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RABBINIC VIEWS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SARAH AND HAGAR:
A MIDRASHIC COMMENTARY TO GENESIS 16 AND 21

JULIE K. GORDON

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Referee: Professor Norman J. Cohen

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Acknowledgments

Midrash, the Rabbinic aggadic tradition is the search for continual renewal of ancient texts. Just as they undertook to renew the Bible to help them order and find "kedushah" in their time, so, too, this process must be undertaken by every individual. In this search I have been influenced by many important people.

My husband, Rabbi Jonathan Ginsburg, continually teaches me the importance of intellectual thought, the power of words, and the centrality of deeds of loving kindness. He has faith in my abilities and encourages me to pursue my ambitions at times when I need a great deal of support. He truly is a "Ezer-Kenegdo," my help-mate and partner.

My professors at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion have stimulated me to study the vast Jewish tradition and begin to synthesize it with modern life. I am very grateful for the education I received from my teachers, both in and outside of the classroom. I have gained a model of struggling with important, difficult questions of today by utilizing the wisdom of our Sages. As I serve the Jewish people, may I continue to develop the skills and insights they offered to me.

I am especially appreciative of the creativity and sensitivity of my advisor, Dr. Norman Cohen. He taught me

to see Biblical and Rabbinic texts in a new light. I gained an understanding of the midrashic process which attempts to continually renew ancient texts in light of the issues of the day. My sensitivity to the vast Jewish tradition has been heightened by his abilities. I pray that I will continue building the creative path he showed to me.

Special thanks go to Jeffrey Macklis and Howard Marks who were generous with their time, technology, and home. They enabled me to enjoy writing every word of this thesis!

Praised are You, Adonai, our God of time and space who has kept me alive, sustained me, and enabled me to reach this season!

Introduction

I chose to write a thesis in the field of Midrash for a variety of reasons. Through my years of study at HUC-JIR, I had my eyes opened to the riches of its texts and its process. My teachers helped me to read the Biblical text in a new way, applying literary and thematic analysis to the wealth of Biblical narratives. After reading the Biblical stories, they taught me to ask questions which the Biblical writer often omitted due to the Bible's terse style. These questions in turn became the foundation for an intensive study of Rabbinic literature which attempts to provide answers for these questions. By immersing myself in this process, I gained an appreciation for creativity of the Rabbis, who read the Bible in light of their own historical experience and wrote midrashim which reflect it. They sought to reinterpret the Bible in order to make it meaningful for their time. They read the Bible in order to provide answers for the crucial questions of their day.

We can learn much from the model of the Rabbis who read the Bible, extending and elaborating on it in order to make it continually meaningful. We, too, must read the Bible and reinterpret it in light of our own experience. Yet, in addition, we must take the next step and continue to create midrashim which can help us address the crucial questions of our time.

More particularly, however, I chose to write a thesis which focuses on two Biblical female characters, Sarah and Hagar. I came to this study through a course I took with Dr.

Norman Cohen entitled: "Modern Midrash, A Rabbi's Tool." In that course, I studied two women, Hannah and Peninah, who are mentioned in the Bible, in 1 Samuel. I became fascinated by them, their struggles for the love of their husband, and the difficult problem Hannah faced because she was barren. As a result, I decided to undertake a thesis project which studied three set of women with similiar issues: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and Hannah and Peninah. As I started my research of the first pair of women, Sarah and Hagar, it became increasingly clear that they would be the focus of my energy for the thesis because of time constraints. Since there was a wealth of material which concentrated on them and their relationship with Abraham. I have spent the past nine months studying them exclusively.

Finally, I chose to study two Biblical women because I am firmly committed to retrieving and creating literature about Jewish women. I believe that our rich tradition which has stories about women can serve as an aid to Jewish women today. We are struggling to find models for ourselves and both Biblical narratives and Rabbinic midrashim can enhance this process.

The method I used in studying Sarah and Hagar was two-fold. First, I read the Biblical material in Genesis 16 and 21. I analyzed it from a literary point of view, looking for literary devices such as word plays and repetition. I wrote down unanswered questions which arose after an indepth reading of the narratives. Finally, I compared and

contrasted the two chapters, seeing the many similarities and differences. Robert Alter's, The Art of Biblical Narrative¹ and Speiser's, Genesis² were very helpful.

The second step in writing this thesis was to gather all the pertinent rabbinic sources to Genesis 16 and 21. I used several general rabbinic indices such as: Otzar Ha-Aggadah, Otzar Midrashim, and Torah, HaKetuvah V'HaMesorah. In particular, the last index mentioned was very helpful because it provided quite a comprehensive list of sources on each verse. In addition, I checked all the indices to the available English translations of Talmud and Midrash. I organized the midrashim by collection and systematically read all the material in historical chronology.

In order to arrange all the hundreds of midrashim found, I chose to divide my material into two types: comments on specific verses in Genesis 16 and 21 and general comments on the characters. This was done because I wanted the reader to gain a clear picture of the rabbinic attitudes toward Sarah and Hagar. Thus, the general comments were woven into one piece which presents the rabbinic view on these women, their characters, personalities, and interaction.

As a result, the reader will find the thesis organized into two parts. Part One is a Commentary and Midrashic anthology to Genesis 16 (Section A) and Genesis 21 (Section B). I have structured the rabbinic comments according to the verse on which they commented. I have explicated and reacted to the midrashim in order to better understand the feelings or

each character which is generally missing from the Biblical text. Part Two contains a Biblical and Rabbinic overview of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. It is divided into three sections: Section A is a Biblical overview of Genesis 16 and 21, Section B contains a Rabbinic portrait of Sarah and Hagar's interaction, and Section C deals with Sarah and Hagar's relationship with Abraham. I have woven many midrashim together to more clearly show the Rabbinic attitudes to each character. By arranging the material in this manner, I hope the reader will come away with an integrated portrait of hundreds of years of Rabbinic Commentary on these women.

PART ONE: SECTION A

GENESIS CHAPTER 16

16:1 "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar."

Commentary: Immediate introduction of characters with an emphasis on their inter-relationship. Sarai is the focus at the beginning of the chapter, yet her connection to the other characters is clearly stated at the outset. She is the wife of Abram, has borne him no children, but she does have an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar.

Midrashim:

a. "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." It is written, "A woman of valour who can find, for her price is far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10). What does "mikhrāh" (**her price**) mean? R. Abba b. Kahana said: Her pregnancy, as you read "mikhorotayich," (Your origin and your nativity), (Ezekiel 16:3). (Bereshit Rabbah 45:1, Midrash Hadash to Gen. 16:1, and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #78)

Even righteous women, such as Sarah, find pregnancy more difficult to attain than rubies.

b. "Had borne him no children." R. Judah said: the word "lo" (**him**) teaches that she did not bear children to Abram, but if she would have been married to another man, she would have borne him children. R. Nehemiah said: She would not have borne children to him nor to anyone else. How then does R. Nehemiah interpret "lo yaldah lo v'lah shifhah mizreet" (**had borne him no children**)? He interprets it to mean that she did not bear on **her own account** nor on **Abram's account**. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:1 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #78)

R. Nehemiah disregards the Masoretic punctuation when he reads the verse. He interprets the verse as if it is read: "lo yaldah lo v'lah" (**did not bear children for him, she was responsible**). He believes Sarai was responsible for them not having children.

c. "She had an Egyptian maidservant and her name was Hagar." She was a handmaid, "malug" (of plucking) whom Abram was bound to support but might not sell. R. Shimon b. Lakish was asked: "What is the meaning of what we learnt: 'servants of plucking'?" "What you pluck, you pluck," he answered. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:1, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #78, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:1)

"Malug" is a technical term describing the portion of a wife's dowry which a husband enjoys the right to use, without responsibility for loss or deterioration.

It is deduced that Abram's rights to Hagar are limited from the phrase: "She had an Egyptian maidservant." Thus Hagar is tied to Sarah.

d. R. Shimon b. Yohai said: Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah's behalf to his own house (Gen 12:17), he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah. He said: "It is better that my daughter be a handmaid in that house than a mistress in another house." Thus, it is written, "She had an Egyptian handmaid whose name was Hagar." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:1)

e. A similar passage is found in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 26. There it reads: Because of Pharaoh's love for Sarah, he gave her Hagar, his daughter, elevating her from the status of a concubine to that of a handmaid. Thus it is written: "An Egyptian handmaid."

f. Abimelech, too, when he saw the miracles performed in his house on Sarah's behalf, he gave his daughter to her saying: "It is better that my daughter be a handmaid in that house than a mistress in another house," as it is written, "Royal princesses are your favorites" (Psalm 45:10), viz., the daughters of two kings [Pharaoh and Abimelech]. "The consort stands at your right hand, decked in gold of Ophir;" this alludes to Sarai. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:1)

These midrashic comments fill in Hagar's background which is not included in the Biblical text. Despite the fact that she is called a "maidservant," she must be from a proper heritage, fit to serve Sarai and bear Abram a son.

16:2 "And Sarai said to Abram, 'See, Adonai has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.' And Abram heeded Sarai's request."

Commentary: Sarai tells Abram the reason they have no children; "God has kept me from bearing." The reader must ask how she knows that she is responsible. The text does not answer this important question. Sarai is only concerned with herself, as seen in the use of the following words written in first person: "me," "my maid," and "I." Sarai does not mention Abram's desire for an heir. It is as if their childlessness is painful to her alone! In Genesis 15 we read a passage in which God promises Abram a great reward. Abram cries out, "What can you give me, seeing that I continue childless." (Gen. 15:2) Remaining without a son was a source of great pain to Abram, which Sarai ignores in this verse.

She comes up with an idea, a scheme, to satisfy her need to have a child: "Consort with **my maid**; perhaps I shall have a son through her." Here, Sarai does not refer to her handmaid by name, perhaps it is her way of underscoring the difference between herself and Hagar. The Biblical writer is making a word play between "ibaneh" (**built up**), and "ben" (**son**). Sarai's self-perception is that she needs to be built up by having a male child.

Parallels from a Nuzi text record the family law of the Hurrians, a society well known to the patriarchs. In light

of this parallel, Sarai's plan seems less like a scheme and more like conformity to family law of her time. This document reads:

If Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country, i.e., a slave girl, as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring.
(Speiser, Genesis, p.120)

Two additional unusual words must be noted. Sarai says to Abram, "na" (**please**) as if she is begging him to respond to her plea. She also uses the word, "ulai" (**perhaps**) when discussing the future prospect of a child from the union of Abram and Hagar. It is now clear that Sarai was required to provide a concubine, but would then have all the legal rights to the offspring.

Though we read that Abram heeded Sarai's request, the Biblical writer does not include any discussion between them. Nor does he give us any insight into how Abram feels about her request? One would expect to read that Abram listens and then asks God for advice. However, the text is silent.

Midrashim:

a. "And Sarai said to Abram, 'See, Adonai has kept me from bearing'." She said: I know the source of my affliction: it is not as people say [of a barren woman], 'she needs a talisman, she needs a charm,' but "See, Adonai has kept me from bearing." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:2 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

The midrash is clear, but the reader is troubled. One must ask: Why did God withhold children from Sarah? Again,

the text is silent.

b. Whether it was she or he who was infertile, our mother Sarah said, "See, Adonai has kept **me** from bearing." (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:2)

This passage is similar to the midrash listed above.

Here, the question of Abram's or Sarai's responsibility for the infertility is definitively attributed to Sarah by her use of the word "me."

c. Whoever abuses ones fellow is punished, and anyone, like Sarah, who deprecates him/herself, will receive reward, for she said, "See, Adonai has kept **me** from bearing." The Holy One therefore declared: "Because you considered yourself responsible, saying 'Adonai has kept **me** from bearing,' you, as you live, I shall particularly remember." And the proof of God's remembering? The verse read in the lesson for the day, "And God remembered Sarah **as God had said.**" (Gen. 21:1) (Pesikta Rabbati 42:1)

Here, Sarai is praised for taking full responsibility for their lack of children. These midrashim stress the importance of humility. Sarai is rewarded for abasing herself; yet it is not clear that she is solely responsible for the lack of children. The picture of Sarai which is being painted is one of a distraught, angry woman, who accepts her own responsibility without challenging her husband's joint culpability. It is as if she has thrown up her hands in despair over their infertility. This attitude is not surprising in light of the negative attitude to barrenness found in the following midrashim.

d. One who does not have sons is as if he is dead. (Midrash Hadash to Gen. 16:2)

e. One who does not have children is as if he is destroyed. (Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

f. Read then: [A transgression performed with good intention is] as good as a positive precept performed with an ulterior motive, as it is written, "Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber, the Kenite, Most blessed of women in tents" (Judges 5:24). Now, who are the "women in the tents?" Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are meant. (B.T. Nazir 23b and B.T. Sanhedrin 105b)

Rashi's commentary to B.T. Nazir 23b is helpful in understanding this passage. He writes that three of these women gave their handmaidens to their husbands with ulterior motives. In Sarah's case, she was jealous of the mothering ability of other women. She gave Hagar to Abram, seemingly to enable him to have a son (a positive precept performed for an ulterior motive), but her intention was to feel better about herself by mothering the child borne from Abram and Hagar.

Similarly, In Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, Chapter (27)25, we find that God took the Israelites out of Egypt because of the deeds of the four matriarchs. Sarah is included because she took Hagar and brought her to Abram's couch.

g. "Her mouth is full of wisdom" (Proverbs 31:26). When does this apply to Sarai? At the time that she said to Abram, "Consort with my maid." (Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Hayyei Sarah #4)

h. "A slave girl who supplants her mistress" (Proverbs 30:23). This is applied to Sarah to make known to you the strength of our mother Sarah who was not jealous of her handmaid. Rather, her intentions were for the sake of heaven. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:2)

All of these midrashim laud Sarai's decision that Abram should consort with her handmaid. This perspective is surprising in light of Sarai's future mistreatment of Hagar. However, they do maintain the general positive Jewish attitude toward Sarah.

i. "Ulai" (Perhaps I shall have a son through her) is written as if Sarai is uncertain if she will have a son through Hagar. However, with Rachel it is written, "v'ibaneh" (and that through her I too may have children) (Gen. 30:3). Sarah says "perhaps" because she has no precedent that by giving Hagar to Abram she will have a son. Rachel, however, is certain because she has Sarah as her precedent. (Bereshit Rabbati to Gen. 30:3)

j. It is taught: One who does not have a child is as though one was dead and demolished. 'As dead:' "And she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I am dead'" (Gen. 30:1). 'As though demolished:' "Perhaps I shall have a son through her," only that which is demolished can be built up. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:2 and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:2)

The negative attitude to childless women appeared above. Here, this view is applied to Sarai's infertility; she needed children from Hagar otherwise it would be as if she were dead and demolished. The midrash marks the difference between the word in the Biblical text, "ibaneh" (built up) and "hecharays" (demolished). Sarai is saying that unless she is built up by Hagar giving birth to a son, she will be demolished, leaving no heirs.

k. "And Abram heeded Sarai's request." R. Jose said: [Abram listened] to the voice of the Holy Spirit, as you read, "Therefore, listen to Adonai's command!" (1 Sam 15:1) (Bereshit Rabbah 45:2 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha to Gen. 16:2)

The editor of the Soncino edition of Midrash Rabbah adds that Abram listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit because he felt it moved Sarai to speak to him.

l. "Abram heeded Sarai's request." As God told him later, "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says" (Gen. 21:12). (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:2)

These midrashim answer the question raised in the initial comments to Gen. 16:2. According to them, Abram did not make up his own mind as the plain wording of the Biblical text would indicate. The Rabbis believed that

Abram heeded Sarai's request only after consulting with God, a response one might typically expect from him.

m. Gen. 16:2 does not say that Sarai was barren, rather it says, "Adonai has kept me from bearing." "And Abram heeded **Sarai's request.**" Why did Abram listen to her [and agree to marry Hagar]? He wanted to check if he was infertile or if Sarai was infertile. (Eisenstein, Otzar Midrashim, Midrash Yelammedaynu, p.223, vol.1)

n. The Holy One said: "Listen to me, no one who hearkens to my words will suffer a loss." The rabbis taught: there have been occasions when a man listened [to his wife] and as a result profited. This is the case of Abraham. When do we learn this? It is said, "And Abram **heeded Sarai's request.**" (Devarim Rabbah 4:5)

Abram listened to Sarai's request that he should take Hagar and have a child with her. As a result of heeding her words, he profited by gaining Hagar and Ishmael.

o. Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die" (Gen. 30:1). If you will not fulfill my request as your father Isaac did, do as your grandfather Abraham did when he listened to Sarah as it is said, "And Abram heeded Sarai's request." (Aggadat Bereshit #52)

According to this midrash, Abram's response to Sarai's request becomes a paradigm for Rachel, another barren women. I interpret this passage as showing that infertility was viewed as the woman's problem, to which the husband may or may not have been very understanding. If Abraham, our father, could agree to his wife Sarai's request, I believe all the more so, later generations of men should heed their wives requests for action in regard to infertility.

16:3 "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten

years, and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine."

Commentary: Sarai continues to be the main character.

We now see her actively involved with the other characters: Sarai is Abram's wife, and Hagar's mistress. In the previous verse she is called Sarai; now she is referred to as "Sarai, Abram's wife." This shift in titles foreshadows the change in relationships which will occur once Abram cohabitates with Hagar and she conceives.

Sarai is the focus of this verse: "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid...and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine." Abram does not lift a finger in acquiring Hagar as concubine. This passivity is appropriate in light of the Nuzi text; Sarai was responsible for fulfilling the family law of their time. The story is unfolding rapidly: Sarai is barren; she tells Abram to consort with her maid; Abram agrees; and Sarai gives Hagar to him. In this verse, there are no superfluous details.

In Gen. 16:3 there is an unusual parenthetical clause: "after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years." Abram and Sarai have lived there for ten years without having any children. The Biblical writer is emphasizing the length of time in order to make Sarai's decision to give Hagar to Abram more understandable. She was feeling desperate. The phrase also serves to put this incident in a historical and geographical context.

Finally, it is important to note the use of several

words, "vatitain otah l'Avram ishah l'ishah" (and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine). The writer is foreshadowing the coming change in both Sarai and Hagar's status. Again, in view of the Nuzi document, the plain meaning of the phrase "l'ishah" is as concubine. The Hebrew text uses the same word for wife and concubine. This word demands midrashic interpretation, especially since both Sarai and Hagar are referred to as "ishah" in the same verse.

