that the concubines were also daughters of Laban. They too came from the line of Abraham and were not of different blood. Hence, they as well as Rachel and Leah were able to bear sons that would become the twelve tribes and part of the line of Jewish descent.

The Bearing of Twelve Sons

Culi spends a great deal of time explaining the etymology of the names of the twelve tribes. The first son to be born is Reuben. Leah soon goes on to give birth to three more sons. At this time, Culi writes,

Leah knew that Jacob had four wives and was destined to have twelve sons. According to this, her rightful share was three sons. But now that she had a fourth son, God had given her more than her due. This was a far greater divine kindness than even the fact that she had had children before Rachel. She therefore felt obligated to thank God in a special way.⁹⁹

In fact, Culi teaches, "The Talmud notes that since the time of creation no one had thanked God until Leah did so." Once again, we see a marked rabbinic preference for Leah over Rachel. In fact, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* points out that Rachel is jealous of Leah for her good fortune. Culi himself is torn about Rachel. In one place he states, "Some say that Rachel acted like a spoiled wife."¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, he also writes, "Saints are not jealous of others. But when it comes to spiritual matters, it is good to be jealous. Rachel was jealous of Leah's good deeds. She said, "Leah must have done much more

⁹⁸ ML Genesis 29: 16

⁹⁹ ML Genesis 29: 35

¹⁰⁰ ML Genesis 30: 2

good than I. I am still childless, while she has four sons.”¹⁰¹ Culi then questions, “Is jealousy prohibited? Envy of another’s attributes is not only permitted, but even preferable, because it inspires one’s own improvement.” Thus, by envying Leah’s ability to bear sons, Rachel is not committing a sin. She is merely trying to improve herself enough that she too, will be worthy of bearing sons. This incident regarding jealousy is indicative of Culi’s time period. The eighteenth century Ottoman Empire was a place of great wealth and even greater poverty. As many Jews lived in degraded circumstances, Culi uses Rachel as an example for people to follow. As he teaches, no one should be jealous of another’s wealth and/or material possessions. Instead, each person should turn their mind to matters of the spirit and behavior.

Finally, Rachel can stand it no more. She goes to her husband and begs him to pray that God will give her children. “‘If you don’t pray for me, I’ll die,’ she said to Jacob. She assumed that Jacob loved her so much that he would put on sackcloth and fast for days on end so that she would have children.”¹⁰² Much to Rachel’s surprise, Jacob, like Culi, has no patience for Rachel’s histrionics. Enraged by Rachel’s threats, Jacob loses his temper, as Culi quoting from Rashi states, “Who has withheld from you? You tell me to act as did my father. I am not – my situation is not like my father. My father had no children whereas I have children. It is from you that He has withheld children. Not from me.”¹⁰³ Although Culi also evinces very little patience for Rachel, he teaches, “A saint should not lose his temper even when he has good reason. Certainly not for something as

¹⁰¹ ML Genesis 30: 2

¹⁰² ML Genesis 30: 2

¹⁰³ ML Genesis 30: 2

trivial as this." From all of this, we once again learn that the ability to bear children is woman's most important function. A woman who is childless lives in limbo, in a place akin to death. Just as Culi explains: "Four are considered dead: 1. A blind man. 2. One who has lost his money; He feels worse than a beggar. 3. A leper, since he cannot associate with other people. 4. One who has no children. Thus Rachel said to Jacob, 'Pray that God will give me children. If not, I will be considered dead.'"¹⁰⁴

Rachel then attempts to make up for her past sins so she will bear a child. First, she gives Bilhah to Jacob. Culi quotes from Rashi, stating,

Rachel said to Jacob, "Your grandfather Abraham had children from Hagar, yet he girded his loins, he interceded on behalf of Sarah. He prayed for her." Jacob answered her, "My grandmother Sarah, brought a rival-wife into her house." She thereupon responded, "If that is what prevents my having children, here is my handmaid....and I too will have a son through her as did Sarah."¹⁰⁵

Although Bilhah conceives and gives birth to two sons, Rachel still remains childless.

To Gain One Must Lose

In Genesis 30:16, Jacob comes in from the field, and Leah goes to meet him. At this time she requests his presence in her tent that evening. In general, Culi is scathing about Leah's behavior.

If a woman verbally asks her husband to have intercourse with her, she is considered shameless. If she does not actually ask, but tries in other ways to get her husband to pay attention to her, making herself beautiful so that he will not think of other women, she will be rewarded with pious, scholarly children, just as was Leah. In truth, Elohim perceived Leah's wish, not as wanton, but because she desired and sought to increase the

¹⁰⁴ ML Genesis 30: 1

¹⁰⁵ ML Genesis 30: 3-6

number of tribes.¹⁰⁶

From this we learn that perhaps women in the Ottoman period were not very subtle about expressing their sexual needs. Culi decries this behavior even in a faultless matriarch. Of course, the Bible is much more lenient as Leah is rewarded for her behavior with yet another pregnancy.

Finally, after Leah's new pregnancy, Rachel had really had enough. One day, when Reuben, Leah's son brings her mandrakes, Rachel makes a strange and desperate request. As Culi quotes from *Bereshit Rabbah*,

Rachel said to Leah, "Give me I pray thee of your son's mandrakes." Leah answered: You want to ingratiate yourself with Jacob at my expense! R. Simeon taught: Because she, Rachel, treated Jacob so slightly, she was not buried together with him. Each sister lost by the transaction but each gained. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained the tribes and the birthright, while Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the tribes and the birthright. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: The one lost mandrakes and gained two tribes and the privilege of burial with him; while Rachel gained mandrakes and lost the tribes and burial with him.¹⁰⁷

Thus Leah becomes pregnant with her sixth son. But this is not Leah's last pregnancy.

Finding herself pregnant yet again, Culi teaches us from Talmudic tractate *Berachot* 60a:

Leah stated, "Twelve tribes are destined to emerge from Jacob. Six have already emerged from me and four from the maidservants. That is ten. If this one, that I am now pregnant with is a male, my sister Rachel will not even be like one of the maidservants." Immediately her fetus was transformed into a female, as it says, and she called her name Dinah.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ ML Genesis 30: 16

¹⁰⁷ ML Genesis 30: 17, 18, *Bereshit Rabbah*

¹⁰⁸ ML Genesis 30: 21

Rachel is Pregnant!

The *Me-Am Lo'ez* writes, "On Rosh Hashanah it was decreed in the heavenly academy that Rachel's prayers be answered."¹⁰⁹ Finally, after years of praying and waiting, and the incident with the mandrakes, Rachel becomes pregnant. Culi has several explanations for this phenomenon. Most importantly, he teaches,

Rachel had her own merit for giving Leah the secret sign and sparing her humiliation. Through many prayers was Rachel remembered. First, for her own sake. Also for the sake of her sister. And God hearkened to her – for Jacob's sake. And he opened her womb – for the sake of the matriarchs... What did He remember in her favor? Her silence on her sister's behalf. When Leah was being given to him, she knew it, yet was silent. Also because she brought Bilhah into her home and gave her to Jacob.¹¹⁰

In a moment of humor, Culi also claims Rachel's pregnancy was for another purpose.

"As long as a woman has no child, she has no one to blame for her faults. Once she has a child she can blame it on him. For example: Who broke this vessel? Your child! Who ate these figs? Your child!"¹¹¹ Hence, Rachel needed to have a child to have someone to blame for all of her problems. However, in the end, the birth of Joseph was the cause of great rejoicing. In truth, as Culi explains, Rachel's pregnancy was the result of the power of the matriarchs: "Now all the wives of Jacob: Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, united their prayers with the prayer of Jacob and together they besought God to remove the curse of barrenness from Rachel, and she conceived."¹¹² From this we learn from the *Me-Am Lo'ez* that perhaps barrenness can be attributed to an improper amount of prayer and

¹⁰⁹ ML Genesis 30: 22

¹¹⁰ ML Genesis 30: 22

¹¹¹ ML Genesis 30: 23, 24

¹¹² ML Genesis 30: 22

unrepented sin. Once the prayer is proper and the sin is forgiven, nothing can stand in the way of pregnancy.

Culi also takes the moment of Rachel's pregnancy to explain more about how barren women should pray for children. He writes,

If a woman wishes to pray for children, she should do so on the night that she immerses in the mikvah. This is the first night that she is allowed to be intimate with her husband. For the next three days, she should pray that she should be impregnated. This usually occurs within three days of intercourse. If she wants a son, she can pray for one during the first forty days of her pregnancy. Until then the sex of the child is not detectable. After that however, prayer is useless. Not everyone is like Rachel and Leah who can change the course of nature through their prayers.¹¹³

From all of this elaborate ritual, it appears that barrenness was just as much of a serious issue in Culi's day, as it was in the time of the Bible. Hence we can see just why Rachel is a character that has resonated deeply with women throughout history. Her hopes and dreams were similar to many other Jewish women who were taught by men like Culi that a barren woman was akin to one dead.

Continuation of the Line

The Biblical narrative of the patriarchs and matriarchs ends with Jacob. However, Culi is quick to point out the line of descent after the death of Jacob. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* states,

In a period of seven years, Jacob had twenty-three children. Each of his eleven sons had a twin sister. Including Dinah, there were twenty-three. Twin sisters were born to each son since there was no one else for Jacob's sons to marry. Of course, the sons did not marry their twin sisters; Reuben married Dan's sister, and so on. If siblings are only half sisters from the same father, the marriage is permitted. Joseph was born without a twin sister. Hence, Joseph married Dinah's daughter.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ ML Genesis 30: 21

Thus we learn, that is of the utmost importance to Culi that the line of Jewish descent not be marred by outside blood. It is even permissible for half-siblings to marry, if it continues the unbroken chain. In Ottoman society in which marriages between Jewish and Christian elite were commonplace, Culi even teaches, it is preferable to marry a half-sibling, than to marry outside of Judaism.