Midrashim:

a. "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian." She persuaded (took) her with words. She said to her: "How wonderful it is that you are to be united with so holy a man." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:3 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This midrashic comment is very unusual in its positive depiction of Sarai and Hagar's relationship. Here we see that Sarai is trying to convince Hagar that she is lucky to be given to Abram. This passage pictures Sarai as being sensitive to Hagar's feelings of discomfort. The writer of this midrash must have felt uncomfortable with Hagar's total passivity and wanted it to appear as if she was lucky and had to be persuaded by her mistress to have sexual relations with Abram. Once again we must note that in the Ancient Near East, a handmaid would have had no control over her life.

b. "Who can count the dust of Jacob; or number the stock (rova) of Israel? May I die the death of the upright; May my fate be like theirs!" (Numbers 23:10), i.e., even the "reva," (fourth

part) of them. Who can count the hosts that have issued from those women who eagerly observed the mitzvot and cherished them, as is proved by the texts "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian" (Gen. 16:3). This may be illustrated by the case of a butcher who was about to slaughter the king's cow, when the king noticed it. Perceiving that the king was watching he threw the knife away and began rubbing her down and filling the crib for her. He began to say: 'Let me die for having come to slaughter her! See, I have polished her up!' (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:19)

In this midrash a wordplay is being made between "rova" (stock) and the root "rv" (copulate). It is a positive portrait of Sarai. While it might have been her natural instinct to respond negatively to her infertility, she does not do so. Rather, she thinks it is so important for Abram to have a son that she is willing to give Hagar to him.

c. "After Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years." R. Ammi said in the name of Resh Lakish: What is the source of what we learned that if a man married a woman and spent ten years with her and she did not bear a child, he may not stay without children? This verse, "After Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years," proves that the time he spent outside of the land of Israel was not included in the reckoning. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:3 and P.T. Yebamot 6:6)

These two sources explain that Abram had not divorced Sarai or taken another wife until after they had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years. They lived together through many years of barrenness, more years than necessary, and he was still with her. The reason that Abram finally agreed to take Hagar as his concubine/wife was in response to Sarai's patience which has run out.

d. The rabbis taught that a man is not permitted to stay with a woman who has not borne children after ten years. He is not allowed to be exempt from life's duties. He must either give his wife her ketubah, i.e., divorce her, or marry another woman who is likely to bear children, as it is said: "mikaytz eser shanim"

literally (after ten years). (Sheiltot, beginning of Toldot and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:3)

The writers of these midrashim wanted to insure that people bear children. As a result, they made a time limit on the years a man could spend with his wife without having children. In addition, we see how the rabbis sought to justify all new legislation by showing how it was derived from the Torah text. This form is called midrash halachah. This midrash explains the reason why Abram agreed to take Hagar as his wife; from a legal point of view, he had no choice. He must fulfill his legal responsibilities to bear children, despite the cost. One can deduce that the writers of these texts were uncomfortable with Abram taking Hagar as his wife.

e. "And [Sarai] gave her [Hagar] to her husband Abram as concubine." She gave her to him, but not to another; she gave her to him to be a wife, not to be a concubine! (Bereshit Rabbah 45:3 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This passage emphatically notes the special circumstances of Sarai's giving Hagar to Abram. Sarai gave Hagar only to Abram; she would not have given her to any other man. Midrashically this explanation can be seen from the words, "vatitain otah l'Avram ishah" (and gave her to her husband Abram); Hagar was to be given only to Abram.

The second midrashic comment also can be seen from words in the Biblical text: "lo l'ishah" (as concubine). While the original biblical intent of these words is as concubine, the text uses the word, "ishah," which can be

translated as wife. This midrash states that Hagar's status was raised from handmaid to wife; fitting for Abram's partner and mother of his child. The writer must have been uncomfortable with the idea that Abram, our father, could have had a concubine. In addition, while Sarai had wanted Abram to take Hagar, she did not expect her handmaid to be raised to the same status as she, of wife. One can now better understand Hagar's change in attitude toward Sarah and Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar.

16:4 "And he cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem."

Commentary: Abram suddenly took an active role after his initial passivity: he cohabited with Hagar. The text does not include any discussion between them. Now, however, the focus of our attention shifts to Hagar. The text states that she conceived. However, the text is sufficiently ambiguous: one can read it and understand that she got pregnant after only one act of sexual intercourse. From this perspective, her pregnancy is all the more dramatic and supernatural. On the other hand, one can read the verse to mean that she conceived over a period of time.

Hagar is now the central, active character: "she conceived," "she saw," "her mistress," and "her esteem."

While the two sentences are condensed into one verse, a span of time obviously has elapsed and the story is evolving.

The last phrase of the verse is of great interest. The reader is given a small, tempting taste of the emotion which must have surrounded these interactions. Once Hagar became pregnant, the esteem she had for her mistress was diminished, yet Sarai is still referred to as 'her mistress.' There is an ironic contrast between the phrases, "mistress" and "lowering of esteem." In addition, the language used in this verse is passive. We now more clearly see how much social standing and esteem was tied up with a woman's ability to have children. Once it is verified that it is Sarai who can not have children, Hagar loses esteem for her. Finally, it is important to note that Hagar is not specifically referred to as "handmaid" in this verse. Her relationship to Sarai is noted by the use of these words: "her mistress." Now that Hagar has become pregnant, the relationship between Sarai and her is strained even further. I suggest the words, "her mistress," were meant to be understood ironically.

Midrashim:

a. "He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived." R. Levi, the son of R. Hayta, said: She became pregnant from the first [act of] intercourse. R. Eleazar said: A woman never conceives from the first [act of] intercourse. An objection is raised, surely it is written, "Thus the two daughters of Lot came to be with child by their father" (Gen. 19:36)? Said R. Tanhuma: By an act of willpower they conceived from the first act of intercourse. R. Hanina b. Pazzi said: Thorns are neither weeded nor sown, yet of their own accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow.

(Bereshit Rabbah 45:4, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:4)

This passage uses a technique called "asmachta," in which a scriptural text is used as a support for a rabbinic enactment. R. Tanhuma concludes his comment, using the story of Lot and his daughters as evidence that Hagar became pregnant after the first act of intercourse. Thus, they read the text quite literally: "He cohabited with Hagar [one act of sexual intercourse], and she conceived."

The analogy between the amount of care needed to grow thorns and wheat is very clear and clever. The author of this passage is trying to say that there is a significant difference between Sarai and Hagar. "A thorn grows wild, is prickly, is not considered valuable or beautiful, and is not gathered for any use. Hagar became pregnant after the first act of intercourse because she is like a thorn which simply springs up. On the other hand, wheat, which requires much pain and toil, is considered valuable and necessary for human sustenance. Sarai was not able to conceive without much pain and toil, but she and her offspring were considered to be valuable and necessary for the perpetuation of the Hebrew tribe.

b. "When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem." Hagar said to herself: "It must be that I am more worthy before Adonai than Sarai, my mistress. All those years that my mistress was with my master she did not conceive, and from one act of intercourse Adonai allowed me to conceive." (Sefer Hayashar to Gen. 16:4)

This midrash is a wonderful explication of Hagar's thoughts which caused her to think less of her mistress.

Hagar continued to refer to Sarai as "mistress," but she forgot her place, and thought of herself as superior.

Hagar's attitude is the reason for Sarai's distress in Gen. 16:5 and the justification for treating her so badly in Gen. 16:6.

c. "Her mistress was lowered in her esteem." This was Abram's fifth test. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:4)

Abram was being tested to see how he would handle Hagar's change in attitude toward Sarai and Sarai's complaining about Hagar's pregnancy and growing lack of respect toward her.

d. Ladies used to come to inquire how Sarai was, and she would say to them: "Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman [Hagar]." Hagar would tell them: "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: She appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, so many years would not have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!" Said Sarah: "Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No, I will argue the matter with her master!" (Bereshit Rabbah 45:4 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This midrash reflects the belief that the righteous are rewarded, while the wicked are punished. Thus, Sarai must not be as righteous as she appears, otherwise she would have been rewarded with children for her good behavior. This passage is the link between Gen. 16:4 and 16:5. In Gen. 16:4, Sarai's response to Hagar's change in attitude toward her is silence, while in Gen. 16:5 her anger toward Hagar is directed at Abram. Sarai never directly tells Hagar that she feels she has insulted her.

16:5 "And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault! I myself gave my maid into your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. Let Adonai decide between you and me!'"

Commentary: The focus shifts back to Sarai as the central character. She does not speak directly to Hagar nor does she confront Hagar about her behavior. Rather, she blames Abram for the wrong done her. She says, "chamasi alecha" (the wrong done me is your fault!). The word "chamas" is a strictly legal term. Speiser adds to our understanding of the term. He writes:

The Code of Hammurabi states explicitly that a slave girl who was elevated to the status of a concubine must not claim equality with her mistress (par. 146). Sarah is thus invoking her legal rights, and she holds her husband responsible for the offense. (Genesis, p.118)

The reader is now aware of the reason for the intensity of her feelings. Earlier, Sarai is the one who instigated the new relationship between Abram and Hagar as she was legally responsible to do. At that point, she thought that she might benefit (Gen. 16:2). Now, however, she appears as a angry wife who had fulfilled her legal responsibilities, but whose plan did not turn out the way she intended. While Sarai wanted Hagar to bear Abram's child which she would raise, she did not expect her handmaid to laud it over her. Her desperate reaction can be seen in the strong language she used to attack Abram! When she says, "Let Adonai decide between you and me," she is demanding that he act. She is

feeling resentful and jealous and we do not know what Abram feels. Her statement is a reaction to Abram's total passivity. Sarai is very unhappy with her situation, but is unable to do anything by herself to change it. She must turn to Abram as the one capable of resolving her very difficult problem. The next verse is Abram's response to her accusation.

Midrashim:

a. "And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault!'" R. Yudan explained in the name of R. Judah: You wronged me with words! Why do you remain silent when you hear me insulted? (Bereshit Rabbah 45:5 and Yalkut Shimon, Lech L'cha #79)

The writer of this midrash is interpreting "chamas" (wrong), as "chomsani" (stolen). Sarai is complaining that Abram **robbed her** of the words he should have spoken on her behalf.

b. R. Berekiah explained in the name of R. Abba: I have a grievance against you. Imagine two men incarcerated in prison, and as the king passes, one of them cries out, "Execute justice for me!" The king orders him to be released, whereupon his fellow-prisoner says to him, "I have a grievance against you, for had you said: 'Execute justice for us,' he would have released me just as he has released you. But now that you said, 'Execute justice for me,' he released you but not me. Similarly, had you said, 'We are childless,' then as God gave you a child, so would God have given me a child. Since, however, you said, 'And I continue childless' (Gen. 15:2), God gave **you** a child but not me!" This may also be compared to two people who went to borrow seed from the king. One of them asked: 'Lend me seed,' and he ordered: 'Give it to him.' His companion said to him: 'I have a grievance against you. Had you asked: 'Lend us seed, he would have given me just as he gave you. Now, however, that you said: 'Lend me seed,' he has given you but not me.' Similarly, had you said, 'Since You have granted us no offspring,' then as God gave you so God would have given me. Now, however that you said, 'Since You have granted me no seed' (Gen. 15:3), God gave to you

but not to me." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:5 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

Sarai is very angry with Abram and says, "The wrong done me is your fault!" This midrash explains "the wrong," as Abram's selfishness. He could have said that they both were childless (Gen. 15:2), and then God would have also given Sarai a child. Since Abram did not include Sarai in his plea to God, she was not given a child.

c. R. Joshua b. Nehemiah said: Women are also known for being scratchers. The proof is, "chamasi alecha" (the wrong done me is your fault!) (Bereshit Rabbah 45:5)

This derash is derived from using the peal form of the root, "chms" which means **scratch**. Sarai is pictured here as being very active in complaining about Hagar to Abram.

d. R. Judah said: Is it possible that the righteous woman [Sarai] said to Abraham, "The wrong done me is your fault?" No, rather she said to him: "I command you to pray for Hagar; I'll even pray with you on her behalf. You did not pray for me when the Holy One said to you, 'I will give all these lands to you and your offspring' (Gen. 26:3). You should have said to God: 'What is the sin of Sarai, my wife? When You said to me, 'Go forth from your native land' (Gen. 12:1), we went forth as one.' You should have also said: 'Ruler of the universe, all the mitzvot that I do, she participates with me.' Finally, you should not have said, 'Since You have granted me no offspring' (Gen. 15:3); you should have said, 'Since You have granted us no offspring.' You prayed for yourself and you forgot about me!" (Midrash Hadash to Gen. 16:5)

This is a wonderful midrash which captures the righteous indignation which Sarai felt over Abram's silence. This passage justifies her strong language; he was totally passive and self-absorbed when he should have been concerned about both of them.

e. R. Abin said: One who invokes the judgment of Heaven against ones fellow human being is punished first [for ones own sins], as it says, "And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault!'" and it is subsequently written, "and Abraham proceeded

to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her" (Gen. 23:2). (B.T. Rosh Hashanah 16b, B.T. Baba Kamma 93a, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:5)

This passage paints a negative portrait of Sarai's outburst against Abram. As a result of her improper behavior, her punishment was that she had to die before Abram. I am surprised there are so many commentators who believed that an early death was the appropriate punishment for her. A similiar passage is also found in Bereshit Rabbah 45:5, but it is quoted somewhat differently.

f. "Now that she sees that she is pregnant." When Sarai saw that Hagar had become pregnant by Abram, she was jealous of of her handmaid and she said to herself: "It can not be that she is better than me." Then she said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault," because at the time you prayed before Adonai for offspring, you should have prayed that I would also bear a child. When I speak to Hagar in your presence, she scorns my words because she is pregnant and you do not say anything to her. Finally, she said to him, "Let Adonai decide between you and me," about what you did to me." (Sefer Hayashar, Lech L'cha to Gen. 16:5)

g. Sarai said to Abram, "My judgment and my pain are in your hands. I left my land, my birthplace, and my father's house (Gen 12), and you brought me with you on faith. I came up with you, I went with you before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and I said that you are my brother so that they would not kill you. I took Hagar, the Egyptian, as my servant and I gave her to you as a wife. You said to me that she is going to give birth. If that child that she will give birth to is the only means by which I will be built up, I [will suffer] being looked upon contemptuously by her. Therefore, let God be revealed and **judge between me and you**, and let God be filled with mercy upon me and you. May God make peace between me and you, and let the world be filled from me and you. Then, we will not need the son of Hagar. She is one of the peoples of the world who threw you into the fire of the Chaldeans." (Targum Yerushalmi to Gen. 16:5)

This midrash restates Sarai's claim that Abram is responsible for her pain and suffering. In this passage, she retells the history of their years together in order to emphasize that she has been a loyal and brave wife, enduring

much travail through their wanderings. She prays that God will judge between them, find her meritorious, make peace between them, and give them children. The author is justifying her later mistreatment of Hagar who is unworthy. This perspective is seen in the sentence: "she is one of the peoples of the world who threw you into the fire of the Chaldeans."

h. There are ten dotted passages in the Torah and one of them is, "Let Adonai decide between you and me!" This passage is dotted to show that she spoke to him only against Hagar. (Avot D'Rabbi Nathan, chapter 37, and Massechet Soferim 6:3)

Sarai said these strong words, "Let Adonai decide between you and me," so that Abram would think about the situation. She did not literally intend God to judge between them. The same passage is quoted in later collections of midrashim, however they add a "yaish omrim" (others say): that the dot refers to those who sowed dissension between him and her. (Sifrei Bamidbar, Behaalotcha #69, Bamidbar Rabbah 3:13, Midrash Haserot V'yetayrot to Gen. 16:5, and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha to Gen. 16:5) Nevertheless they do not spell out who was trying to cause an argument between Sarai and Abram in their moment of strife. One could imagine, that they were referring to Hagar and Ishmael.

i. A woman who says to her husband, "Let Adonai decide between you and me," should do so in a manner of request [asking God to decide] between them, as we found in the case of Abram and Sarai. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Both of the passages included above attempt to soften the caustic nature of Sarai's words. She was not trying to

accuse Abram of any wrongdoing; she was meekly asking him to listen to her. These midrashim stand in sharp contrast to earlier passages in which the writer emphasizes her anger.

j. Rav said: A man should always be careful in the oppression of his wife because from her tears, he should know that he is about to hurt her. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:5)

Abram was not aware of the pain he was causing Sarai.

This midrash cautions men to be more sensitive to the feelings of their wives.

k. "Veinecha" (**between you**) is written but, R. Hoshaya said: "baincha" (**your son**) is meant, seeing that it is already written, "And he cohabited with Hagar and she conceived" (Gen. 16:4). Why is it further stated, "Behold you will conceive" (Gen. 16:11)? This teaches that an evil eye entered Hagar [after Sarai uttered this statement], and she miscarried. R. Hanina said: If Elisha, the prophet, would have said to Sarai in the holy tongue, it would have been enough. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:5 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This is a very harsh statement about Sarai's character.

Her statement to Abram, "Let Adonai decide between you and me," was of such power that it caused an evil eye to enter Hagar, causing her to miscarry. This interpretation may solve the textual problem in Gen. 16:11, but it is a harsh indictment of Sarai.

16:6 "Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.' Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her."

Commentary: Abram speaks directly to Sarai for the first

time in this chapter. He is responding to the depth of her anger and frustration. He is beginning to understand that Sarai feels as if she has lost control. At first she lost control over having children; God was in control (Gen. 16:2). Now, she has lost control over Hagar's respect toward her as "mistress." He answers her demand for action, saying: "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." As a result, she now has regained control over Hagar because Abram has put Hagar in her hands.

Note, in this regard, that Speiser writes the following:

"Although Abraham told Sarah to do to Hagar as she pleased, Sarah stops short of expelling her slave. Hammurabi Law 146 would forbid it in these circumstances, as does Deuteronomy (21:14). But there is nothing in either source (the meaning of the key verb in Deuteronomy is 'to pledge for debts,' not 'to treat brutally') to discourage intolerable abuse, which eventually drove Hagar to flight." (Genesis, page 121)

Abram says, "Deal with her as you think right." He could have simply told her: 'Deal with her as you want.' He was hinting to Sarai that she treat Hagar nicely, as seen in the word, "tov" (right). Yet, Abram did not show much concern for Hagar, his concubine, or their child which she was carrying. One is very surprised by Abram's passivity; did he not know that Sarai was very upset and, as a result, would treat Hagar harshly? Why was he not worried about Hagar's pregnancy? She was carrying **their** child!

The Biblical text does not include any discussion between Sarai and Hagar. It simply states: "Sarai treated

her harshly, and she ran away from her." Hagar is referred to only indirectly as "your maid," and by the use of pronouns. Through the use of this literary technique, the author is underscoring Hagar's menial status; she has no control over her destiny.

Midrashim:

a. "Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands.' " He said: "I do not care at all what happens to her [Hagar]. It is written, 'Since you had your will of her, you must not enslave her' (Deut. 21:14); after we vexed her, can we now enslave her again?" (Bereshit Rabbah 45:6 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

Abram refuses to take any action to solve the problem between Sarai and Hagar. He does not care to help Hagar because she insulted Sarai, yet he is unwilling to do Hagar any harm because she is his wife.

b. The text [Gen. 16:6] tells of Abraham our father's merit. His soul is humble and he did not react terribly. Rather, he told Sarai, "Deal with her as you think right." (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:6)

Abram could have reacted to Sarai's distress by becoming defensive. However, he did not respond in this manner. Rather, he answered her request for his permission and, as a result, he is praised. One questions this interpretation of the Biblical text since he does not appear to be acting in a praiseworthy manner. How can we consider his acquiescence to be a model of conduct?

c. He said: "I do not care at all what happens to her. It is written, 'Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.' While it is written, 'He shall not have the right to sell her to outsiders, since he broke faith with her' (Exodus 21:8); after we have made her a wife, shall we make her a handmaid again? I do not care for the better or the worse what happens to her; hence it is written, 'Then Sarai treated her harshly, and

she ran away from her.'" R. Abba said: She [Sarai] restrained her from cohabitation. R. Berechiah said: She slapped her face with a slipper. R. Berechiah said in R. Abba's name: She made her carry her water buckets and bath towels to the baths. (Bereshit Rabbah 45:6 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This midrash explicates the outcome of Abram's passivity; Hagar is mistreated and runs away from her [Sarai]. The text says that she only ran away from Sarai, yet given their joint mistreatment of Hagar, one would expect her to run away from them both. While Abram and Sarai's treatment of Hagar might have been within the letter of the law, were they in conformity with its spirit? One seems to overtly mistreat her, while the other causes her to suffer through his negligence.

Several rabbis attempt to deduce how Sarai mistreated Hagar. Each of the three answers portrays Sarai as a petty, jealous, angry woman who is very threatened by Hagar. Their relationship has reached rock bottom.

16:7 "An angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur."

Commentary: The focus of characters has shifted from Sarai to Hagar. She has not yet spoken a word; the reader only knows that, in reaction to being mistreated, she ran away from Sarai.

The Biblical writer is describing the spot at which the angel of Adonai found her. He includes this seemingly

superfluous detail in order to orient his listener/reader. He uses the motif of a spring, water, as a foreshadowing of the incident in which Hagar and Ishmael are expelled into the desert and their water runs out (Gen. 21:15). Water is a well known symbol; it signifies both life and death. The spring is later identified in Gen. 16:14 as the well which was called Beer-lahai-roi.

Midrashim:

a. R. Shimon wept and said: "The handmaid of my ancestor's house was found worthy of meeting an angel twice, and I am not worthy even to meet him once." (B.T. Meilah 17b)

This rabbinic comment refers to two Biblical episodes in which Hagar met an angel: Gen. 16:7 and Gen. 21:17.

This midrash portrays Hagar in a very positive light.

b. "An angel of Adonai found her." This verse comes to teach that all good thoughts [and all good deeds] that come to a person are brought by an angel. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:7)

This exegesis is unusual because it can be understood to mean that Hagar was worthy of the concern of an angel of Adonai. Generally, the midrashim are not sympathetic to Hagar and her plight.

16:8 "And [the angel] said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' "

Commentary: The Biblical author continually emphasizes

Hagar's lowly status; she is **Sarai's slave**. Even now that she is pregnant with Abram's child, she remains Sarai's property. Hagar responds to the angel's question and refers to Sarai as 'her **mistress**.' She is unable to disavow their prior relationship.

The angel asks her, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" These seem to be peculiar questions coming from an angel of Adonai; doesn't the angel already know the answer? This conversation needs to be understood as a literary device which opens up the discussion between Hagar and the angel of God. The question really is: 'what has happened to you?' At this point, Hagar does not know with whom she is talking. Additionally, Hagar does not answer the angel's second question, "and where are you going?"

Midrashim:

a. "Where have you come from." "Oh, you came from there (zeh). In the future twelve princes will come forth from you, as seen by the use of gematria of the word "zeh" (this), which equals twelve. (Bereshit Rabbati, Lech L'cha, page 72)

b. "And where are you going?" "You are walking to a place of mourning." (Bereshit Rabbati, Lech L'cha, page 72)

This midrash is important because it notes the question of the angel which Hagar never answered. It implies that she had been walking in the desert aimlessly, toward her death, until the angel came upon the scene.

c. The well which was called Beer-lahai-roi (Gen. 16:14) appeared to Hagar at two times. One time it appeared when the angel found her, for if she would have moved from there, she would have died, as it is written, "and where (ana) are you

going?" As it is said, "I have not eaten of it while in mourning (b'oni)" (Deut. 26:14). (Bereshit Rabbati, Lech L'cha, page 71)

The angel was able to find her because she was at the well, a familiar meeting spot. Water signifies life, which the angel brings to her. She had not eaten because it was as if she were in mourning after being mistreated by Sarai.

d. "And [the angel] said, Hagar, slave of Sarai." So goes the proverb: "If one person tells you that you have ass's ears, do not believe this one; if two tell it to you, order a halter." Thus, Abraham said [firstly], "Your maid is in your hands" (Gen. 16:6); the angel said [secondly], "Hagar, slave of Sarai." Hence, [she responded], "And she said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'" (Bereshit Rabbah 45:7 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

This passage notes the repeated emphasis upon Hagar's status vis-a'-vis Sarai. In spite of her heightened status, from slave to Abram's wife to mother of his child, Hagar recognizes Sarai as her mistress. The writer of this passage wanted to insure that readers knew that there was an intrinsic difference between the two of them, which even Hagar could not put aside. Since both Abram and the angel referred to her as slave, she called Sarai, "gevirte" (my mistress), for she began to believe this herself. The midrash reflects the belief that once we take on the qualities others ascribe to us, it becomes their fault!

e. "And she said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'" Sarai is called Hagar's mistress because she came down very hard on Hagar. Another reason: Sarai is referred to as Hagar's mistress because she continues to be responsible for Hagar. Sarai tried to help Hagar, but she was not able to change Hagar, who was known for her lewdness and idolatry. The proof text is, "Because of your filthy lewdness, because I have purged you and you were not purged, you shall not be purged from your filthiness

any more, till I have satisfied My fury upon you" (Ezekiel 24:13). (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:8)

There are several possible interpretations listed above concerning Sarai's relationship with Hagar. One perspective concludes that Sarai acted appropriately toward Hagar, seeing Hagar as an idolator, undeserving of being pregnant with Abram's child. The other perspective views Hagar as being mistreated by Sarai.

16:9 "And the angel of Adonai said to her, 'Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.'"

Commentary: This verse is the beginning of an ongoing discussion between the angel of Adonai and Hagar. The following two verses also begin in this same way: "And the angel of Adonai said to her." It is important to note that the author specifically tells the reader whence the angel comes; the angel is "of Adonai."

The angel of Adonai commands her to return to her mistress and also to submit to her harsh treatment. The writer uses the following two verbal command forms: "shuvi" (go back), and "hit'ani" (submit). The angel does not give any explanation to Hagar why she should follow these commands. Yet, God seems sympathetic to her plight as seen in the angel's description of her treatment as being harsh. And later does the reader find the following promise to Hagar: "I will greatly increase your offspring

and they shall be too many to count" (Gen. 16:10). One deduces that this reward is conditional on her return to Sarai.

Finally, the angel commands her to "return to your mistress," rather than to go back to Abram. Clearly, the author is familiar with the family law of that time; Hagar reports to Sarai, not to Abram.

Midrashim:

a. "And the angel of Adonai said to her, 'Go back to your mistress.'" "And the angel of Adonai said to her, 'I will greatly increase your offspring" (Gen. 16:10). How many angels visited her? R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: "Five, for each time "speech" is mentioned it refers to an angel." The rabbis said: "Four, this being the number of times the word "angel" occurs." R. Hiyya observed: "Come and see how great is the difference between the earlier generations and the later ones! What did Manoach say to his wife? 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God' (Judges 13:22); actually they had seen an angel. Yet Hagar, a bondmaid, sees five angels and is not afraid of them!" R. Aha said: "The fingernail of the fathers rather than the stomach of the sons!" R. Isaac quoted: "'She oversees the activities of her household' (Proverbs 31:27); Abraham's household were seers, so she [Hagar] was accustomed to them." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:7, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:9)

The different tradents are each explicating the number of angels which Hagar saw. On the peshat (plain meaning) level, the phrase, "And an angel of Adonai said to her," is simply repeated several times. For the writers of midrash, however, since the phrase occurs more than once, it calls for explication. Thus, it must mean that the text refers to different angels.

I see this passage as a very positive rabbinic portraiture of Hagar. The Rabbis conclude that she deserves

great merit even though she is called "bondmaid." As a reward for her trials and tribulations, she merits encountering many angels.

16:10 "And the angel of Adonai said to her, 'I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.'"

Commentary: As noted in the commentary to Gen. 16:9, these two verses are tightly linked. In Gen. 16:9 we read of the angel's order, while in Gen. 16:10 we are told the reward for her following the angel's command. Speiser theorizes about the author's purpose of including this verse in this chapter:

It is time to account for the place of the Ishmaelites in the scheme of things, the role of the Bedouin who are always in evidence on the border between the desert and the sown, a group as defiant and uncontrollable as the young woman from whom the narrative derives them. (Genesis, page 121)

While I do not accept Speiser's analysis of Hagar, I do agree with his understanding of the purpose of these verses.

16:11 "The angel of Adonai said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; You shall call him Ishmael, for Adonai has paid heed to your suffering.'"

Commentary: The angel's comments to Hagar are prophetic. First, though the angel tells her that she is pregnant which she already knows, it is the second part of the phrase which is prophetic: "and [you] shall bear a son." Now that Hagar knows she is carrying a male child, the angel tells her the name of her unborn son, "Ishmael," with its aetiology, "for Adonai has paid heed to your suffering." There is a wordplay between the root in the name Ishmael, "shm" and the root of the verb "shm" (has paid heed).

I understand these words as describing a significant improvement in her situation: the angel has come to save her! This act shows God's tremendous concern for her and her son who will give birth to great nations as opposed to Abram's lack of concern.

Midrashim:

a. "The angel of Adonai said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son;'" This phrase teaches that because of all [Hagar's] suffering, she had a miscarriage. Thus, the angel came and told her that she would have a son. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:11)

This midrash is drawn from the form of this verb, "vayoladt" (and shall bear a son). The verbal form is in the past tense; Hagar had been pregnant but miscarried. So, the angel came to tell her that she would become pregnant and bear another son.

b. Four [children] were named before they were born and they include: Isaac, Ishmael, Josiah, and Solomon. The proof for Ishmael is the verse, "You shall call him Ishmael." (P.T. Berachot 1:6 (11b) and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79)

c. "You shall call him Ishmael." Why is he called Ishmael?

It is because in the future the Holy One will hear the cry of the captive. (Midrash Hadash to Gen. 16:11)

This passage is a wonderful link between Gen. 16 and Gen. 21. The midrash is referring to the future time when God will hear the cry of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert.

16:13 "And she called Adonai who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi,' by which she meant, 'Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!'"

Commentary: In the commentary to Gen. 16:8, I noted that Hagar never asks with whom she is speaking. Only the reader is told that she is talking with "malach Adonai" (an angel of Adonai). In this verse, it is written that she called Adonai who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi,' instead of "malach Adonai." The writer is vague regarding with whom exactly Hagar spoke.

Hagar says, "Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!" She is profoundly moved by her encounter with God. She realizes how special it was to have been seen by God. Adonai took note of her suffering and after this encounter with God, she was able to see the well which saved their lives.

Midrashim:

a. "And she called Adonai who spoke to her," R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Johannan in the name of R. Eliezer b. R. Simon said: "The Holy One never condescended to converse with a woman save

with that righteous woman [Sarah], and that too was because of a particular cause. R. Abba b. Kahana said in R. Biry'a's name: "And what a roundabout way God took in order to speak with her, as it is written, 'And God said, 'Nay, but you did laugh' (Gen. 18:15). But it is written, 'And she called Adonai who spoke to her'?" R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah answered in R. Idi's name: "That was through an angel." R. Leazar said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: "That was through the medium of Shem." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:13 and 48:20, and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #80)

The question posed in this midrash is: 'With whom did Hagar speak?' It contains the varied opinions of many rabbis and concludes that God spoke indirectly to Hagar through an angel. God did not talk directly to Hagar because Adonai only spoke directly to Sarai, that righteous woman. We must conclude that these rabbis did not consider Hagar as righteous a woman as Sarai. For several of the rabbis, it was even difficult to imagine God speaking with any woman!

b. "You are El-roi," R. Aibu explained: "You see the sufferings of the persecuted." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #80)

This midrash further explicates the aetiology of Ishmael's name: "God has paid heed to your suffering." As noted in the commentary to Gen. 16:11, I question the extent to which God lessened Hagar's suffering.

c. "Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!" She [Hagar] said: "I have been granted not only speech [with an angel], but even with royalty, too, as you read, 'That You have brought me thus far?' (2 Sam. 7:18) I was favoured [to see the angel] not only when I was with my mistress, but even now that I am alone." R. Samuel said: "This may be compared to a noble lady whom the king ordered to walk before him. She did so leaning on her maid and pressing her face against her. Thus, her maid saw [the king], while she did not see him." (Bereshit Rabbah 45:13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #80)

This passage contains a view contrary to the first midrash to Gen. 16:13. There, the rabbis believed that God

midrash to Gen. 16:13. There, the rabbis believed that God did not speak to Hagar, while here Hagar not only was granted speech with an angel, but she saw God. I believe this midrash is an important link in the evolving picture of Hagar. She was viewed by the Rabbis as being more than an angry, disrespectful maidservant. She was seen in very positive, as well as negative terms. This midrash stresses that Hagar was able to see God, as it said: "Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!", while Sarai never saw God.

16:14 "Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered."

Commentary: The story of the angel and Hagar at the well is the second aetiology in this chapter. It helps explain the reason the well has its name. In addition, geographical information is given which helps orient the reader. Finally, the well is important because Isaac seems to settle there later (Gen. 25:11).

Midrashim:

a. "Beer-lahai-roi." The well is so named because it helped sustain life. It appeared to Hagar two times; if it would not have, she would have died. (Bereshit Rabbati, Lech L'cha to Gen. 16:14)

This idea appeared earlier in a midrash to Gen. 16:8.

16:15 "And Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael."

Commentary: This verse abruptly shifts from the interaction between the angel and Hagar to a declaration that Hagar bore a son to Abram. The angel had commanded her to return to Sarai, yet there is no discussion of Hagar's return to Sarai and Abram's camp. How did Sarai respond upon Hagar's arrival? How did Hagar feel? I read the lack of details about Hagar's return as her unhappy acceptance of a relationship with Sarai over which she had no control. Her choices were straightforward: she could either die in the desert and kill their child, or return to the camp and accept whatever life there would bring.

Only in this verse at the conclusion of the chapter is Hagar finally referred to only as "Hagar." The text does not include any other terms which it previously used to identify her, such as Sarai's maidservant and Abram's concubine. Now, she is her own person, but this only occurs after she bears her son to Abram. Next, the text declares that she bore a son to Abram and he named him Ishmael, as the reader had been told earlier. I understand the lack of details about their reunion as emphasizing the new path her relationship with Abram was taking. The paucity of superfluous details in the verse underscores Abram's love

for her which had developed during her absence, and which flowered upon her return as they waited together for the birth of their son Ishmael.

Midrashim:

a. "And Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael." Abraham knew the name of the son, Ishmael, through the means of the holy spirit, just as the angel told Hagar. Thus, in terms of [involvement with naming], Hagar was not needed. (Bereshit Rabbati, Lech L'cha to Gen. 16:14)

The view expressed in the midrash listed above is not surprising, for it expresses a negative attitude toward the importance of the woman's involvement in major events, such as naming a child.

16:16 "Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram."

Commentary: The chapter concludes with Abram having been re-established as the main character. It emphasizes that Hagar's role [and that of women in general] was to give birth to children, especially sons for their husbands or masters. Here the Biblical text provides a clear answer to the question of Hagar's status after bearing Abram the son he had long awaited. The reader, however, must wait until Genesis 21 for further explication of the relationship between Sarai and Hagar.

PART ONE: SECTION B

GENESIS CHAPTER 21

Introduction

In the intervening chapters since Genesis 16, several important events have occurred in the lives of Abram and Sarai. El Shaddai has appeared to Abram and made a covenant with him and his offspring, promising, "You shall be the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:4). As a sign of this mutual contract, their names have been changed: Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17:5), and Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:15).

God made the following promise in changing Sarai's name, "I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her" (Gen. 17:16). Abraham's response to this news was to laugh (Gen. 17:17), which is the second aetiology of the name "Yitzhak," meaning **laughter**. God continues saying, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come" (Gen. 17:19). Not only is Abraham told that Sarah will give birth to a son, but God tells him the name of his son; important pieces of information for the upcoming events.

In chapter 17, Ishmael is mentioned while Hagar is not included. Abraham responds to the news of the upcoming birth of a son by Sarah, saying, "Oh that Ishmael might live by your favor" (Gen. 17:18), which shows his concern for his son. God says, "As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I

hereby bless him; I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year" (Gen. 17:20). This Biblical text does not include Abraham's reaction to this statement. Its purpose is to authoritatively declare the position of Sarah's son Isaac as heir. Hagar's son Ishmael will not inherit Abraham's wealth, nor will he be considered part of Abraham's everlasting covenant with God.

An additional sign of the covenant was circumcision for Abraham and every male in his household (Gen. 17:10). Thus, Abraham circumcises his son Ishmael who was thirteen at this time (Gen. 17:25).

In chapter 18, Abraham and Sarah were visited by three men. One said, "I will return to you when life is due, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:10). Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent and laughed to herself, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old" (Gen 18:12). God asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for Adonai? I will return to you at the time that life is due, and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:13). This incident is the third aetiology of Isaac's name. The reader is now prepared for the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21, which is understood as a miracle, because of the their advanced ages.

21:1 "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised, and Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken."

Commentary: The first eight verses in the chapter contain details about the conception and birth of Isaac. This first verse as translated into English seems to be clumsy. The original Hebrew is clearly understood; it is parallel language to emphasize the miraculous nature of Sarah's conception. The first verb, "pakad" (took note), is synonymous with the first verb in the second phrase, "yaya'as" (did). The second verb, "amar" (promised), is parallel with the second verb in the second phrase, "debar" (spoken). The phrases "as God had promised" and "as God had spoken" emphasize God's fulfillment of a promise made to Sarah in Genesis 17:16 and Genesis 18:10.