Leaving Laban's House

After twenty years, when Jacob determines it is time to return home, his wives stand with him. As Culi explains, Rachel tells Jacob, "We don't have second thoughts about leaving with you. We never had any good whatever from our father."¹¹⁵ Once again, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* uses Rachel's speech to express a dislike for Jacob's "favorite" wife. As Culi quotes from Bereshit Rabbah, "Why did Rachel die first? Because (in the incident above) she spoke before her elder sister."¹¹⁶ In her position as second wife, Rachel should not have been so bold as to speak before the head wife. From this, we learn something about the relationships between women in Ottoman times. Ottoman Jews of the non-Ashkenazic variety, were not prohibited from polygamy. Many men had several wives. However, Culi makes clear that there is a distinct order and manner in which wives should be governed. In all things, the first wife – the head wife – must be obeyed. She should speak for all women of the household. In this instance, Culi shows disdain for women who violate this precept and speak out of turn.

¹¹⁴ ML Genesis 30: 23, 24

¹¹⁵ ML Genesis 31: 14-16

¹¹⁶ ML Genesis 31: 14-16

Stealing the Teraphim

We learn in Genesis 31:19, "Rachel stole the fetishes that belonged to her father." Culi teaches that Rachel steals the *teraphim* for several important reasons. As he derives from Rashi, "She intended to remove her father from idol worship."¹¹⁷ Culi also quotes from *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*: "Rachel stole them so that they should not tell Laban that Jacob had fled."¹¹⁸ Thus, Rachel's purpose was a noble one. However, at the same time, she is punished for her thievery. Unaware that Rachel has stolen the *teraphim*, Jacob vows to Laban, (as quoted by Culi) "Anyone who has stolen the *teraphim* shall die before his proper time; And the utterance of a righteous person is like the speech from the mouth of an angel, and thus Rachel was condemned to die."¹¹⁹ Culi continues and elaborates about the reasons for Rachel's premature death,

God does not overlook even the slightest wrong. Rachel committed a sin when Jacob called Rachel and Leah out to the field to consult with them. Rachel replied before Leah. Rachel should have shown Leah more respect. Also, Rachel was being punished for stealing the *teraphim*.¹²⁰

The Death of Rachel

Culi uses the death of Rachel in childbirth to teach a powerful lesson to all women. In doing so, he once again demonstrates his general disdain for the character of Rachel. Culi writes,

There are three sins that can cause a woman to die in childbirth. As quoted from the Mishnah, Shabbat 31b they are: 1. Not being too careful with the laws of *Niddah*. 2. Not being careful with regard to the taking of challah. And 3. Not being careful to light the Shabbat candles. In addition,

¹¹⁷ ML Genesis 31: 19

¹¹⁸ ML Genesis 31:19

¹¹⁹ ML Genesis 35: 9, *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*

¹²⁰ ML Genesis 35: 9

women also die on childbirth because they rinse their children's diapers (excrement) and clothes on Friday evenings close to the time that the Sabbath lamp must be lit.¹²¹

This list, taken from the Talmud, is enough to strike fear in any woman's heart. Culi uses the list here to scare women who are no longer observant into choosing to observe Jewish tradition. The implication is that if they follow these three requirements, they have nothing to fear regarding childbirth; God will spare their lives. However, at the same time, Culi is not entirely clear about which of the sins listed above Rachel committed. Instead, he blames her death on Rachel's earlier sins; not giving her elder sister the proper respect and the stealing of the *teraphim*. Nonetheless, Culi does leave Rachel some dignity in her death, "Rachel had the merit of dying in the land of Israel and not elsewhere."¹²² Thus, one who dies in the Holy Land, dies a worthy death. Culi goes on to elaborate further, clearing up the issue of Torah law – that one is not permitted to marry two sisters – that is not explained earlier. "Rachel died because upon entering the holy land, Jacob needed to keep the Torah law that he could not be married to two sisters."¹²³ Rachel being the less important of the two sisters is thus condemned to die. Culi then bequeaths one last responsibility to Rachel (also quoted in Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews):

Rachel was thirty-six when she died. But not before her prayer was heard, that she bear Jacob a second son, for she died in giving birth to Benjamin. Rachel was buried on the way to Ephrath, because Jacob, gifted with prophetic spirit, foresaw that the exiles would pass this place on their march to Babylon, and as they passed, Rachel would entreat that God's mercy should fall upon the poor outcasts.¹²⁴

¹²¹ ML Genesis 35: 9

¹²² ML Genesis 35: 9

¹²³ ML Genesis 35: 9

¹²⁴ ML Genesis 35: 19-20

Thus we are treated to Culi's ultimate vision of Rachel, crying out with the pains of childbirth, but able to understand the despair of the exiles as they escaped the burning Temple and a Jerusalem of death. Leah, as we learned earlier, merits burial with her husband and the rest of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

Conclusion

What does Culi wish the reader to learn from the lives of Rachel and Leah? Most of all, he attempts to explain the chain of tradition passed down from Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca finally to Jacob, Leah and Rachel (Bilhah and Zilpah). Hence, he spends most of his time explaining about the birth of the twelve tribes and very little energy teaching about the actual personalities of the last of the matriarchs. Rachel and Leah's (and very minimally Bilhah and Zilpah's) very existence rests upon their ability to bear Jacob sons. Anything outside of this is of very little interest. In these few chapters of Genesis, Culi is at his most masochistic and patriarchal. He berates Rachel harshly for her barren existence, blaming everything on her sinful nature and actions. Leah meanwhile, so long as she bears sons, is extolled to the skies as the very essence of Jewish womanhood and motherhood. However, at the same time, Culi uses the characters of Rachel and Leah to teach Ottoman Jews about proper courtship and the deeper issue of infertility. He acknowledges the pain barren women go through and encourages them to be continually hopeful in an age of poverty of despair.

VII. The Anti-Heroine Dinah

Dina, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, is not strictly a matriarch. Along with the twelve sons of Jacob she belongs to the next generation, the long awaited results of God's machinations and the covenant with Abraham. However, Dinah clearly is not granted the same legacy as her brothers and instead is discussed only in one notorious incident in Genesis. Dinah's rape and the subsequent killing of the Shechem and his people serve to teach about the new found power of the people of Israel and the twelve brothers who will become the twelve tribes. Meanwhile, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* uses this episode to teach what are in Culi's mind several key points regarding the behavior of women.

Culi begins his discussion of Dina with a warning:

A man should constantly review this chapter with the members of his family. It teaches us a good lesson about what happens when a woman spends too much time out of the house. Women should avoid going places where they will be seen by men; they should not even stand by the windows of their own homes where men can see them.¹²⁵

In truth, this injunction regarding women staying at home sounds a good deal like the Muslim norms of the day. Muslim women were encouraged to stay home, rarely even venturing forth to places such as the market, sending slaves and servants in their stead. Thus Culi is not advocating a new idea, he is merely encouraging women to behave as their Muslim counterparts. However, Culi does not simply admonish women to stay at home, he adds to this injunction, "A woman should not make herself up and dress so as to stress her beauty when she goes out. The only time that she may do so if for her husband

¹²⁵ ML Genesis 34:1

at home...it is a sinful attitude to think otherwise."¹²⁶ Again, similar to Muslim culture, women were encouraged to keep their figures and faces hidden from view when they did venture forth on the rare occasion. Jewish women would be used to the veils of their Muslim counterparts and also adapted this type of modest dress to avoid harassment. However, at the same time, many wealthy women, especially those involved with the harem and the court, did dress richly in beautiful clothing and fabrics. Thus, it also appears that Culi is warning the wealthy upper classes away from this type of immodesty and display of wealth.

The *Me-Am Lo'ez* does not create rules about women's dress arbitrarily. Culi bases them on a significant Biblical injunction. He writes,

If a woman stands near the windows while dressed immodestly, she can cause passers by to be sexually stimulated. This can lead to masturbation on the part of young men, and the prohibition regarding masturbation and onanism applies to Jew and gentile alike. If a woman causes a man to commit such a sin, she is also guilty.¹²⁷

Thus we are now to understand that provocative or immodest dress can lead a man to sin. A good and pious woman would never want to be the cause of sin, hence she will now feel doubly obligated to dress appropriately.

Finally, after Culi's discussion of modesty and dress, he begins his discussion of the actual Torah portion. Regarding the phrase from Genesis 34:1, "Then Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land," the *Me-Am Lo'ez* explains, "In the Torah's account here, we see all the troubles caused by a

¹²⁶ ML Genesis 34:1

¹²⁷ ML Genesis 34:1

young girl who spent time outside her house. Even an unmarried girl must not roam the streets where men will see her; this is all the more true of a married woman." However, the blame is not Dinah's alone. It also falls on Leah, Dinah's mother, "Leah found it very easy to go out to meet Jacob in the field. Dinah took after her, and walked the streets to explore the city."¹²⁸ Culi derives this opinion from other commentators, in particular Rashi, who also adds, "[Leah and Dinah] are the source of the adage, 'like mother, like daughter.'" In fact, this issue of "Dinah went out," is explored at length by a great many commentators. Although the *Me-Am Lo'ez* does not quote here from *Bereshit Rabbah*, it is clear that Culi was well aware of this famous paragraph:

[God] considered well from what part to create [woman]. Said he: 'I will not create her from Adam's head, lest she be frivolous; nor from the eye, lest she be a coquette; nor from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper; nor from the mouth, lest she be a gossip; nor from the heart, lest she be prone to jealousy; nor from the hand, lest she be light-fingered; nor from the foot, lest she be a gadabout. But I will create her from the modest part of man, for even when he stands naked, that part is covered.' And as He created each limb, He ordered her, 'Be a modest woman, be a modest woman.' 'Yet in spite of this, I did not create her from the head, yet she is frivolous; nor from the eye, yet she is a coquette; nor from the ear, yet she is an eavesdropper, as we read, "Now Sarah listened at the tent door." Nor from the heart, yet she is prone to jealousy, as we read, "Rachel envied her sister." Nor from the hand, yet she is light-fingered, as we read, "Rachel stole the teraphim." Nor from the foot, yet she is a gadabout, as we read, "Dinah went out."

Here, we see Dinah grouped with the matriarchs as lacking in qualities God desired.

Thus, although she clearly does not have the status of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Dinah is shown to be of one with these women; she is a gadabout. Just as the matriarchs each had their own failings, Dinah has hers.