Midrashim:

a. "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised." It is thus that Scripture writes, "then shall all the trees of the field know that it is I, Adonai, who has abased the lofty tree and exalted the lowly tree, who has dried up the green tree and made the withered tree bud. I, Adonai, have spoken, and I will act" (Ezekiel 17:24). R. Judan said: "Not like those who speak but do not perform." R. Berekiyah commented: 'I, Adonai, have spoken:' when did God speak it? 'I will return to you when life is due' (Gen. 18:10). 'and I will act,' thus it is written, 'Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised.'" (Bereshit Rabbah 53:1)

This midrash uses the verse from Ezekiel to prove that when God makes a promise, God fulfills it. Thus, since

in Gen. 18:10 God promises Sarah she will have a son, now in Gen. 21:1 God has come to carry it out.

b. "Can mortals be acquitted by God? Can a person be cleared by one's Maker" (Job 4:17)? Is it possible for a mortal to be more righteous than one's Creator? It is said, "Can a person be cleared by one's Maker" (Job 4:17)? Now what did Elisha say to the Shunammite: "At this season next year, you will be embracing a son" (2 Kings 4:16). The Shunammite replied, "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (2 Kings 4:17). Likewise, the angels who gave the good tidings to Sarah said to her, "I will return to you when life is due" (Gen. 18:10). Those angels knowing that they live forever could say, "I will return to you when life is due" (Gen. 18:10). He [Abraham] replied: 'But I am mortal, here today and dead tomorrow; who knows whether I will be alive or dead [by then].' In regard to [the first passage], it is written, "At this season next year, you will be embracing a son" (2 Kings 4:16). Now what is written further? "The woman conceived and bore a son at the same season the following year" (2 Kings 4:17). Now if the words of a mere mortal were fulfilled, how much more so those of the Holy One, as it is said, "And Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised" (Gen. 21:1). (Bereshit Rabbah 53:2)

This passage uses the incident in 2 Kings of a mortal emissary of God promising the birth of a son to show that the prediction in Gen. 18:10 will surely culminate in the birth of Isaac in Gen. 21. The idea is similar to that of the midrash listed above.

c. "Though the fig tree does not bud" (Hab. 3:17) alludes to Abraham, as in the verse, "Your fathers seemed to Me like the first fig to ripen on a fig tree" (Hosea 9:10). "And no yield is on the vine" (Hab. 3:17) alludes to Sarah, as you read, "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house" (Ps. 128:3). "Though the olive crop has "kechash" (failed)" (Hab. 3:17) refers to the faces of the men who gave good tidings to Sarah which shone like an olive. Were they "kachasheem" (lying)? No, but "the fields produce no grain" (Hab. 3:17), which means "though sheep have vanished from the fold" (Hab. 3:17). This has the same connotation as in the verse, "For you, My flock, flock that I tend, are people; and I, your Shepherd, am your God—declares Adonai God" (Ez. 34:21). Additionally it is written, "and no cattle are in the pen" (Hab. 3:17) which has the same meaning as in this verse, "Ephraim became a trained heifer, but preferred to thresh" (Hos. 10:11). Subsequently, however, Sarah exclaimed: "What! Am I to lose faith in my Creator! Heaven forbid! I will not lose faith in my Creator, "Yet will I rejoice

in Adonai, exult in the God who delivers Me" (Hab. 3:18). The Holy One said to her: "Since you did not lose your faith, I, too, will not give you cause to lose faith." Thus, it is written, "Adonai took note of Sarah." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:3 and Pesikta Rabbati 42:5)

This midrash is a wonderful example of the rabbinic style of linking disparate verses together to prove an idea. Here, the verses from the prophet Habakkuk prove that just as Israel has suffered in the past, did not lose faith, and was rewarded, so, too, Sarah suffered, did not lose her faith, and was rewarded with a son for maintaining her faith.

d. "Adonai took note of Sarah." R. Aha said: 'The Holy One is a trustee: Amalek deposited with God bundles of thorns [wrong-doings], therefore God returned to him bundles of thorns [punishments], as it says, 'I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel' (1 Sam. 15:2). Sarah deposited with God a store of pious acts and good deeds; therefore Adonai returned her [the reward for] these, as it says, "Adonai took note of Sarah." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:5)

The commentators were puzzled by the interpretation of "pakad" as (**remember**). This would imply that God remembers as though God could forget, or that God visited, as though God had a body. As a result of these theological problems, they interpreted "pakad" as "pikadon" (**deposit**). Sarah deposited righteous actions with God, and was rewarded with the birth of a son.

e. "Adonai took note of Sarah." R. Aha said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: "The Holy One said to Israel: 'As trustee, I act honorably: whatever a man deposits with Me, I return to him.' With what kind of action may God's be compared? With the action of one who is a trustee, one with whom people leave things in deposit. One person comes and deposits gold coins; another comes and deposits thorns. Then they come to get them back. To one who deposits money, the trustee returns money; to one who deposits thorns, the trustee gives back thorns. So the Holy One said: 'I act as trustee. Whatever a person deposits with Me, I return to him.' Thus, it was with Abraham. You find that he deposited souls with the Holy One, as is written, 'Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that

they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran' (Gen. 12:5). But did Abraham make souls? R. Eleazar ben Pedat replied in the name of R. Jose ben Zimra: 'If all the inhabitants of the world should undertake to create a single gnat, they would be unable to do so, therefore how can you speak of 'the persons they had acquired in Haran?' Is it conceivable that Abraham and Sarah created souls? If not, then what is meant by "the persons that they had acquired?" What is meant is that Abraham converted men to faith in the one God, and Sarah converted women. 'By the acquiring of persons' is meant the act of conversion as referred to in the verse, "And then I saw scoundrels coming from the Holy Site and being brought to burial, while such as had acted righteously were forgotten in the city" (Eccles. 8:10). It was by their conversion of men and women that Abraham and Sarah are said to have created souls; they brought them in under the wings of the Divine Presence. Thereupon the Holy One said: "As you live, you deposited souls with Me; I will requite your trust in kind: "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised, and Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age" (Gen. 21:1-2). (Pesikta Rabbati 43:6)

This passage is a later parallel to the one included in Bereshit Rabbah. It has further developed the interpretation of "pakad" as (deposit). In Gen. 12:5 both Abram and Sarai's names are included, while Gen. 21:1 emphasizes God remembering Sarah. The rabbis connect these two verses: as a reward for the people they converted in Haran, now Abraham and Sarah are requited in kind with the long hoped for child.

f. R. Isaac said: "It is written, 'But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed' (Numbers 5:28). This is the one [Sarah] who entered the houses of Pharaoh and Abimelech and yet emerged undefiled; surely it was but right that she should be remembered." R. Judah b. R. Simon said: 'Although R. Hunan said that there is an angel appointed over desire, Sarah had no need for such. Rather, God in God's glory [made her conceive]; thus, 'Adonai took note of Sarah.'" (Bereshit Rabbah 53:6)

This midrash contains the same idea as the one listed above; Sarah conceived because of her merit. In this passage, the merit attributed to her was as a result of her

actions in the incidents with Pharaoh and Abimelech.

g. "On New Year's Day Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited." How do we know this? R. Eliezer said: "We learn it from the two occurrences of these words: 'visiting' and 'remembering.' It is written concerning Rachel, "Now God remembered Rachel" (Gen. 30:22). It is written concerning Hannah, "and Adonai remembered her" (1 Sam. 1:19). There is an analogous mention of "zecher" (**remembering**) in connection with New Year's Day, as it is written, "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts (zicharon teruah)" (Lev. 23:24). The double mention of "took note" [is as follows]. It is written concerning Hannah, "For Adonai took note of Hannah" (1 Sam. 2:21), and it is written concerning Sarah, "Adonai took note of Sarah" (Gen. 21:1). (B.T. Rosh Hashanah 11a)

The opening phrase in Genesis 21:1 is linked to a passage describing another barren woman in the Bible, Hannah. Sarah, Hannah, and also Rachel were understood to have given birth on Rosh Hashanah. This idea can be found in many sources throughout Rabbinic Literature because it emphasizes the supernatural character of these pregnancies. Rosh Hashanah is the appropriate time for them to conceive because the holiday emphasizes rebirth and hope brought about by new beginnings.

h. "Adonai took note of Sarah." This [verse is tied to the following]: "And the nations that are left around you shall know that I, Adonai, have rebuilt the ravaged places and replanted the desolate land. I, Adonai, have spoken and will act" (Ez. 36:36). "And the nations that are left around you," these are the people that were embarrassing Sarah by calling her 'barren.' "I, Adonai, have rebuilt the **ravaged places** and replanted the desolate land," this refers [to Abraham and Sarah], as it is said, "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years" (Gen. 18:11). "**Replanted the desolate land**," refers to [Sarah] who said, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old" (Gen. 18:12)? "I, Adonai, have spoken and will act," as it is said, "Adonai took note of Sarah as God **had promised**." Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashanah and Isaac was born seven months later, on the evening of Passover, as it is said, "I will return to you when life is due" (Gen. 18:10). Four barren women were remembered on Rosh Hashanah and they were: Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah. (Tanhuma haNidpas, Vayera #17 and Pesikta Rabbati 42:5)

Abraham and Sarah's barrenness symbolized Jewish powerlessness. When the nations of the world embarrassed Sarah by calling her barren, they denied God's power to act in the world. The rabbis linked Isaac's birth to Passover in order to emphasize that just as God took the Israelites out from Egyptian slavery with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, so, too, God has the ability to give life to barren women. In addition, Isaac, with God's help will redeem Israel in the future.

i. R. Yehudah said: "'Adonai took note of Sarah,' that is, remembered her with sons; 'and Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken,' that is filled her breasts with milk." [But] R. Nehemiah said: "'Adonai took note of Sarah,' means that God remembered her with a son. As for 'and Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken,' Scripture means that God restored her to her youth." However, R. Simeon b. Lakish said: "'Adonai took note of Sarah,' means that God remembered her with offspring. She was able to have offspring because, 'Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken;' since she had no womb, God made her a womb." (Pesikta Rabbati 42:4)

These rabbinic opinions explicate the seeming superfluous language in Genesis 21:1. Each phrase in the verse comes to teach something important and distinct. All three rabbis agree that the phrase, "Adonai took note of Sarah" means that she was given a son. However, they disagree regarding the meaning of the second phrase, "and Adonai did for Sarah as God had spoken." The three interpretations for this repetitive phrase are: her breasts were filled with milk, she was restored to her youth, and she was given a womb which she lacked. The motif that Sarah lacked a womb is based on a midrashic reading of Gen. 11:30: "Now Sarai was barren, she had no child," which is

understood as, "Now Sarai was barren, she had no **womb**."

j. "Adonai took note of Sarah." There are three keys that the Holy One entrusts to no creature—not to an angel, nor to a seraph, nor even to a troop [of seraphim] but they are kept in God's own hand: the key of rain, as is said, "Adonai will open for you God's bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season" (Deut. 28:12); the key of resurrection, "I am going to open your graves" (Ezek. 37:12); and the key of the womb, "Adonai took note of Sarah." (Pesikta Rabbati 42:7)

While the idea of this midrash is similar to others listed above, it is restated in a new way. God possesses the key to the womb which God does not entrust to any creature. Adonai, Godself, acts to open the womb!

k. Then God went on to say, "But you must restore the man's wife, since he is a prophet" (Gen. 20:7). Thereupon Abimelech rose early, restored Sarah to Abraham, did honor to Abraham, and begged him to pray on his behalf that God loosen the constraint upon the openings of his body. As Abraham prayed, all of the Philistines were relieved of the constraint upon the openings of their bodies. Nay more, all the female members of Abimelech's household conceived and gave birth to male children, as is said, "Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children" (Gen. 20:17). Abraham was like the man who bore the title of "king's friend" and whose ship was requisitioned many years for public service in port. The king was told, "Though your friend's ship is requisitioned, he has not importuned you concerning the possibility of having it released. But now that the ships of other men are being released, shall not his ship also be released? As much as any other, it deserves to be released." Likewise, when Abraham prayed on behalf of Abimelech and his wife, and all the Philistines conceived and bore children, the angels rose up, complaining: "Ruler of the universe, all these years Sarah was barren, and Abimelech's wife was barren." [How is it known that Abimelech's wife was barren? Because it is said, "God healed Abimelech and his wife" (Gen. 20:17), and no one is ever healed unless he has been previously smitten.] "Now that Abraham has prayed," the angels went on, "Abimelech's wife was remembered; including his maidservants. These women were remembered, but Sarah remains barren. Justice demands that she also be remembered." Well did R. Eliezer teach that wherever Scripture says, "**Adonai**," the phrase refers not only to the God [of mercy], but also to God's court [of angels of justice]. "Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, his slave girls, so that they bore children" (Gen. 20:17), followed by "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised" (Gen. 21:1). (Pesikta Rabbati 42:3 and 42:6)

This midrash was derived from the juxtaposition of two incidents: the end of Genesis 20 which contains Abraham's prayer asking God to heal Abimelech, and the beginning of Genesis 21 which details God remembering Sarah as God had promised. Thus, just as God opened Abimelech's body openings, so, too, God took note of Sarah and opened her womb.

l. "Adonai took note of Sarah." According to Scripture, they who receive commands from Adonai are of all kinds. Some are commanded but do not obey; others are commanded and do obey....I gave a command to Abraham, and he obeyed, "Abram went forth as Adonai had spoken to him" (Gen. 12:4). Therefore, I gave a command concerning him and concerning the members of his household that reward be given them: "Adonai took note of Sarah." (Pesikta Rabbati 42:8)

Sarah was allowed to conceive as a reward for Abraham obeying God's command to leave his homeland.

m. The root "pkd," as in the verse, "Adonai **took note**," [has different shades of meaning in different contexts, but always refers to God's providence]...and finally "pkd" in connection with God's giving of children: "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised." (Pesikta Rabbati 42:9)

God's providence is seen in the use of the verb, "pkd" (**took note**). Thus, even before the writer clearly states what God is going to do, he implies that God will give Sarah children.

n. The Holy One says: "Take care to recite to Me the proper blessing for every occasion. If you are careful with regard to such blessings, I will come to you and bless you in return, as is said, "In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you" (Exod. 20:21). Consider Abraham: what is said of him? "Inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and followed My mandate: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings" (Gen. 26:5), I blessed him, "And Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things" (Gen. 24:1). Additionally, in his star Abraham saw it written that he would have no children, as is said, "Seeing that I continue childless" (Gen. 15:2). But the Holy One said: You read the stars correctly, for as you live, Abram, Abram is not

destined to beget children. What then do I mean to do for you? I will change your name and you will beget children, as is said, "And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham" (Gen. 17:5). Sarai also was not destined to bear children, as is said, "Now Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30); but as Sarah she will bear children, as is said, "Adonai took note of Sarah as God had promised." (Pesikta Rabbati 43:1)

This passage also presents the message that Sarah's pregnancy was a reward for Abraham's proper action; he was careful and pronounced the proper blessing for every occasion.

o. "Adonai sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). "Adonai sets the childless woman among her household" is applied to Sarah, as it is said, "Now Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30). "As a happy mother of children" [is Sarah as it is said]: "Adonai took note of Sarah." (As quoted in Bereshit Rabbati, Vayaytze to Gen. 29:31, also in Bereshit Rabbah 53:5 and Pesikta Rabbati to Gen. 43:4)

Psalm 113:9 is also applied to seven barren women:

Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, Leah, the wife of Manoach, Hannah, and Zion. Once Sarah was childless, but Adonai has now made her a happy mother of children. The use of the plural noun, "banim" (**children**), in Psalm 113:9 is not explicated.

p. R. Berechiah, citing R. Levi, said: "[Sarah's being remembered] added strength to the sun and the moon. For you will note in the account of the birth of Isaac, that the term, 'vaya'as' (**did**) is used, 'And Adonai **did** for Sarah as God had spoken.' In the account of creation the same term is used, 'vaya'as, 'God **made** the two great lights' (Gen. 1:16). As 'vaya'as' in this verse implies God is giving light to the world, so, too, in the passage concerning Sarah, it implies adding even more light to the world. The word 'vaya'as' also means (**gave**), so that Gen. 21:1 can be read: 'God gave to Sarah as God had spoken.' The word, 'vaya'as' is used in the same way in the story of Esther, where it is said, 'the king 'asah' (**proclaimed/gave**) a remission of taxes for the provinces" (Es. 2:18). And as 'asah' (**gave**) in the story of Esther means giving gifts to the world, so, too, the term 'asah' (**gave**) in the story of Sarah means giving gifts to the world." (Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna to Gen. 21:1 and Bereshit Rabbah 53:8)

In this midrash, the root "sh" is interpreted as

(made) and (gave). Thus, God **made** more light enter into the world through Sarah, and she **gave** a gift to the world in her son Isaac.

21:2 "Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken."

Commentary: One must ask why it is necessary to state that Sarah both **conceived** and **bore a son** to Abraham. The answer from a critical, scholarly point of view is that the verse is written in typical Biblical style which uses repetition for emphasis. However, from a midrashic point of view, these words demand explication.

Midrashim:

a. "Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham" comes to teach that she did not steal seed from elsewhere. (Bereshit Rabbah 53:6).

This passage understands the seemingly repetitive words as each teaching an important idea. The first word, "conceived," is to be understood in its plain meaning. The second word, "bore," emphasizes that Sarah conceived this son by Abraham, even though he was old!

21:3 "Abraham gave his new-born son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac."

Commentary: This is the third time in the book of Genesis that Isaac's name has been introduced. Here, however, the writer does not include an aetiology. In addition, the text does not explain why only Abraham named the baby Isaac, rather than both parents. Sarah's lack of participation is all the more striking because she is mentioned almost unnecessarily in the text. One can deduce that in a patriarchal society the father named the baby. Yet the reader is left to ponder the reason why the Biblical writer included this detail.

Midrashim:

a. Observe that although it is said of Abraham that he "journeyed by stages toward the Negev" (Gen. 12:9), he did not attain his rightful place until Isaac was born. But as soon as Isaac was born, he attained this level, through the close association and union of the two. For that reason he, and no other, called him Isaac, in order that water and fire should be merged together. Hence, "Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac," the son that was born to him as fire born from water. (Zohar 118a-118b)

Abraham specifically is mentioned as the one who named his son Isaac because this act helped him attain his rightful stage in life. More significantly, Isaac is described as being born from the merger of fire and water. I understand the fire to refer to Sarah's temper and water to describe Abraham's passivity.

21:4 "And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him."

Commentary: This verse has been included because it provides background for Sarah's response to Isaac's birth in Gen. 21:6. However, no midrashim will be included because the content of this verse does not directly relate to Sarah or Hagar.

21:5 "Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him."

Commentary: This verse is directly concerned with Abraham's age. As a result, one can deduce Sarah's age at the time of Isaac's birth; she was ninety years old. No midrashim will be included because the content of this verse does not refer to Sarah or Hagar.

21:6 "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'"

Commentary: This verse serves as the third aetiology of Isaac's name; here it is said that everyone who hears that she gave birth will **laugh**, "yitzhak," with her.

Midrashim:

a. "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'" R. Berekiah, R. Yehudah b. R. Simon and R. Hanan in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: "If Reuben has cause to rejoice, what does it matter to Simeon? Similarly, if Sarah was remembered, what did it matter to others? But when our matriarch Sarah was remembered, many other barren women were remembered with her; many deaf gained their hearing, many blind had their eyes opened, many insane became sane." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:8 and Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna to Gen. 21:1)

This midrash focuses on the second phrase: "everyone who hears will laugh with me." It emphasizes the redemptive quality of Sarah's life: when she was remembered, other people with problems were also remembered. She is a model; she represents the potential which is possible for all people. This passage understands her laughter, "yitzhak," in a positive sense; everyone will rejoice with her!

21:7 "And she added, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age.'"

Commentary: Sarah is amazed over the extraordinary change in her life. After many years of barrenness, she has given birth to a son. In this verse, she remarks about the supernatural character of her ability to mother. The Biblical writer uses an unusual plural phrase, "would suckle children," rather than simply stating, "a child." This plural noun reinforces the miraculous nature of Sarah's ability to have a child. Finally, she remarks, "Who would

have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in **his old age**." She does not refer to her own age, rather she focuses on Abraham's age. Perhaps it is her way of denying her own aging process or that she was the one who was infertile.

Midrashim:

a. "Adonai sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). "Adonai sets the childless woman among her household" alludes to Sarah, as it is written, "Now Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30). "As a happy mother of children," as it says, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children!" (Bereshit Rabbah 53:5 and Bereshit Rabbati, Vayaytze to Gen. 29:31)

This midrash is also cited in reference to Genesis 21:1. Here, both the verse in Psalms 113:9 and in Gen. 21:7 emphasize the plural noun, **children**. Her ability to give birth to one son at her age is as amazing as other women's ability to give birth to many children and it serves as a model for others who have had difficulty bearing children.

b. "That Sarah would suckle children!" She suckled "banim" [which is midrashically understood as] builders. [Another comment:] Our mother Sarah was too modest. Abraham said to her: "This is not a time for modesty, uncover your breasts so that all may know that the Holy One makes miracles." She uncovered her breasts and the milk gushed forth as from two fountains, and noble ladies came and had their children nursed by her, saying, "We do not merit that our children should be suckled with the milk of that righteous woman." The Rabbis said: "Whoever came for the sake of heaven became God-fearing." R. Aha said: "Even one who did not come for the sake of heaven was given dominion [greatness] in this world." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:9)

This passage explicates the words "suckle children." The first comment that Sarah suckled builders is

midrashically connected to the last phrase to explicate the idea that God-fearers build up the world. Sarah was considered too modest until Abraham told her to suckle **all the children**. Her actions were considered praiseworthy and caused others to become God-fearing.

c. R. Berechiah, citing R. Levi, said: "You find that when our mother Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the nations of the world declared, and may we be forgiven for repeating what they said: 'Sarah did not give birth to Isaac. It was Hagar, Sarah's handmaid who gave birth to him.' [To prove that Sarah had indeed given birth to Isaac], what did the Holy One do? God withered up the nipples of the noblewomen of the world's nations, so that they came and kissed the dust at Sarah's feet, pleading with her: 'Do a good deed and give suck to our children.' Therefore our father Abraham said to Sarah: 'Sarah, this is no time for modesty. Hallow the Holy One's name. Sit down in the marketplace and give suck to their children.' Hence it is said, 'Sarah would suckle children!'" Note that the verse does not say, "child" but "children." Now from matters of this kind can we not draw the following inference? If a mortal, to whom joy came, rejoiced and caused every one else to rejoice, all the more reason to conclude that when the Holy One comes to bring joy to Jerusalem, Jerusalem will say, "Rejoicing in Adonai, I will cause joy" (Isa. 61:10). (Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna 22:1)

This midrash is similar to the passage in Bereshit Rabbah just above. However, because it is of a later date, there is more detailed explication. The nations of the world thought Hagar was the mother of Isaac rather than Sarah. Abraham had to order Sarah to **suckle [the] children** of the world in order to prove to the nations that she had given birth to Isaac. Just as the miracle of Isaac's birth brought others to the worship of God, so, too, Israel brings the nations to serve God.

d. "And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children!'" How many children then did Sarah suckle? R. Levi said: "On the day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great banquet and all the peoples of the world derided him, saying, 'Have you seen that old man and woman who brought a foundling from the street, and now claim him as their

son! And what is more, they make a great banquet to establish their claim! What did our father Abraham do? He went and invited all the great men of the age and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but not the wetnurse, and a miracle happened to our mother Sarah. Her breasts opened like two fountains and she suckled them all. Yet they still scoffed, saying, 'Grant that Sarah could give birth at the age of ninety, could Abraham beget [a child] at the age of a hundred?' Immediately Isaac's face changed and became like Abraham's, whereupon they all cried out, 'Abraham begat Isaac.' (B.T. Baba Metzia 87a, Tanhuma haNidpas, Toldot #3, Bereshit Rabbati, Vayera to Gen. 21:7, and Midrash Hadash to Gen. 21:7-9)

The midrash cited above expands on the earlier passage in Bereshit Rabbah.

e. According to R. Phinehas b. Hama, quoting R. Hilkiah: "the word "mll" (said) here means ripe ears, and the verse therefore refers to Abraham's virility: the standing crop of Abraham was dried up, but now it became full of ripe ears (mlylh) again. Hence the verse as a whole is to be read: 'Who would have attributed to Abraham the virility to produce ripe ears, with the result that Sarah would give children suck?' At the sight of Sarah's milk the nations of the earth brought their children to Sarah to give them suck, thus confirming the truth of the statement that Sarah would suckle children. Though some of them in all sincerity brought their children for Sarah to suckle, some brought their children only to check up on her. Neither the former nor the latter suffered any loss. According to R. Levi, those who were brought in sincerity became proselytes. In regard to these, Scripture says, "Sarah would suckle children!" How is the expression, "would suckle children" to be interpreted? That these children of the nations of the earth became children of Israel. And according to our teachers, those children who were brought to check up on Sarah achieved distinction in the world through promotion to great office. Accordingly, all Gentiles throughout the world who accept conversion and all Gentiles throughout the world who fear God spring from the children who drank of the milk of Sarah. Hence Sarah is alluded to as "a joyful mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). (Pesikta Rabbati 43:4 and see above in Bereshit Rabbah 53:5)

This final rendition of the story of Sarah suckling all the children of the world emphasizes the outcome of her action; all those children either converted to Judaism or account for the righteous Gentiles in the world.

f. "Her children declare her happy" (Prov. 31:28). Sarah said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle

children!" Sarah had more than one son. (Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah #4)

This is an important midrash, although it is vaguely worded. The reader is free to interpret exactly who were Sarah's children. I understand "children" symbolically; Sarah's actions perpetuated the future of Judaism.

21:8 "The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned."

Commentary: The feast is the background for Sarah's sudden concern over Ishamel. No midrashim will be included, however, because the content of this verse is not pertinent to the evolving picture of Sarah and Hagar.

21:9 "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing."

Commentary: Sarah is the central character in this verse which directly follows a quick description of the feast held in honor of Isaac's weaning. Now Sarah has regained her equilibrium after giving birth and the great celebration. She actively begins to worry about the relationship between Abraham's son Ishmael and her son Isaac. The Biblical writer uses the verb, "saw," as if she was on her guard, spying on Ishmael's actions. It is as

if he became a threat to her son Isaac for the first time, despite his presence over the past years. In this sense, Sarah had never 'seen' him before; it suddenly 'dawned' on her that he might pose a threat to her plans.

Additionally, the author does not include Ishmael's name. Rather, he describes him in terms of his relationship to his mother and to his father; the son or her son. Additionally, his mother is called **Hagar, the Egyptian**, rather than Hagar, Sarah's handmaid or Hagar, Abraham's wife or concubine. Finally, Sarah **saw the son playing**, which is the writer's literary device to connect this son, Ishmael, with the other son, Isaac. "Mitzahayk" (**playing**) is linked with "Yitzhak" (**laughter**). One must ask why was Sarah concerned about Ishmael's playing. Speiser has an interesting interpretation of Ishmael's playing:

According to Gen. 16:16 combined with Gen. 21:5 above; Ishmael would now be at least fifteen years old. But his "playing" with Isaac would mean no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger. (Speiser, Genesis, p.155)

Midrashim:

a. [To the verse] "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham," the following verse is applied, "She looks for wool and flax" (Prov. 31:13). She **saw** [the difference between] Ishmael and Isaac. (Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah #4)

Sarah was able to differentiate between Ishmael and her young son Isaac by watching Ishmael at play, just as one can

tell the difference between wool and flax by looking at them.

b. R. Isaac said: "The phrase 'Sarah saw' implies that she looked at him disdainfully as being the son, not of Abraham, but of Hagar the Egyptian." (Zohar 118b)

Sarah did not refer to Ishmael as the son of Abraham in order to show her disdain for him and his mother.

c. R. Hiyya said: "After recording the birth of Isaac, Scripture never mentions Ishmael by name so long as he was still in the house of Abraham: dross cannot be mentioned in the presence of gold. Hence, Ishmael is referred to here as 'the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham,' as it was not fitting that his name should be mentioned in the presence of Isaac." (Zohar 118b)

Ishmael is not mentioned by name in order to show his low standing as compared to Isaac's exalted position as Sarah's son.

d. "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, **playing**." R. Simeon b. Yohai said: "Rabbi Akiva used to interpret this to his [Ishmael's] discredit and I will say something to his credit. R. Akiva explicated: 'mitzahayk' (**playing**) as referring to immorality, as in the verse, 'The Hebrew slave, whom you brought into our house, came to me to **dally** "l'tzahek" with me' (Gen. 39:17). This verse teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonor them." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:11 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

e. R. Ishmael taught: "'mitzahayk' (**playing**) refers to idolatry, as in: 'Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to **make merry** 'l'tzahek' (Ex. 32:6). This verse teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:11, Sifrei Bamidbar, Vaetchanan #31, Shemot Rabbah 1:1, Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94, Zohar 118b, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:9)

f. "And God seeks the pursued" (Eccl. 3:15), is explained [in the following way]: The Holy One says: "I always love the pursued and hate the pursuers, as when Ishmael pursued his brother Isaac, 'Sarah saw the son...**playing**'" (Gen. 21:9). Ishmael shot arrows at Isaac, as it is said, "Like a madman scattering deadly firebrands, arrows, is one who cheats his fellow and says, 'I was only joking'" (Prov. 26:18-19). (Pesikta Rabbati 48:2)

This midrash sees Isaac as the pursued and Ishmael as the pursuer. Isaac represents Israel and Ishmael typifies the nations of the world who are idolatrous, etc. Ishmael as the 'pursuer' is symbolic of the nations who persecute Israel.

g. R. Eleazar said: "Mitzahayk" refers to bloodshed, as it is said: 'Let the young men come forward and sport "visahaku" before us' (2 Sam 2:14)." R. Azariah said in R. Levi's name: "Ishmael said to Isaac, 'Let us go and see our portions in the field.' Then Ishmael would take a bow and arrows and shoot them in Isaac's direction, while pretending to be playing. Thus it is written, 'Like a madman scattering deadly firebrands, arrows, is one who cheats his fellow and says, 'I was only joking (misahayk)' (Prov. 26:18-19). (Bereshit Rabbah 53:11 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

A similiar idea appears in Tanhuma Buber, Toldot #5. There, Isaac entreats God to save him from death because Ishmael wants to kill him.

In Aggadat Bereshit #37, the same passage appears as in Bereshit Rabbah 53:11. There is one significant addition however: God said: "If he [Ishmael] kills him, how will my world stand?" Sarah responds to God's fear by commanding Abraham to cast them both out.

h. "But I say, "mitzahayk" refers to inheritance. For when our father Isaac was born, all rejoiced, and Ishmael said to them: 'You are fools, for I am the first born and I receive a double portion!' You may infer this from Sarah's protest to Abraham, 'For the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac' (Gen. 21:10)." (Bereshit Rabbah 53:11 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

The tradent referred to as "I" in the passage listed above is R. Simeon b. Yohai. He considers his comment to be more positive than those of R. Akiba and it serves as a midrashic link between Genesis 21:9 and 21:1. Sarah saw

Ishmael boasting about the double portion he would receive as the first born son. She became very outraged over his talk about his inheritance and, as a result, ordered Abraham to expel him.

21:10 "She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.'"

Commentary: Sarah commands Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael as seen in the verb form, "garesh." Does she have the authority to order Abraham to act thusly? The text is silent. She does not refer to Hagar and Ishmael by name nor by their relationship to Abraham. She refers to Hagar as "ha'amah" (**slavewoman**), while in Genesis 16 she called her "shifcha" (**maidservant**). I believe that is her way of distancing them from Abraham, Isaac, and herself in order to make their expulsion less of a harsh act and more understandable.

Sarah's hatred of Ishmael is the cause of her anger in this verse, while in Gen. 16:5, Sarah's hatred of Hagar stemmed from the concubine's tactless behavior toward her childless mistress. Speiser understands this difference as resulting from the different authorship's of these chapters; Genesis 16 is the work of J and Genesis 21 is the work of E. He writes:

Once again, E seeks to explain people and their actions, but he does so with the aid of words rather than deeds. If E's characters do more reasoning than J's, they are also less natural and impulsive. (Speiser, Genesis, p.157)

Finally, one sees that the only way Sarah could arrange it so that her son Isaac would inherit was to expel Ishmael. This is a common story in the Torah: an emphasis is on the younger son's right to inherit over his first born brother. Thus, one can conclude that this story of the expulsion of Ishmael is similiar to other incidents of the younger son inheriting in place of the first born son.

Midrashim:

a. "She [Sarah] said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slavewoman.'" Hagar is like a merchant ship which flounders from place to place in the sea without a port. (Tanhuma Buber, Hayyei Sarah #17 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera to Gen. 21:10)

Sarah does not refer to Hagar by name, rather she uses her title in order to dehumanize her. The author of this midrash is not sympathetic to Hagar's plight. He compares her to a ship floundering at sea, due to the words "And she wandered about" (Gen. 21:14). His attitude is that Hagar's expulsion was to be expected since her people became wanderers. Speiser writes about her descendants:

It is time to account for the place of the Ishmaelites in the scheme of things, the role of the Bedouin who are always in evidence on the border between the desert and the sown. (Genesis, p.121)

b. "She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that **slavewoman**.'" This was his ninth test because Sarah told him to expel that slavewoman [Hagar] after she [Sarah] had been built up through her. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:10; see also Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30)

This midrash concludes that Abraham had to make a separate decision to expel Hagar. It is also interesting to note that the author believes that Sarah had already been built up through her. This phrase is sufficiently ambiguous; I interpret it to mean that Hagar's ability to bear a son freed Sarah and, as a result, she was also able to have a son.

c. "And her son." Abraham's tenth test was to send Ishmael, his son, away and it was more difficult for him than all the other tests. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:10)

One can imagine the agony Abraham experienced when Sarah told him to expel Ishmael, his son. Perhaps Sarah uses the word, "her son" in contrast to "his son" in Gen. 21:11, as a means of distancing Abraham from his relationship with Ishmael. She was saying that Ishmael is not Abraham's son; Isaac is the only son of Abraham.

d. "For the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance." Sarah said these words as if to say: "I know that he will never enter the fold of the true faith and that he will have no portion with my son, either in this world or in the world to come." Therefore, God supported her, since God wished to keep the holy seed carefully separated, for that was the end for which God created the world. (Zohar 118b)

This passage justifies Sarah's command to expel Ishmael, because of his lack of faith he was not worthy of inheriting from Abraham.

e. "With my son Isaac." "With my son," even if it is not Isaac. "With Isaac," even if he were not my son; kal v'homer (all the more so) "with my son Isaac." (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

This midrash addresses itself to the repetition in the phrase, "with my son Isaac." The repetitive language emphasizes the great threat Ishmael posed to Isaac's inheritance.

f. [The reason Sarah wanted to expel Ishmael was that he was trying to kill Isaac. She told Abraham saying: "He did such and such to Isaac. Make it clear that Isaac [will inherit] everything that the Holy One swore to give you and your descendants. For the son of that slavewoman is not going to inherit with my son Isaac. Write a get [divorce her] and send away that slavewoman and her son from Isaac's and my presence in this world and from the world to come." This is why it is written, "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his" (Gen. 21:11). (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30, and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

This midrash ties several verses, (Gen. 21:9-12) together. It presents Sarah's command to expel Ishmael and Hagar as reasonable: she told Abraham to give Hagar a get, divorcing her legally. The author is trying to lessen the harshness of Sarah's demand.

21:11 "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his."

Commentary: The author uses a very interesting phrase to describe Abraham's feelings: "Vayayra hadavar meod b'aynai Avraham," which literally translates as "the matter caused much evil in Abraham's eyes," though it should be understood as: "the matter distressed Abraham greatly." The phrase is the Biblical literary style's way of describing concern, but it is sufficiently vague to warrant rabbinic interpretation. In particular, we focus on the writer's use of the word "davar" (matter). We must ask to what matter can it refer? In general, the Bible does not describe a character's feelings in response to a situation, thus later

interpretations attempt to fill in the emotions missing from the Biblical story. This incident is unusual in that the author includes Abraham's feelings concerning Ishmael's expulsion: "the matter distressed Abraham **greatly**." In Hebrew there is a seeming superfluous word, "meod" (**very**) which emphasizes the strong emotion felt by Abraham toward his son Ishmael. One commentator, Malbin, remarks that the verse implies a double grief: first, at Sarah's demand for their expulsion, and second, at his son's depravation which is intimated in the word "greatly." As a result, one must ask the following question after reading Sarah's command and Abraham's reaction: why doesn't he verbally respond to her order if he is so upset? One can deduce from the second part of the verse that Abraham's concern was focused only on his son; he was not upset over Hagar's expulsion. Thus, his relationship with Hagar was not as significant as his ties to Sarah.