¹²⁸ ML Genesis 34:1

After this discussion of Dinah and Leah, Culi goes on to point out one other important thing to keep in mind about Dinah. Dinah was in many ways not a natural woman. This is due to the fact that on the occasion of her pregnancy, Dinah was intended to be a boy. However, in order to help her barren sister, Rachel, Leah prayed that the embryo be changed into a girl. Thus, Leah named this girl, Dinah, or "judgment."¹²⁹ Regarding this, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* later writes, "Dinah therefore had a boyish curiosity and loved to explore like a boy. Dinah therefore had a masculine personality."¹³⁰ Here is yet another explanation for Dinah's willful behavior.

Although it appears that Culi places a great deal of the blame for Dinah's rape on Dinah herself and on Leah, he also points to Jacob as one culpable. As Culi explains about an incident earlier in Genesis,

Jacob concealed Dinah in a chest so that Esau would not see her and take her by force. This was considered the wrong thing to do however, because a good wife can always improve her husband. Since Dinah was a saint, it would have been very possible for her to cause Esau to improve his ways if he had married her. We actually see that Dinah did have the power to improve people. She later married Job. Although he was a gentile, she caused him to become a proselyte, and he eventually became a great saint. If she could do this to Jo, she certainly could have improved Esau, who was already circumcised, and who was a son of Isaac and Abraham.¹³¹

Jacob should never have concealed Dinah from Esau. This was his mistake for which Dinah was later made to pay. Here, we once again see a tie-in to Leah and the matriarchs. Originally Leah was promised in marriage to Esau. However, she cried her eyes out because she did not want to marry such a wicked man. Leah then escaped this fate by

¹²⁹ ML Genesis 20:21

¹³⁰ ML Genesis 34:1

¹³¹ ML Genesis, 34:1, also Ginzberg, Louis, Legends of the Jews.

tricking Jacob into marrying her instead of Rachel.¹³² Dinah, by Jacob's actions, also escapes relations with the evil Esau. Culi in particular however, is very negative regarding Jacob's concealment of Dinah, so much so that he contradicts himself by writing,

Although the Torah had not yet been given, Jacob had bound himself by its commandments. He therefore should have done whatever he could to improve Esau and cause him to repent. Women, however, do not have responsibility for others, and are only punished for their own sins. Dinah, did not have any responsibility (towards Esau, as Jacob did).¹³³

It is interesting to note, that earlier in this same section of commentary, Culi loudly and strongly condemns women who dress improperly and entice men to masturbate. He even goes so far as to write, "If a woman causes a man to commit such a sin, she is also guilty." Thus on the one hand, Culi does not hold women to the same standards as men – they do not bear responsibility for others – but a woman is guilty if she inadvertently causes a man to sin. It is no wonder that the *Me-Am Lo'ez* spends very little time remarking on what must have been the shock and pain of Dinah's rape but instead chooses to focus on the much more interesting world of men and politics. Women here are left in a difficult bind – they are responsible and yet they are not.

Culi waits until the very end of this section of Genesis regarding Dinah to throw in the few pieces of midrash that mitigate her responsibility. These pieces are mostly a sideline however, so one is not distracted from Culi's real message to women that is discussed above. Finally, Culi quotes *Bereshit Rabbah* when he states, "Actually Dinah was

¹³² ML Genesis

¹³³ ML Genesis 34:1

extremely modest. When she went out, she was completely covered, so that even her face was concealed. But one of her arms accidentally became uncovered, and Shechem was able to get an idea of her beauty." The *Me-Am Lo'ez* also throws in another incident from *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*. In this commentary this midrash is actually highlighted. Here, however, Culi feels some need to mention it, but makes sure that it is a side-line and only an addendum to his depiction of Dinah.

The daughter of Jacob was abiding in the tents and she did not go into the street; what did Shechem, the son of Chamor do? He brought forth dancing girls who were also playing pipes in the streets. Dinah went forth to see those girls who were making merry; and he seized her.¹³⁴

According to this Midrash, Dinah was only partially to blame for venturing forth. In truth, the wily Shechem enticed her to come outside into the streets; normally she did not go out – this was out of character. Culi, however, is more interested in decrying Dinah's actions and would prefer to ignore this midrash whenever possible.

Although he had raped an innocent girl and it is difficult to believe, Culi does not write of Shechem as an entirely bad man. Once he had captured Dinah, Culi writes, "He spoke to Dinah gently, trying to win her affection."¹³⁵ Shechem was forced however, to gain Jacob's consent to marry the girl. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* explains, "Dinah wept and screamed day and night. Shechem therefore wanted to satisfy Jacob's family with money. If they agreed to let her marry him, she might also consent."¹³⁶ Thus Shechem and his family agree to be circumcised in order for Shechem to marry Dinah. However, Genesis 34:25, 26 explains: "On the third day, when they were in pain [from the circumcision],

¹³⁴ ML Genesis 34:2, *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*

¹³⁵ ML Genesis 34:3

¹³⁶ ML Genesis 34:8-12

two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and killed every male." Of interest to the commentators are the brothers Simeon and Levi. Culi quotes *Bereshit Rabbah*, "Simeon and Levi – Dinah's brethren. Was she then the sister of these two only and not the sister of all the tribal ancestors? She is called by their name however, because they risked their lives for her sake."¹³⁷ Here, Dinah is depicted as a bit of an outsider. She is the "sister of the tribal ancestors," but not in truth a link in the chain of tradition. Thus on the one hand, we have learned that on certain occasions such as the creation of woman, Dinah is equated with the matriarchs. Like them she is referred to as a saint. But, she is not truly within the chain of tradition leading from Abraham to the Messiah.