Midrashim:

a. "The matter distressed Abraham greatly." Abraham was upset on account of his son's future evil deeds when Ishmael will worship foreign gods. (Targum Yerushalmi to Gen. 21:11)

This midrash attempts to understand the meaning of the ambiguous phrase: "the matter." Ishmael is portrayed in negative terms as the idol worshiper par-excellence.

b. "The matter distressed Abraham greatly." Abraham was very upset because he [Ishmael] had become depraved. (Shemot Rabbah 1:1)

This passage explicates the use of "meod" (**greatly**) in

the verse. The word appears to be superfluous; it would have been enough to say, "the matter distressed Abraham." Thus, the author interprets that Sarah's command to expel Ishmael was the worst thing that could happen to a son of his. This comment presents a portrait of the close relationship between Abraham and Ishmael.

c. "The matter distressed Abraham greatly." [The verse uses the words "biaynai Avraham," lit. in the eyes of Abraham], therefore, his eyes closed after seeing the evil. (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

Abraham had to close his eyes in order to not see the evil in which his son Ishmael was involved. He did not want to acknowledge his son's evil doings.

d. "For it concerned a son of his." [The text uses the words "al odot beno" (for it concerned a son of his); "odot" means the **deeds** of his son who was involved in idolatry. (Bereshit Rabbati to Gen. 21:11)

Ishmael's involvement with idolatry was mentioned earlier as one of the interpretations for the word "mitzaheyk" (playing) in Gen. 21:9.

e. "For it concerned a son of his." Sarah looked at Ishmael disdainfully, but not Abraham, as we read, "it concerned a son of his." Thus, Abraham perceived Ishmael not as the son of Hagar, but as his son. (Zohar 118b)

f. "For it concerned a son of his." The matter bothered Abraham about his son, but not about Ishmael's mother [Hagar]. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:11)

These midrashim confirm the initial observation that Abraham was not significantly attached to Hagar, but loved Ishmael.

21:12 "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.'"

Commentary: We now have begun a two verse description of God's response to Abraham's fears about his son. However, in the preceeding verse Abraham is only distressed over [Ishmael] "a son of his." In this verse, God responds to his concern over his son, but adds these words: "or your slave." Till now, Abraham had not shown any distress over Hagar. Perhaps this is the writers way of stressing that Abraham also should have been worried about her.

We must ask why God gave Abraham permission to follow whatever Sarah tells him. This Divine carte blanche is followed by God's promise that it is through Isaac that Abraham's offspring will be continued. God is responding to Abraham's yet unarticulated concern about his future heir. It is as if Abraham knows that Ishmael, his first born, should inherit, but God has given him permission to deny Ishmael what is rightfully his. Now, Abraham is able to give his inheritance and the promise of a great future to Isaac.

Midrashim:

a. R. Judah said: "In that night the Holy One was revealed to him. God said to him: 'Abraham! Don't you know that Sarah was appointed to you for a wife from her mother's womb? She is your

companion, and the wife of your covenant; Sarah is not called your handmaid, but your wife; while Hagar is not called your wife, but your handmaid. **Whatever Sarah tells you**, she has uttered truthfully. Let it not be grievous in your eyes, as it is said, 'But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed.'" (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30)

This passage explicates God's words to Abraham. God is trying to reassure him that it is all right to do whatever Sarah tells him. The midrash clearly distinguishes between Sarah and Hagar; Sarah is Abraham's wife and thus, her words must be heeded. The line will continue through her progeny.

b. "[You] do not be distressed." This is a proof that Abraham was subsidiary to Sarah in the matter of prophecy. (Shemot Rabbah 1:1)

There are other passages which will be included below which emphasize Sarah's prophetic gifts and her importance.

c. Abraham thought about not expelling Ishmael; perhaps he would try and improve his behavior. He had these thoughts until the Holy One told him to expel him because there is no hope for him. It is written, "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed.'" (Bereshit Rabbati to Gen. 21:11-12)

Abraham was conflicted about Sarah's command to expel Ishmael. He was only convinced by God's words that there was no hope for Ishmael.

d. The Rabbis said: "She was her husband's ruler. Usually the husband gives orders, whereas here we read, "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says." (Bereshit Rabbah 47:1 and 52:5)

This passage adds another piece to the growing portrait of the relationship between Sarah and Abraham; she was the dominant character, while he was subservient to her.

e. R. Isaac observed that Iscah was Sarai (Gen. 11:29). He asked, "why was she called Iscah?" Because she foresaw [the future] through holy inspiration; hence it is written, "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says." (B.T. Sanhedrin 69b and Seder Olam Rabbah, end of chapter 2)

Sarah's decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael was not a

capricious judgment; her decision was divinely revealed.

Thus, no one can challenge her judgment and Abraham must do as she says.

f. "But he who listens to me will dwell in safety, untroubled by the terror of misfortune" (Prov. 1:33). In connection with listening Scripture speaks of four kinds of listeners: One who listens and suffers a loss; one who listens and gains a reward; one who does not listen and suffers a loss; and one who did not listen and won a reward. The one who listened and gained a reward was our father Abraham, as it is said, "But God said to Abraham." And what reward did he gain? [The continuation of his line through an exemplary son], as it is said, "For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you." (Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 14:2, Eikhah Zuta to Gen. 21:12, and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

g. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: "This can be compared to a man to whom a son was born. On seeing him, an astrologer remarked: 'This lad will become the leader of robbers; it would be best for his father to cast him away.' When the father heard this he exclaimed: 'Shall I then cast away my son?' When the father of the astrologer heard this he said: 'Whatever my son has said, hearken unto him.' So, too, Sarah saw Ishmael taking to evil ways, and she said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slavewoman and her son' (Gen. 21:10), and this grieved him. God thereupon appeared to Abraham and said to him, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says.' Abraham paid heed to Sarah and, as a result, earned that his line be descended through Isaac, as it is said, 'for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.' God said: 'If this is the reward of one who listens to his wife, how much greater will the reward be for one who listens to Me.' And King Solomon came and stated this explicitly: 'But he who listens to Me will dwell in safety, untroubled by the terror of misfortune' (Prov. 1:33)." (Devarim Rabbah 4:5)

This midrash underscores the importance of the discussion between God and Abraham. It also reinforces the idea that Abraham earned a reward for listening to Sarah's command; his line would descend through Isaac.

h. "I will not be silent concerning him or the praise of his martial exploits" (Job 41:4). The Holy One said: "People might say that we speak with God as Abraham spoke with God, but God is silent with us!" As a result, the Holy One said, "I will not be silent concerning him," refers to Abraham. Why does he make me silent? As a result I will make him silent. When was Abraham silent? When I said to him, 'Take your son' (Gen. 22:2). I was

[once] silent, as it is said, 'But I am like a deaf man, unhearing' (Psalms 38:14)." (Tanhuma Euber, Vayera 46a and Aggadat Bereshit 22)

This is a difficult midrash to understand. It seems to teach that we are not to learn from Abraham's behavior; when God told him that through Isaac, offspring will be continued, he should have called out to God. As a result, God did not respond to him when he cried out regarding Ishmael.

In addition, Abraham was silent when God said, "kach na et bincha" (take your son) (Gen. 22:2), while he was upset regarding Ishmael's expulsion.

i. God supported Sarah's command to expel Hagar and Ishmael, since God wished to keep the holy seed carefully separated, for that was the end for which God created the world. Israel was already in God's thought before the creation of the world. It was therefore that Abraham appeared in the world, so that the world could be sustained for his sake. Abraham and Isaac together upheld the world, yet they were not firmly established until Jacob came into the world. When Jacob appeared, both Abraham and Isaac became firmly established and the whole world with them. From Jacob the holy people gradually emerged into the world, and so the whole of existence became duly established according to the holy pattern. Thus God said, "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you" in Isaac and not in Ishmael. (Zohar 118b)

This passage emphasizes the importance of Isaac's seed while denigrating the uniqueness of Ishmael. It underscores the rabbis' major concern; the line through Isaac has particularistic implications.

j. "For it is through Isaac [b'Yitzhak] that offspring shall be continued for you." The letter "b" (two) denotes two things: the seed follows Isaac who recognizes the two worlds and, as a result, he will inherit the two worlds. (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

Isaac merited continuing Abraham's line because

he recognized the existence of this world and the world to come. He innately honored God, while Ishmael disparaged God and the belief in the world to come.

k. "For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you." Ishmael was not included because he was not part of the covenant Abraham made with God. (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:12)

This midrash is interesting but problematic because it does not explain why Ishmael was not part of the covenant Abraham made with God. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant and Abraham circumcised Ishmael at age thirteen (Gen. 17:25).

21:13 "As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

Commentary: God continues to speak with Abraham. In Gen. 21:12 God told him what will happen to Isaac if he listens to Sarah and expels them. Here, God tries to allay any final reservations Abraham might have about expelling them; Ishmael will also have a good future. It is important to note that the word used is "nation" rather than "great nation." No later reader should presume that the Ishmaelites are as important as the Israelites. In addition, the author continues to refer to Ishmael by his relationship to Hagar, as "son of the slave-woman," rather than by name.

Midrashim:

a. Your son who came from Israel is called "bincha" while your son who came from the foreigner is referred to as "benah." Thus it is written here, "ben ha-ahmah" (as for the son of the slave-woman). (Tanhuma haNidpas, Hukkat #6)

This midrash emphasizes the significance of words used by the Biblical author. There is a difference between Ishmael and Isaac; Ishmael is the son of Hagar not Abraham. This passage again attempts to distance the reader from emotionally identifying with the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar; they are not Israelites worthy of concern.

21:14 "Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them on her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba."

Commentary: The author begins to tell the story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion into the wilderness. It starts here and continues through Gen. 21:21.

Abraham is the principal character here; Sarah has retreated from the scene. The verse begins with Abraham rising **early the next morning** in order to prepare Hagar for leaving. The style used is reminiscent of Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac; both are stories about Abraham's eagerness to fulfill God's command vis-a-vis his sons. Here Abraham is concerned with giving Hagar the bare essentials, such as

"some bread" and "a skin of water." He placed the food and water on her shoulder, together with the child. The author refers to Ishmael as "the child," and the real problem is his age. If he was fifteen years old, one must wonder how Hagar was able to carry him on her back? Perhaps the reference to Ishmael as 'a child' is true; he was still a 'child' in Abraham's eyes. This verse presents him as a younger child, while in Gen. 21:9 he is pictured at age fifteen. There is no unity in the chapter in regard to his age. In addition, one must remark that Abraham was not very generous in preparing them for an extended journey whose destination was unknown. Here he is involved with Hagar, while in Gen. 21:11 he only showed primary concern for his son. It is strange that Abraham is not more involved with his son Ishmael. One must ask why Abraham does not talk with Ishmael and tell him that everything will turn out right; that God had promised that his seed would constitute the beginning of a nation. Abraham's silence also is reminiscent of Genesis 22. As the verse concludes, it is focused on Hagar wandering about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. This information serves to orient the reader about the scene of the upcoming events. More significantly, the author's focus on Hagar underscores Abraham's continued ambivalence about expelling Ishmael. God tried to reassure Abraham, but he still has guilt feelings. There are clearly many questions raised by the scant information given in this verse.

Midrashim:

a. "Early next morning." Abraham rose up early, and wrote a bill of divorce, and gave it to Hagar, and sent her and her son away from himself, and from Isaac his son, from this world and from the world to come, as it is said, "Early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water." He sent her away with a bill of divorcement and he took the veil and he bound it around her waist, so that it should drag behind her to disclose [the fact] that she was a bondwoman. Not only this, but also because Abraham desired to see Ishmael, his son, and to see the way they went. (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30, Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:14)

The authors of this midrash are uncomfortable with Abraham's treatment of Hagar. They saw Hagar as Abraham's wife and, as a result, they add that he divorced her by giving her a get, a religious divorce decree. Abraham, our father, would not have simply expelled Hagar without fulfilling his proper religious responsibility which is understood to refer to a get by later Jewish legislation. In addition, the passage emphasizes Abraham's concern for Hagar and Ishmael. He would not send them away without watching over them in some way and desiring continued contact, he bound a veil around her waist.

b. Like a woman sent away from her husband, so likewise Abraham arose and sent them away from Isaac his son, from this world and from the world to come, as it is said, "But unto the sons of the concubines, Abraham gave gifts and sent them away from Isaac his son," by a deed of divorcement. (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30)

This passage is similar to the first midrash in that Abraham is pictured as giving Hagar a get. However, here the focus is different; Abraham is sending them away from Isaac in order to protect him from them.

c. "She rises while it is still night" (Prov. 31:15). Sarah got up early with Abraham to prepare the provisions necessary to give to Hagar and Ishmael before the expulsion. (Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah #4)

Here Sarah is involved with Abraham as he prepares their expulsion. This midrash portrays Sarah in a very positive vein; she is helpful to Abraham at the time that he needs support, despite her feelings.

d. Abraham's household was liberal [having few distinctions between master and slave], yet it says, "Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar." The reason is that such was the custom of slaves, to carry water in their pitchers. (Bereshit Rabbah 53:13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

This passage explains why the text states that Abraham took the water and gave it to Hagar, a seemingly unnecessary detail not usually found in the Torah. It is there to teach that slaves customarily carry water in pitchers. In addition, it emphasizes Hagar's lowly status.

e. "Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar." This teaches that he hated Ishmael because of his evil ways and sent him together with his mother Hagar away empty-handed and expelled him from his house on this account. [For otherwise,] do you really think that Abraham, of whom it is written, "And Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold" (Gen. 13:2), could send away his wife and son from his house empty-handed, without clothes or means of livelihood? But this is to teach you that when Ishmael became depraved he [Abraham] ceased to think about him. What became of him in the end? After he had driven him out, he sat at the cross-roads, and robbed and molested passers-by, as it is said, "He shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone" (Gen. 16:12). (Shemot Rabbah 1:1)

This midrash picks up on the scant amount of food which Abraham gave to Hagar and Ishmael. It is a scathing portrait of Ishmael whose ways were evil and caused Abraham to expel him and treat him harshly.

f. Ishmael was twenty-seven years old and yet you say, "He **placed** them on her shoulder, **together with the child.**" This, however, teaches that Sarah cast an evil eye on him, which caused him to become sick. The proof lies in the verse, "When the water was gone from the skin;" it is the way of a sick person to drink frequently. (Bereshit Rabbah 53:13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

Ishmael's age is in question in the passage included above. If he was twenty-seven, why would his mother carry him? We also find Ishmael's age mentioned in Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94, which states that Ishmael was seventeen years old. Elsewhere in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30, Ishmael is pictured as being twenty-four years old. In all these passages, Ishmael is an adult, old enough to walk. The midrashic explanation is that Sarah cast an evil eye on him which made him sick. As a result, Hagar had to carry him, making her travels even more difficult.

g. By the merit of our father Abraham the water did not fail in the bottle. But when she reached the entrance of the wilderness, she began to go astray following the idolatry of her father's house and this caused the water to be spent. The proof is, as it is said, "And **she wandered about** (t'eta) in the wilderness of Beer-sheba." (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30 and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:14)

This midrash plays on the root "t'h" (go astray). It connects Gen. 21:14 with Gen. 21:15 which says, "When the water was gone from the skin." It blames Hagar for the lack of water; she caused it by wandering about, being idolatrous in the wilderness. Hagar's actions caused them to not have enough water to drink and endangered their survival.

h. The meaning of "And she wandered about" is merely idolatry, because it is written [based on the root "t'h"] "They are vanity, a work of delusion" (Jer. 10:15). (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30 and Zohar 118b)

21:15 "When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes."

Commentary: Hagar continues to be the main character. Abraham had given her the food and water, but it was exhausted since she had to take care of Ishmael as if he were a child. The reader is told that the water was spent, a red flag that trouble was at hand. To be without water in the desert is the first sign that death was close behind. One wonders what her feelings were which motivated her to leave her child under one of the bushes once the water was spent. Perhaps the bush provided shade for the child as she went to search for more water. The bush is a superfluous detail which needs to be explained midrashically.

Midrashim:

a. "When the water was gone from the skin." The water was spent because he was sick and drank from it every hour. (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

Ishmael's sickness was mentioned earlier in the midrashim to Gen. 21:14. His illness was caused by Sarah who cast an evil eye on him.

b. "When the water was gone from the skin." Ishmael was seventeen years old when he left his father's house. Abraham did not cause the water to be spent; it occurred after Ishmael became involved in idolatry. Ishmael was dying of thirst. What did he do? He went and placed himself under one of the bushes in the desert and said: "God of Abraham my father, You see before you

the outcome of thirst. Take my soul from me so that I will not die of thirst." These words caused God to hear (Gen. 21:17). (Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:15)

This is a powerful picture of Ishmael dying of thirst in the desert. While it unsympathetically blames Ishmael's idolatry for the lack of water, his sincere cry to God is heeded and he is saved. Here, Ishmael is praised for crying out to God. This midrash is in sharp contrast with the earlier condemnation of Abraham for not calling out to God.

c. "She left the child under one of the bushes." R. Meir said: "It is the way of broom bushes to grow in the desert. R. Issi [and others say R. Ammi] said: "It was under one of the bushes where the ministering angels spoke to him" (Gen. 21:17). (Bereshit Rabbah 53:13, Tanhuma naNidpas, Vayaytze #5, Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:5)

This midrash explains the purpose of a seemingly superfluous phrase, "under one of the bushes." Bushes are a common Biblical meeting place between a person and God.

21:16 "And she went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears."

Commentary: Hagar's passivity and acceptance of the imminent death of her child is surprising. She does not try and look for water, but leaves him to die by himself. It is only then that she burst into tears. One would expect that she, as his mother, would want to be at his side as he died rather than to abandon him. Perhaps the scene is melodramatically set in this manner so that we are to

identify with her and sympathize. In addition, the author includes an interesting detail: a distance is a bowshot away. Perhaps, it is his way of foreshadowing Ishmael's future as a bowman (Gen. 21:20).