The commentary continues when Simeon and Levi take Dinah from Shechem's house after slaughtering every male in the city. Culi writes,

When the brothers finally arrived, Dinah did not want to leave. She had experienced intercourse with a passionate, uncircumcised man, and had acquired a taste for it. She argued, 'How can I let myself be seen by our people? I am so ashamed! As long as I live, I'll never live this down. Who'll want to marry me?' They therefore had to drag her literally out of the city.¹³⁸

From this we learn that if a woman is raped, she is the one to bear the shame. In some manner, the rape is her fault. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* once again here reiterates from *Bereshit Rabbah*, "What caused all of this? The fact that Dinah went out!"

¹³⁷ ML Genesis 34: 25, 26, *Bereshit Rabbah*

¹³⁸ ML Genesis 34:27-30

However, the story of Dinah is not at an end. Culi presents us with two alternative versions of Dinah's legacy. First we are taught,

In order to allay her apprehension, Simeon agreed to marry her. Meanwhile, Dinah had become pregnant from Shechem, and she gave birth to a daughter whom she named Asenath. The brothers wanted to kill the child, they said: 'What will people say? Jacob has a bastard in his house!' Jacob, however, would not allow it. He took a piece of metal, engraved the Divine Name on it, and hung it around the girl's neck, and with that, he left her in the field. The angel Michael came and brought the girl to Egypt, to the house of Potiphar, the priest of On. Since he and his wife could not have children, they adopted the infant girl as their daughter. This same Asenath, later became Joseph's wife.¹³⁹

Here we are given the lineage of Joseph's wife Asenath. From this we learn that Dinah in fact is a link in the chain of tradition, albeit by a rather circuitous route.

Culi also uses midrash to explain an alternative ending of Dinah's story. He writes,

According to another opinion, Simeon brought Dinah into his house where she remained a spinster for the rest of her life. No one would marry her because she had been defiled by Shechem. When Jacob's sons migrated to Egypt, she went with them, and it was there that she died. She was then brought back to the land of Israel where she was buried.¹⁴⁰

This rather bleak ending of Dinah's tale, does not account for Asenath. Here it appears that Dinah is punished for her actions with Shechem.

With the story of Dinah at an end, we are left to ponder her legacy and place in the line of tradition. She is not a matriarch, as her blood is in a sense is contaminated, unlike that of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah who remain purely of the line of Abraham by family lineage and chaste behavior; matriarchs do not associate with those of other

¹³⁹ ML Genesis 34:27-30, *Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer*

¹⁴⁰ ML Genesis 34:27-30

nations (even involuntarily). As Culi writes, "The wrath of the Lord descended upon the inhabitants of Shechem to the uttermost on account of their wickedness. For they had sought to do unto Sarah and Rebecca as they did unto Dinah, but the Lord had prevented them."¹⁴¹ Thus Dinah does not have the status accorded her mother and grandmothers, but she is acknowledged nonetheless to be an important female figure. The Midrash still finds an important place for her as the mother of Joseph's wife Asenath. Although she does not fit into Culi's version of the chain of tradition, Dinah is a person of consequence because of the lessons to be learned from her behavior and experiences. Contrary to the matriarchs, Dina remains the *Me-Am Lo'ez's* example of how women should **not** behave. Thus she is the ultimate teaching tool and warning for people who live in an increasingly assimilated and secular world.

¹⁴¹ ML Genesis 34:27-30

VIII. Conclusion

...He was appalled when he saw on reaching Constantinople that his coreligionists there had neglected the teachings and practices of their Torah, and set out to awaken in them a deeper sense of the Jewish religion by bringing to them the *Me-Am Lo'ez* in their own "unpretentious popular" language, the Ladino of the day.¹⁴²

Jacob Culi strove for his *Me-Am Lo'ez* to be a work accessible to all Jews, no matter their position in life or level of Jewish learning. He deeply believed that the precepts and lessons taught by the Torah should be embraced and followed by every Jew. As Culi explains in his introduction to the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, "When a person engages in Torah and deeds of kindness, all of his sins are atoned."¹⁴³ Thus, he did not disdain use of the vernacular or from using the Torah text as a springboard to teach about ideal Jewish practice. Emerging from the *Me-Am Lo'ez*, are images of Culi's ideal for women as well as images of the women who lived in early eighteenth century Turkey. Unfortunately, the actual life of Turkish women and Culi's ideal represented by the biblical Matriarchs differ in many respects. The Ottoman Empire was in a decline and the poor lived in terrible degradation, while the rich upper classes flaunted their material wealth with scant concern for traditional Jewish values and mores. However, Culi's intended audience was not only the degraded lower class; his work at times presents scathing commentaries on the excessive nature of upper class society and recommends renewed, and in his view, ethical Jewish action. In his commentary on the book of Genesis, Culi spends a great deal of time creating and disseminating the image of the "ideal" Jewish woman. In particular, his writings on the biblical Matriarchs are a social critique of the problems of Ottoman

¹⁴² Angel, Mark, ed., Studies in Sephardic Culture: The David N. Barocas Memorial Volume (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1980), 17.

¹⁴³ ML, Introduction, Point Ten. Adapted from Proverbs 16:6.

society and women in general. According to Culi, women bear the juxtaposed roles of great responsibility to the family line and the pure observance of Judaism, while at the same time, they are relegated to supporting roles within the Jewish and worldly spheres.

Jewish family life under the Ottomans was not dissimilar from the life of Muslim Turks. The typical Turkish family structure was patriarchal, consisting of mother, father, children and sometimes other close relatives. Although women in rural communities labored in the fields, her urban counterpart was confined to the house whatever her social status. Depending on the family's economic situation a woman spent her day doing household chores or supervising the servants, taking care of her children, praying, sewing and embroidery, weaving or playing music.¹⁴⁴ Life for women outside the home was limited, but by no means non-existent. Special occasions, such as weddings, engagements, *mevlit* (chanting in memory of a dead person) or visits to relatives and neighbors were opportunities to socialize and dress up in one's best clothes. Visits to the public baths and to cemeteries were frequent, and regarded as a woman's right. However, young men and women were not able to see or get to know one another nor to choose the person they were to marry. The choice of a bride was the prerogative of the man's mother, and if the girl's family agreed, the parents among themselves would settle the matter. The marriage contract would be concluded by means of a bride and groom expressing their consent separately in the presence of witnesses, without seeing one another. On the condition that their work did not involve association with men, women

¹⁴⁴ Sansal, Burak. *All About Turkey*. 1996–2007.
<http://www.allaboutturkey.com/ita/woman.htm>

were allowed to earn a living. The most widespread forms of employment for women, both in the cities and in rural areas were weaving and embroidery.¹⁴⁵

For the most part, Culi accepted and supported the stereotypical Turkish role of women (many of these expectations were based on Islamic law and cultural mores). Like the biblical Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, for Culi, the ideal woman married young and soon took on the role of mother and loving wife, caring for husband, children and home. Ideal women came to their marriages pure, without blemish, as we learn from Eliezer's search for the perfect bride, Rebecca. Ideal women became part of their husbands' families and honored their husbands as they once did their parents. Unlike Leah, they did not ask directly for intercourse with their husbands, but within the privacy of their homes, they were to make themselves attractive and appealing. Outside of the home, the ideal woman (unlike Dinah) was modestly covered and was encouraged to not provoke the passion of men. As Culi explains, "A woman should not make herself up and dress so as to stress her beauty when she goes out. The only time that she may do so if for her husband at home...it is a sinful attitude to think otherwise."¹⁴⁶ Women were taught that it was necessary to maintain their modesty for their own protection and also for the protection of men who were warned against having seminal emissions in vain. Ideal women were knowledgeable in the laws of *Niddah* along with other important Jewish home rituals. As we learn from Rachel, women who were not cognizant of their Jewish responsibilities could expect punishment. For example, because of past mistakes –

¹⁴⁵ Sansal, Burak. *All About Turkey*. 1996–2007.
<http://www.allaboutturkey.com/ita/woman.htm>

¹⁴⁶ ML Genesis 34:1

jealousy of her sister Leah -- Rachel was afflicted with the inability to bear children. Additionally, Culi explains that Rachel's death during the birth of her second son, Benjamin, was also a type of punishment. Rachel had been remiss in the observation of her many Jewish obligations. The *Me-Am Lo'ez* uses this incident to carefully instruct women regarding the seriousness of their Jewish commitment stating,

There are three sins that can cause a woman to die in childbirth. As quoted from the *Mishnah, Shabbat 31b* they are: 1. Not being too careful with the laws of *Niddah*. 2. Not being careful with regard to the taking of challah. And 3. Not being careful to light the Shabbat candles. In addition, women also die on childbirth because they rinse their children's diapers (excrement) and clothes on Friday evenings close to the time that the Sabbath lamp must be lit.¹⁴⁷

Thus women as well as men have important Jewish obligations that they are required to uphold and maintain. The punishment for not following through with the proper *minhag* and *halachah* is death in childbirth, similar to the matriarch Rachel.

Additionally, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* attracted the lower classes by condemning the excesses of the wealthy. Abraham and Eliezer are commended for presenting Rebecca with merely modest trinkets before her acceptance of Jacob's proposal. Sarah is celebrated as the epitome of modesty -- she will not even nurse her son Isaac in the presence of others, until cajoled by her husband. Dinah is derided for dressing up and "gadabouing" through the streets to visit her friends. These are just a few examples of just how Culi utilizes his sources to address social concerns.