Midrashim:

a. "And sitting thus afar." It denotes a mile. (Bamidbar Rabbah 2:9)

This short midrash explicates the ambiguous phrase "and sitting thus afar."

b. Three wept and the Holy One heard their weeping. They are: Hagar, Esau, and Hezekiah. Where does Scripture teach us about Hagar? It says, "And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears." And where do we learn that the Holy One heard the sound of her weeping? Scripture says, "For God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy" (Gen. 21:17-18). (Avot D'Rabbi Nathan, chapter 47)

Hagar must have been righteous, for she merited God hearing and acting upon her sorrow. This midrash is ironic because the Biblical text states that God heard the cry of the boy.

c. R. Berekiah said she began to reproach God, saying: "Ruler of the Universe, yesterday You promised me, 'I will greatly multiply your seed' (Gen. 16:10) and today he is perishing!" Immediately we then read, "God heard the cry of the boy, and angel of God called to Hagar" (Gen. 21:17). R. Simon said: "The angels sought to bring charges against him [Ishmael], saying: 'Ruler of the Universe, will You cause a well to come up for one who will one day try to slay Your children with thirst? It is more proper for You to cause a well to spring up for the six thousand who will one day say before You, 'This is My God, I will glorify Adonai' (Exodus 15:2). God retorted: 'But now, is he righteous or wicked?' They replied: 'He is righteous.' Whereupon God said: 'I judge a person only on what s/he is now.' Hence it is written, 'When God sees iniquity, God does not consider it' (Job 11:11). (Shemot Rabbah 3:2 and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:16)

Hagar reproaches God for not fulfilling the Divine promise that Ishmael will multiply Abraham's seed. The author is making a word play; the word "keshet" (bow) is identified as "kashim" (hard words). In addition, the angels' charge against Ishmael is that his descendants will refuse to grant the exiled Israelites water to drink.

d. In the Book of Psalms it is written, "Hear my prayer, Adaonai; give ear to my cry; do not disregard my tears." [Sarai said:] You were not silent to Hagar's tears, but you are silent to mine! If you say [you heeded Hagar's tears] because she was a beloved convert, I am also a convert, as it says, "For like all my forebears I am an alien, resident with You" (Ps. 39:13). (Bereshit Rabbah 53:14 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

This midrash emphasizes Hagar's status as a sincere convert. It is a very positive portrayal of her.

21:17 "God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.'"

Commentary: In Gen. 21:16 the last scene is Sarah crying, separated from her son, fearing his imminent death. In this verse and continuing into Gen. 21:18, there is a dramatic shift and the beginning of their rescue. In Gen. 21:16 Sarah is crying, while here God hears the cry of the boy. The author had not told us how the boy was reacting; this is the first mention of Ishmael's feelings. We are left to ask: Why didn't God respond to Hagar's cry? The text

shifts between God and the angel. Finally, a rhetorical question is asked of Hagar: "What troubles you, Hagar?" The angel never waits for her answer. She is crying over the possible death of her son and the angel responds by assuring her of his secure future: "I will make a great nation of him" (Gen. 21:18). It seems as if the angel in this monologue is speaking directly to Hagar's fears.

Midrashim:

a. Don't be amazed that [God] sent angels to Jacob while not to Joseph, for angels even spoke with Hagar, as it is written, "And an angel of God called to Hagar." How many angels spoke with her? R. Levi said and our masters [agreed]: "three." (Tanhuma naNidpas, Vayishlach 82a)

b. "And an angel of God called to Hagar." It occurred because of Abraham's merit. (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

Both of these midrashim remark about the same fact: an angel of God spoke to Hagar. She must have deserved this direct communication on God's part by virtue of some act and the commentators are interested in interpreting what her merit might be. It is clear, however, in the second midrash that God responded to Hagar because of Abraham's merit.

c. He went and cast himself beneath the thorns of the wilderness, so that the moisture might be upon him, and said: "O God of my father Abraham! If it is Your will to cause me to drink, please give me water so I don't die of thirst." And God paid heed to him, as it is said, "For God has heeded the cry of the boy." (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30)

This rabbinic passage explains that while the Biblical text mentions Hagar's tears, Ishmael also cried, as it is written: "God heard the cry of the boy." Thus, God was responding to Ishmael's prayers.

d. R. Simon said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: "The Holy One does not judge a person except at the time when that person is there, as in the text, "Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is." (P.T. Rosh Hashanah 1:3, 7b, Sheiltot, Ha-azinu #64, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:16-17)

Ishmael was innocent as this point in time, so God heeded his cry. This interpretation appeared above in midrashim on Gen. 21:16.

e. Although Hagar went astray after idols, she lifted up her voice and wept, yet it says, "God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is." The expression, "where he is" we interpret to imply that he was still a minor in the eyes of the heavenly court. For whereas in the human court, here below, the age of liability is reached at thirty years, in the heavenly court it is reached at twenty years; before that age, even if one is guilty, one is not punished. Hence the phrase, "where he is." (Zohar 118b)

God's compassion for Ishmael only derived from his status as a minor.

f. "Where he is." God heeded Ishmael's cry because of his own merit. It is better to pray for oneself than to pray for others. (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94)

This passage is another rabbinic comment that God heeded Ishmael's own cry. It is similar to a number of passages which state that God loves the tears of barren women. All of these passages emphasize that when a person cries out to God, God responds and heeds his/her prayers.

21:18 "Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Commentary: In this verse Ishmael is described as being very fragile and frail. Hagar is commanded: "se'i"

(**lift up**) the boy and hold him by the hand. Ishmael is not called a child but a boy in this verse. The phrase: "hold him by the hand" is idiomatic for lending support and encouragement (Speiser, Genesis, p.156). I have not included any midrashim because they do not directly relate to the relationship between Sarah and Hagar.

21:19 "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink."

Commentary: Hagar resumes her role as Ishmael's caretaker. She is very active in this verse, it being as if she has awakened from her earlier total passivity and is now ready to take control of the situation. God opens her eyes. But were they closed from her tears and the sand of the desert? The Biblical writer is making a wordplay between, "vayiftach et ayneha" (**opened her eyes**) and "beayr mayim" (**well of water**), since the word "ayncha" could mean **her wells**. God allows her to see a well of water which is their salvation. Was the well there all along and only now she was able to see it? In Genesis 16:13-14 Hagar has a parallel experience of being saved by a well. There she names it: "Beer-lahai-roi," while here the well is unnamed.

Midrashim:

a. R. Benjamin b. Levi and R. Jonathan b. Amram both said: "All may be presumed to be blind, until the Holy One enlightens their eyes. This is learned from the following verse, 'Then God opened her eyes and she saw.'" (Bereshit Rabbah 53:14)

Hagar was unable to see the well of salvation until God opened her eyes, allowing her to see it.

b. The well which was created at twilight [of the eve of the first Sabbath in the week of Creation] was opened for them there, and they went and drank and filled the bottle with water, as it is said, "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water." (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30 and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:19)

This unnamed well was created for a special purpose; it was there to save Hagar and Ishmael. Thus, we can conclude that the well was everpresent, it was only now that she was able to perceive its redemptive quality.

c. When one prays for dew, one must mention the merit of the ancestors, as it says about his [Abraham's] handmaid, "Then God opened her eyes." (Mishnat Rabbi Eliezar)

When one prays for dew, one should mention Hagar. Just as God opened up her eyes and she was able to act, seeing the water of survival, so, too, God will give you dew which is a symbol of salvation.

d. "She went and filled with skin with water." This proves that she was lacking in faith. (Bereshit Rabbah 53:14 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #95)

According to this midrash, Hagar should not have filled the skin with water because it showed that she feared the well would disappear again. A true woman of faith would not have needed to act in this manner.

e. Should caravans consisting of children of Dedanites (relations) act in this manner? Did the father [of Israel] behave so to your ancestor? What is written in connection with your ancestor? "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of

water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink." You, however, have not fulfilled the exhortation: "Meet the thirsty with water" (Isa. 21:14). (Eikhah Rabbah 2:4)

This final midrash refers to the relationship between the Ishmaelites and the Israelites in the desert; the Ishmaelites refused to give their relatives water to drink. Their behavior is condemned as inappropriate, for the God of Israel had saved Ishmael by giving him water to drink. Perhaps this is the historical background against which the stories about Hagar and Ishmael at the well were written.

PART TWO: RABBINIC VIEWS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
SARAH AND HAGAR

A. A Biblical Overview

The first step in painting the rabbinic portraits of the relationship between Biblical characters such as Sarah and Hagar is to understand clearly the stories written about them in the Bible. In order to accomplish this goal, I will begin with some general conclusions about Genesis 16 and Genesis 21, the chapters which contain the stories about their inter-relationship.

Genesis 16 can be titled: "The Birth of Ishmael." It is a story about the conflict between certain specific legal rights and human feelings. The first conflict between Sarai's legal responsibility and her feelings occurs when Sarai decides to offer her handmaid Hagar to her husband Abram in order to insure that he will have a son. As we learned from Nuzi texts, she was legally obligated to provide her husband with a concubine because she was barren. The plot thickens as Hagar conceives, which allows her to claim equality with her mistress. Sarai became very angry and blames Abram for Hagar's change in attitude. The Code of Hammurabi adds to our understanding here: Sarai was rightfully angry with Hagar, for it was forbidden for a handmaid to claim equality with her mistress. Thus, the second conflict between a specific legal right and a human feeling occurs when Abram realizes that he must grant Sarai authority over Hagar. He does so unwillingly, as seen in his words, "deal with her as you think right" (Gen. 16:6). He allows Sarai to do with Hagar as the law allows, even though

he does not whole-heartedly agree.

The third example of a conflict between a specific legal right and a human feeling is the conversation between the angel and Hagar after she ran away from Sarai. The angel tells her to return and submit to Sarai's harsh treatment. The text does not describe God reprimanding Sarai for mistreating Hagar. On the contrary, Hagar, as her slave, is expected to return and accept the consequences of breaking the social and legal norms of her society.

However, there are two scenes which seem to show the author's empathy with Hagar's situation. The first is the aetiology of her son Ishmael's name. He is called Ishmael, "for Adonai has paid heed to your suffering" (Gen. 16:11). The second is the aetiology of the well, Beer-lahai-roi, "You are El-roi, by which she meant, Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me" (Gen. 16:13). Not only did she merit that God be aware of her suffering, but she also was seen by God!

One can theorize several reasons why these stories were told. The chapter explains several important events in early Israelite history which needed to be explained. First, how Abram came to have a son by another woman. Second, how his son came to be called Ishmael and how he fits into the Biblical world. Finally, how the well came to be named Beer-lahai-roi.

Genesis 21 can be titled: "The Birth of Isaac and the Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael." The chapter focuses on how

the birth of Isaac totally rearranged the family system. Up to this point in the Genesis narratives, Sarah was unhappily barren. After his birth, she is happy and laughs saying, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6). However, once he was weaned, she became protective of her son's future inheritance and orders Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is very unhappy that Sarah wants his son expelled, so God has to reassure him that it is through Isaac that the line shall be continued. God also adds, "As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed" (Gen. 21:13). Hagar, too, is changed by Isaac's birth; her physical security is now in jeopardy. Abraham has given her only the bare necessities for them to survive in the desert. When her water runs out, she is saved only through Divine intervention. Finally, the birth of Isaac has affected Hagar so profoundly that she cannot return to live with Abraham and Sarah. The text says that Ishmael dwells in the wilderness, but does not mention where Hagar resides.

One can postulate why the stories found in Genesis 21 were told. First, Isaac is such a significant figure in the Bible that his birth must be explicated in great detail. He is born to his parents after many years of barrenness and this supernatural event must be explained. Second, the aetiology of the name Isaac must be explained. Finally, the chapter must account for the role of the Ishmaelites in the

Biblical world.

There are many similarities between these two chapters and yet there are significant differences. Biblical critics attribute Genesis 16 to the authorship of J, as seen in its use of Yahweh as God's name. These scholars believe except for the first five verses, Genesis 21, was written by E, as seen in its use of Elohim as God's name. Speiser adds to our understanding of the difference in the authors' styles. He writes:

E seeks to explain people and their actions, but he does so with the aid of words rather than deeds. If E's characters do more reasoning than J's, they are also less natural and impulsive.¹

Each character undergoes a major personality change from Genesis 16 to Genesis 21. In Genesis 16, Sarai is angry at Hagar's change in attitude toward her. She was also jealous of Hagar's ability to conceive. Her anger is so fierce that it erupts, causing her to mistreat Hagar. She is clearly portrayed as the mistress with certain legal rights which give her the means to insure that her maid submit to her authority. Yet, in Genesis 21 we see another side of Sarah's personality. She is thrilled that she has given birth. She is totally focused on her new son Isaac and then suddenly realizes that Ishmael may be a threat to Isaac's future inheritance. She worries only about Ishmael; she does not seem jealous of Hagar. Her demand that Abraham expel Ishmael and Hagar seems cruel, yet God supports it. One can conclude that Sarah succeeded in rooting out

any potential threat to Isaac's inheritance. Isaac reigns supreme because Ishmael and Hagar reside in the desert, and her position as Abraham's wife has been restored.

In Genesis 16 Hagar is Sarai's slave. She is a pawn in Sarai's hands, used to insure that Abram has a son. Once she conceives, her respectful attitude toward her mistress changes to contempt. While she seemed passive in the beginning when Sarai gave her to Abram, in the end of the chapter she actively runs away after Sarai mistreats her. Hagar has a conversation with an angel of God who tells her that in return for submitting to her mistress' harsh treatment, God will greatly increase her offspring. Hagar is a slave who lacks control over her life, but here she does have the freedom to express her deepest feelings. She probably despised Sarai and her contempt expressed itself once she conceived Abram's child. In the Ancient Near East, fertility insured a woman's self-respect and a certain degree of power. Once Hagar conceived she was freer to express her deepest resentments.

In Genesis 21 we see another portrait of Hagar. She is cast in the role of the innocent bystander. Sarah is jealous of Ishmael and, as a result, she wants Abraham to cast them both out! In this chapter she is only important in relationship to her son. The author has painted a pathetic scene. Hagar is cast out by Abraham without a word and is given only a minimal amount of food. She is thrust into the desert and wanders about without knowing her way.

She leaves her son under one of the bushes because she cannot bear to see him die. Finally, the author describes her as bursting into tears! When the angel asks her questions, she does not even respond. It is only through God's goodness that she is saved. The writer portrays Hagar as a good mother who gave her son water to drink before she herself drank. And then Hagar's final act is to find a wife for him from the Egyptians, her own people.

It is clear that the relationship between Sarah and Hagar changes from Genesis 16 to 21. Each chapter relates a different story about the reason for Hagar's departure. In Genesis 16 Sarai expels Hagar because of her tactless behavior. However, in Genesis 21, Ishmael is the unwitting cause of Sarah's fury. She saw him playing and became concerned about her son Isaac's future inheritance.

The two chapters also relate different endings. In Genesis 16, Ishmael is saved and will be made a great nation in return for Hagar's return to the camp and submission to Sarai's harsh treatment. However, in Genesis 21, while again God promises that Ishmael will be a great nation, he does not return to their camp. He resides in the desert and his mother marries him off to an Egyptian woman.

There are many questions raised after reading the Biblical narratives, especially since the Bible is tersely written leaving many details untold. Thus, in order to understand rabbinic attitudes toward the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, we must raise all the questions left

unanswered in the Biblical text. It will then be the role of the authors of the midrash to fill in the many gaps in the text.

Since the Biblical text does not relate any conversation between Sarah and Hagar, we must ask: What did they say to each other? In Genesis 16, when Sarai gave Hagar to Abram, how did they both feel? What was Hagar thinking when she acted contemptuously toward her mistress? What did Hagar say to Sarai when she began to be mistreated? Hagar was already pregnant with Abram's child once Sarai began to treat her harshly. Why wasn't Abram more concerned? Why does God allow him to expel Hagar?

In Genesis 21 many more questions arise. What was Ishmael doing that bothered Sarah so much? Why isn't Sarah jealous of Hagar? How could Sarah tell Abraham to expel them? Once Hagar was in the desert, why did she leave Ishmael under one of the bushes? When the angel asked her questions why didn't she respond? What made Hagar merit God's direct concern? And, finally, we must answer questions which relate to Hagar after the experience in the desert. Where does Hagar reside? Does she marry and have any other children? What happens to her?

I will attempt to present the Rabbis' answers to these questions by weaving together the many rabbinic passages about Sarah and Hagar into one multi-textured piece. Then I will draw some general conclusions about the relationship between these two Biblical women.

B. A Rabbinic Portrait of Sarah and Hagar

In order to understand Sarah and Hagar better, the Rabbis were very interested in extrapolating the background of each character because neither of their births is mentioned in the Torah. In regard to Sarai, it is merely stated, "Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). This verse explains that Milcah is the daughter of Haran, though it does not include Sarai's lineage. Thus, the Rabbis conclude that Iscah is another name for Sarai and she is also the daughter of Haran. The following passages explain the aetiology of the name Iscah, in this regard:

Now Sarai was the daughter of Haran, as it is said, "And Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). Iscah being another name for Sarai out of whom the whole world was peopled.²

Now that Sarai's birth has been explained, the Rabbis attempt to discern the meaning of her "nickname" Iscah:

R. Isaac said: "Iscah is Sarai; and why was she called Iscah? Because she discerned "sakethah" by means of the Holy Spirit, as it is said, 'Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says' (Gen. 21:12).³

Another explanation why Sarai is called Iscah is that all gazed, "sochin," at her beauty.⁴

In regard to Hagar's name and background, the Rabbis write:

She was a handmaid, "malug" (of plucking) whom Abram was bound to support but might not sell. R. Shimon b. Lakish was asked: "What is the meaning of what we learnt: 'servants of plucking'?" "What you pluck, you pluck," he answered.⁵

Hagar's background is explained in the following passage:

R. Shimon b. Yohai said: "Hagar was the daughter Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah's behalf to his own house (Gen. 12:17), he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah. He said: 'It is better that my daughter be a handmaid in that house than a mistress in another house.' Thus, it is written: 'She had an Egyptian handmaid whose name was Hagar' (Gen. 16:1)."⁶

This passage shows that Hagar came from royal stock and thus, she is fit to be both Sarah's slave and Abraham's concubine. Similarly, another passage explains that Hagar is Abimelech's daughter whom he gave to Sarah after he saw the miracles performed in his house on her behalf (Gen. 20).⁷

Since the Rabbis are interested in providing missing details concerning Biblical characters, they describe Sarah as being very beautiful. Regarding her beauty, it is said:

All women vis-a-vis Sarah are like apes compared to humans. [In addition, it is said:] Sarah did not know that she was beautiful until Abraham told her; and that is the way it is supposed to be, for women should not know they are beautiful.⁸

By contrast, the Rabbis did not discuss Hagar's physical attributes.