¹⁴⁷ ML Genesis 35: 9

Although Culi is careful in proscribing a limited role for women; he also bestows great responsibility upon them. He recognizes that some women might gain a small degree of accomplishment and recognition. Otherwise, if he limited his female figures utterly and completely, it is supposed his female readership would have no further interest in continuing to read his work. Sarah, as the *Me-Am Lo'ez* explains, was actually greater in prophecy than Abraham. The reason that God did not speak to her, however, was because each time she had her period she was ritually unclean and lost her power of prophecy. Rebecca was also considered a true saint, but was limited in this world because people only saw her for her sex. As Culi so aptly elucidates:

Her (Rebecca's) neighbors were so immoral they could only look upon her as a sex object; therefore none of them knew what a saint she actually was. On high, however her true nature was well known; it was recognized that she was destined to become one of the Matriarchs. The Torah thus says, "no man knew her." No man knew her true exalted nature.¹⁴⁸

However, at the same time, Rebecca was the only matriarch that Culi grudgingly admitted had the quality of intelligence:

In Rebecca, Eliezer also noted another subtle quality of intelligence. Rebecca was sensitive enough not to reply [regarding his need for water] in such a manner as to put him on the same level as the camels. Instead, she said, "Drink *my lord*." She then waited for him to finish drinking, whereupon she then agreed to draw water for the camels.¹⁴⁹

Thus, Culi does in some ways explicate that women have merit outside of their qualities of beauty and modesty. However, and most importantly, each of the matriarchs (excluding Dinah who was not regarded as a matriarch) were limited or oppressed in some way in this world but were to be rewarded in the next with direct communication or

¹⁴⁸ ML Genesis 24:16

¹⁴⁹ ML Genesis 24:26

contact with God.¹⁵⁰ In many ways, this might have been an appealing message – perhaps even a type of “messianic” message – for the lower, degraded classes to whom Culi appealed.

In his depiction of the matriarchs, Culi is greatly concerned with the line of succession and the family backgrounds of each woman. As quoted earlier, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* teaches, “[An unblemished background] is particularly important with regard to the mother of one’s children, who is home and teaches them how to be good Jews.”¹⁵¹ Additionally, for obvious reasons, a man must be able to trust that his wife is able to properly observe Jewish law. To Culi it was clear, only a pure, god-fearing soul of an unblemished family line was capable of achieving her husband’s trust. The behavior and background of a wife is bound up in the very future of a man’s soul as his family and name is at stake in his choice of wife. Thus, in this instance, Culi bestowed upon women great power and responsibility, while at the same time relegating them to second-class status. From all of this, the *Me-Am Lo'ez* emphasizes how a woman’s behavior has the potential to destroy the messianic dynasty of the Jewish people, not to mention individual families.

There is no ambiguity about the familial status of the matriarchs. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob choose their wives with great care. Although there is some uncertainty regarding her standing, Sarah is referred to as Abraham’s sister-wife. It is not clear that she was his sister or even half-sister, but much is made of the fact that the couple has some prior

¹⁵⁰ Talve, Susan, “Images of Women in the *Me-Am Lo'ez*.” (Rabbinic Thesis., Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981).

¹⁵¹ ML Genesis 24:11

familial relationship. Thus, Sarah as well as Abraham comes from the same line of tradition. At the same time, Culi makes much of the fact that Sarah was extremely pure and modest. She did not associate with other men unless forced by her husband; there was no chance that her progeny were tainted with blood other than that belonging to Abraham. As Culi clearly states, "Sarah was extremely modest (after the birth of Isaac); she barely exposed the tip of her breast..." Culi goes on to extemporize, "This teaches us a lesson in modesty. A nursing woman should not expose her breasts even when there are no strange men in the house. Some women expose their bosoms and say that these words do not frighten them. They are wrong and will be punished."¹⁵² Rebecca, Isaac's wife continues this chain of tradition. Rebecca is not only a cousin of Abraham, she is of the second generation. She was a great saint, but not recognized as such by the evil community in which she lived. Rebecca was a woman without deformity or blemish, altruistic and beautiful. It was clear that her children would also be without taint. In essence, she was the only woman suited to be the wife of Isaac and to carry on the line of the messiah. Finally, last but not least, both Leah and Rachel were also of the same familial line of Abraham. Leah is not described as beautiful, but it is clear that she was virtuous, along with being extremely fertile. Rachel, a great beauty, was modest and true. As we can learn from all of this, Culi teaches the Ottoman Jewish woman about the necessity of purity. Women have a great obligation to bear children of the true Jewish line. Adultery and a lack of modesty could not, for obvious reasons, be tolerated. It was the woman's role to ensure the Jewish purity and observance of her offspring. She set the first and earliest example of true and correct Jewish living.

¹⁵² ML Genesis 21:5

From all of this it is clear that Culi was aware that his "ideal" woman was a mere dream and not the reality with which he lived. However, perhaps Culi's concern with the apparent "protection" of women also stemmed from a deeper cause. It is clear that many lower class women were obligated to work outside the home. Weekly visits to the bathhouse – also outside of the Jewish home – was the normative practice of the day. These visits were in fact the center of women's culture and social activity. Hence, lower class Jewish women had no small amount of contact with outside influences, not to mention non-Jewish, strange men. On the other hand, lower class Jewish women played the important role of running the household and raising the children. It was these women's values that would continue to have enduring influence over future generations of Jews. It is also clear from this time period that Jewish knowledge and practice were in decline. Many Jews lived assimilated lives as evinced by a lack of Hebrew and textual literacy. Thus, all of this might explain Culi's great apprehension regarding issues of modesty, purity, protection and proper female behavior. At the same time, Culi's overall message of high moral values would have been appealing to a poor, despairing population. The promise that good would be rewarded perhaps not in this life, but in some future time, gave hope to a community suffering from the demise of Shabbatei Tsvi and his assurances of Messianic redemption.

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