It is clear, therefore, that the Rabbis tried to extrapolate a larger picture of the personalities of both Sarah and Hagar because the Biblical material is so terse. Regarding Sarah they generally were complementary, although

passages critical of her behavior can be found. Sarah was thought to have been very righteous, as we note in the following passage:

The Holy One tries the righteous, each according to his/her power. God tried Sarah for ninety years and then listened to her prayers, giving her a son.⁹

She was also pictured as an exceptional woman who observed all the laws of the Torah:

"As for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, but a woman among all these have I not found" (Eccl. 7:28). Usually, if a thousand men take up the study of Scripture, a hundred of them proceed to the study of Mishnah, ten to Talmud, and one of them becomes qualified to decide questions of law. That is what is written, "I found one human being in a thousand." "One human being" refers to Abraham. "But a woman among all these have I not found" refers to Sarah.¹⁰

In this midrash, the phrase applied to Sarah was probably meant as a rhetorical question, although some commentators explain it as making a positive statement about Sarah's exceptional character; perhaps she was even a scholar! Additionally, it is written:

Proverbs 31, "A woman of Valour," also is [an alphabetic acrostic] written from "aleph" to "tav." It was composed about Sarah, as it is said, "It is for her fear of Adonai that a woman is to be praised" (Prov. 31:30). The two of them [Abraham and Sarah] observed the Torah from the beginning to the end.¹¹

Another midrash applies every line in Proverbs 31 to Sarah. One line which describes her personality is included here:

"Many women have done well" (Prov. 31:29), these are the matriarchs. "But you surpass them all" (Prov. 31:29), as it is said, "Look back to Abraham your father and to Sarah who brought you forth" (Isa. 51:2).¹²

Thus, Sarah is considered to have been a very unusual and special woman.

In addition, Genesis 18 describes Sarah as being in her tent when the angels come to visit. The following passage explains her actions which emphasize her modest nature:

"And they said to him: Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "There, in the tent" (Gen. 18:9); this is to inform us that she was modest. Rabbi Judah said in Rav's name [and some say Rabbi Isaac]: The ministering angels knew that our mother Sarah was in the tent, but why emphasize that she was there? In order to make her more beloved to her husband.¹³

Sarah's righteous character is noted in many midrashim.

Note the following illustration which speaks about her:

Here it is written, "His offering was one silver dish" (Numbers 7:79). "Silver" implies that she was a righteous woman, and may be compared with the text, "the tongue of the righteous is as choice silver" (Prov. 10:20). "One" symbolizes that she was the only righteous woman in her generation.¹⁴

On the negative side, this midrash lists many female character defects and three of these traits are applied to Sarah:

R. Levi said: "Women possess the following four characteristics: They are greedy, inquisitive, envious, and lazy.... Whence do we know them to be inquisitive? For it is written, 'And Sarah heard in the tent door' (Gen. 18:10), that is she was eavesdropping on the angel.... Whence do we know that they are lazy? For it is written, 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal' (Gen. 18:6)." The Rabbis added two more characteristics: they are complainers and gossips. Whence do we know that they are complainers? For it is written, "And Sarai said to Abraham, 'The wrong done me is your fault!' (Gen. 16:5).¹⁵

In addition, one could prove from the Biblical text that

Sarah was also greedy, as seen in the following: "Cast out that slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). Also, one could say that Sarah was very envious of Hagar as seen in Genesis 16.

From these examples, we see that the Rabbis painted a realistic picture of Sarah, which included both her positive and negative character traits.

Sarah lived childless for many years, and her barrenness was a difficult burden for her. The rabbinic tradition is interested in explaining why Sarah, our mother, had to endure barrenness, for attempting to understand her situation, the Rabbis make her into the infertile woman, par-excellence. Note the following illustration:

R. Nachman said in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha: "Our mother Sarah was incapable of procreation for it is said, 'And Sarai was barren; she had no child' (Gen. 11:30); she did not even have a womb."¹⁴

It seems that these Rabbis believe that Sarah was unable to bear a child because of a physical problem.

Other Rabbis explain Sarah's infertility theologically, basing their explanations on the Jewish belief that good will be rewarded and evil punished. Thus, the Rabbis tried to explain what Sarah did which brought about the change in her life enabling her to finally have a child at age ninety. There are several explanations given in this regard, one of which reads:

"Though the fig tree does not bud" (Hab. 3:17) alludes to Abraham, as in the verse, "Your fathers

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seemed to Me like the first fig to ripen on a fig tree" (Hosea 9:10). "And no yield is on the vine" (Hab. 3:17) alluded to Sarah, as you read, "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house" (Ps. 128:3). "Though the olive crop has "kechach" (failed)" (Hab. 3:17) refers to the faces of the men who gave good tidings to Sarah which shone like an olive. Were they "kachasheem" (lying)? No, but "the fields produce no grain" (Hab. 3:17), which means "though sheep have vanished from the fold" (Hab. 3:17). This has the same connotation as in the verse, "For you, My flock, flock that I tend, are people; and I, your Shepherd, am your God-declares Adonai God" (Ez. 34:21). Additionally it is written, "And no cattle are in the pen" (Hab. 3:17) which has the same meaning as in this verse, "Ephraim became a trained heifer, but preferred to thresh" (Hos. 10:11). Subsequently, however, Sarah exclaimed: "What! Am I to lose faith in my creator! Heaven forbid! I will not lose faith in my Creator, Yet will I rejoice in Adonai, exult in the God who delivers me" (Hab. 3:18)." The Holy One said to her: "Since you did not lose your faith, I, too, will not give you cause to lose faith." Thus, it is written: "Adonai took note of Sarah."¹⁷

This midrash is a wonderful example of the rabbinic style of linking disparate verses together to prove an idea. Here, the verses from the prophet Habakkuk prove that just as Israel had suffered in the past, did not lose faith, and was rewarded, so too, Sarah suffered, did not lose faith, and was rewarded with a son for maintaining her faith. Her righteous actions merited her bearing a son at the age of ninety. Another passage which explicates this idea of Sarah's righteousness is included here:

"Adonai took note of Sarah" (Gen. 21:1). R. Aha said: "The Holy One is a trustee; Amalek deposited with God bundles of thorns [wrongdoings], therefore God returned to him bundles of thorns [punishments], as it says, 'I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel' (1 Sam. 15:2). Sarah deposited with God a store of pious acts and good deeds; therefore Adonai returned her [the reward for] these, as it says, 'Adonai took

note of Sarah' (Gen. 21:1).¹⁸

Sarah deposited righteous actions with God, and was rewarded with the birth of a son.

The Rabbis explained Sarah's sudden ability to bear a son in other ways, as well. R. Isaac said that merit was attributed to her as a result of her actions in the incidents with Pharaoh and Abimelech.¹⁹ Another source believes that Sarah was able to give birth only because of Abraham's piety.²⁰ An anonymous source comments that Abram and Sarai's names were changed to Abraham and Sarah as a reward for their recitation of the correct blessings. This name change allowed Sarah to bear a child.²¹ Finally, this idea that a name change affected Sarah's luck is included in the following midrash:

Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring" (Gen. 15:3). R. Samuel b. Isaac commented: "[Abram said:] My planetary fate oppresses me and declares, 'Abram cannot beget a child.' The Holy One said to him: 'Let it be even as your words: Abram and Sarai cannot beget but Abraham and Sarah can beget.'"²²

Thus, by changing their names, God freed them from the influence of the stars.

While the Rabbis' painted a rather realistic picture of Sarah's strengths and weaknesses, in regard to Sarah's rival, Hagar, their comments are more negative. This is seen in the fact that they are quick to explicate the verse, "And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba" (Gen. 21:14), to mean that she quickly reverted to the idolatry of her father's house once away from Abraham's

influence.²³ In addition, they interpreted her actions at the well when she filled the skin with water (Gen. 21:19), as showing her lack of faith.²⁴

However, a contrasting view of Hagar's character is derived from her experiences with God. Since God intervened to save her, her actions must have been meritorious:

[The Rabbis note:] "To deliver Hagar the Egyptian, You sent five angels, but to the six hundred thousand children of Sarah You sent me [Moses] to deliver them?"²⁵

It is very interesting that in this passage Hagar seems to have had a closer, more intimate relationship with God than did Sarah.

In Genesis 16:13, Hagar says: "Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!" The following passage explicates her thoughts:

She said: "I have been granted not only speech [with an angel], but even with royalty, too, as you read, 'That You have brought me thus far?' (2 Sam. 7:18). I was favoured [to see the angel] not only when I was with my mistress, but even now that I am alone." R. Samuel said: "This may be compared to a noble lady whom the king ordered to walk before him. She did so leaning on her maid and pressing her face against her. Thus, her maid saw [the king], while she did not see him."²⁶

I believe these midrashim are an important aspect of the total Rabbinic picture of Hagar. She was viewed by the Rabbis as being more than an angry, disrespectful maidservant. She was seen in very positive, as well as negative terms. The last midrash stresses that Hagar was able to see God while her mistress, Sarai, never saw God.

Another similar positive midrash regarding Hagar deals

with the question of how many angels visited her:

How many angels visited her? R. Hamma b. R. Hanina said: "Five, for each time 'speech' is mentioned it refers to an angel." The Rabbis said: "Four, this being the number of times the word 'angel' occurs." [Additionally, it is said:] R. Isaac quoted: "She oversees the activities of her household" (Prov. 31:27); Abraham's household were seers, so she [Hagar] was accustomed to them."²⁷

The Rabbis conclude that she deserves great merit even though she is called a "bondmaid." As a reward for her trials and tribulations, she merits encountering many angels and much contact with God.

Yet, occasionally the Rabbis stress that Sarah indeed had contact with God and hers was direct while Hagar's was not:

R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Johanan in the name of R. Eliezer b. R. Simon said: "The Holy One never condescended to converse with a woman, save with that righteous woman [Sarah], and that, too, was because of a particular cause. R. Abba b. Kahana said in R. Biry'a's name: "And what a roundabout way God took in order to speak with her, as it is written, 'And God said, 'Nay, but you did laugh' (Gen. 18:15). But it is written, 'And she called Adonai who spoke to her' (Gen. 16:13). R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah answered in R. Idi's name: 'That was through an angel.' R. Leazar said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: 'That was through the medium of Shem.'"²⁸

The question posed in this midrash is: 'With whom did Hagar speak?' It contains the varied opinions of many Rabbis and concludes that God spoke indirectly to Hagar through an angel. God did not talk directly to Hagar because Adonai only spoke directly to Sarai, that righteous woman. We must conclude, therefore, that the Rabbis did not consider Hagar as righteous a woman as Sarai. It should be

added that for many of the Rabbis, it was even difficult to imagine God speaking with any woman!

In order to understand rabbinic attitudes toward Sarah and Hagar, we must also describe how the Rabbis pictured them relating to each other. In Genesis 16, their involved relationship began to develop as a result of Sarai's infertility, Sarai initiating the relationship between her handmaid Hagar and Abram. In this regard, note the following midrashim which explicate the Biblical verse, "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years, and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine" (Gen. 16:3):

"So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian." She persuaded (took) her with words. She said to her: "How wonderful it is that you are to be united with so holy a man."²⁹

This midrashic comment is very unusual in its positive depiction of Sarai and Hagar's relationship. Here we see that Sarai is trying to convince Hagar that she was lucky to be given to Abram. This passage pictures Sarai as being sensitive to Hagar's feelings of discomfort at being treated as an object that can be given to another person. It is important to note, however, that the passage does not include Hagar's response to Sarai. The writer of this midrash must have felt uncomfortable with Hagar's total passivity in the Biblical text and wanted it to appear as if she was lucky and had to be persuaded by her mistress to have sexual relations with Abram. Another passage

extends the Biblical text even further:

"And [Sarai] gave her [Hagar] to her husband Abram as concubine" (Gen. 16:3). She gave her to him, but not to another; she gave her to him to be a wife, not to be a concubine!³⁰

This passage emphatically notes the special circumstances of Sarai's giving Hagar to Abram. Sarai gave Hagar only to Abram; she would not have given her to any other man. Additionally, while the original Biblical intent of the words "lo l'ishah" is as concubine, the word "ishah" can also be translated as wife. Thus, Hagar's status was raised from handmaid to wife; fitting for Abram's partner and mother of his child. The writer must have been uncomfortable with the idea that Abram, our father, could have had a son by his concubine. Now, one can better understand Hagar's change in attitude toward Sarai; she bore Abram's son as his wife! Finally, Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar is even more comprehensible; she was reacting to Hagar's threat to her status as Abram's only wife. Thus, the reason for the tension between them was Hagar's newly acquired status as Abram's wife; fertility is only the symptom of the conflict.

Yet, the Rabbis see a clear difference between Sarai and Hagar in their ability to conceive:

R. Hanina b. Pazzi said: "Thorns are neither weeded or sown, yet of their own accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow."³¹

The analogy between the amount of care needed for thorns and wheat to grow is very clear and clever. The author of

this passage believes that there is a significant personality difference between Sarai and Hagar. A thorn grows wild, is prickly, is not considered valuable, useful, or beautiful. Hagar is like a thorn which simply springs up; she became pregnant after the first act of intercourse. On the other hand, Sarai is like wheat, though it requires pain and toil, is considered valuable, useful, and necessary for human sustenance. Sarai was not able to conceive without much pain and toil, but she and her offspring were considered valuable and necessary for the perpetuation of the Hebrew tribe.

Now that Hagar has conceived, the relationship between her and Sarai changes dramatically. Before, Hagar simply was Sarai's slave, now she thinks that she is more worthy than Sarai, her mistress:

"When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem" (Gen. 16:4). Hagar said to herself: "It must be that I am more worthy before Adonai than Sarai, my mistress. All those years that my mistress was with my master she did not conceive, and from one act of intercourse Adonai allowed me to conceive."³²

Another passage expands on the same idea:

Ladies used to come to inquire how Sarai was, and she would say to them: "Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman [Hagar]." Hagar would tell them: "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is appears to be outwardly. She appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, so many years would not have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!" Said Sarah: "Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No, I will argue the matter with her master!"³³

Thus, Sarai complains to Abram about Hagar. He listens and

agrees to do with Hagar as she pleases. As soon as this happens, Sarai begins to mistreat her. The following passage explicates the Rabbis' ideas about exactly how Sarai harshly treated Hagar:

He said: "I do not care at all what happens to her." It is written, "Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her." While it is written, "He shall not have the right to sell her to outsiders, since he broke faith with her" (Exodus 21:8); after we have made her a wife, shall we make her a handmaid again? I do not care for the better or the worse what happens to her; hence it is written, "Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her" (Gen. 16:6). R. Abba said: "She [Sarai] restrained her from cohabitation." R. Berechiah said: "She slapped her face with a slipper." R. Berechiah said in R. Abba's name: "She made her carry her water buckets and bath towels to the baths."³⁴

In response to Sarai's harsh treatment, Hagar runs away. An angel of Adonai finds her and asks her: "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Gen. 16:8). She replies: "I am running away from my mistress Sarai" (Gen. 16:8). The midrash elaborates:

Sarai is called Hagar's mistress because she came down very hard on Hagar. Another reason: Sarai is referred to as Hagar's mistress because she continues to be responsible for Hagar. Sarai tried to help Hagar, but she was not able to change Hagar, who was known for her lewdness and idolatry. The proof text is, "Because of your filthy lewdness, because I have purged you and you were not purged, you shall not be purged from your filthiness any more, till I have satisfied My fury upon you" (Ezek. 24:13).³⁵

We see here several possible interpretations concerning Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar. One perspective concludes that Sarai acted appropriately toward Hagar, seeing Hagar as an idolator, undeserving of being pregnant with Abram's

child. The other perspective views Hagar as being mistreated by Sarai. I am more convinced by the second comment because it is closer to the plain meaning (peshat) of the Biblical text. It appears to me that Sarai became jealous because Hagar was able to conceive. At the beginning, she did not truly believe that Hagar would become pregnant, and as a result, would change her attitude toward her. This is indicated in the following passage which explains why God responded to Hagar's tears in Genesis 21:16:

As it is written in the Book of Psalms, "Hear my prayer, Adonai; give ear to my cry; do not disregard my tears;" [Sarah said:] You were not silent to Hagar's tears, but You are silent to mine! If You say [You heeded Hagar's tears] because she was a beloved convert, I am also a convert, as it says, "for alike all my forebears I am an alien, resident with You" (Ps. 39:13).³⁴

This midrash emphasizes Hagar's status as a sincere convert and adds to a developing, more positive picture of her.

In Genesis 21, the conflict between Sarah and Hagar is over their sons. Sarah wanted her son Isaac to inherit and thus wanted Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. The following two midrashim explicate the difference between their children:

"And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children!' (Gen. 21:7)." She suckled "banim" [which is midrashically understood as] builders.³⁷

The comment that Sarah suckled builders is midrashically understood as explicating the idea that God-fearers build up the world. On the other hand, Hagar's children are not

meritorious:

Should caravans consisting of children of Dedanites (relations) act in this manner? Did the father [of Israel] behave so to your ancestor? What is written in connection with your ancestor, "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink" (Gen. 21:19). You, however, have not fulfilled the exhortation: "Meet the thirsty with water" (Isa. 21:14).³⁸

Thus, this midrash refers to the Ishmaelites who refused to give their relatives water to drink in the desert. Their behavior is condemned as inappropriate, for the God of Israel had saved Ishmael by giving him water to drink. It is probable that the difference between their sons emanated from the rabbinic understanding of the difference between Sarah and Hagar.

The Bible clearly describes Sarah's death at the age of one hundred and twenty seven (Gen. 23:1), while we are not told when Hagar died. A midrash relates that Sarah died in the month of Marheshvan, "mar" means bitter.³⁹ According to the Rabbis, she died because of the shock of thinking that Isaac had been sacrificed on the first of Tishrei.⁴⁰

Sarah and Hagar were two women locked into a struggle over their ability to have children. Sarah's jealousy and Hagar's contempt contributed to a relationship fraught with much tension. The Rabbis also were keenly aware of their unhappy relationship, did not attempt to cover it up, but rather acknowledged and expanded the feelings of both women. They noted the clear personality differences between them and how their situation of 'sharing' Abram caused strife

between them.

C. Sarah and Hagar's Relationship with Abraham

We have seen the rabbinic portrayal of both Sarah and Hagar, the next step is to see how each character relates to Abraham, the important male in their lives.

Sarah and Abraham spend many years together and the Rabbis note that they were very close to each other, though he is ten years older than she.⁴¹ The following midrash describe Abraham and Sarah as being very close one to the other:

R. Bana'ah used to mark out caves [where there were dead bodies]. When he came to the cave of Abraham, he found Eliezer the servant of Abraham standing at the entrance. He said to him: "What is Abraham doing?" He replied: "He is sleeping in the arms of Sarah, and she is looking fondly at his head." He said: "Go and tell him that Bana'ah is standing at the entrance." Said Abraham to him: "Let him enter, it is well known that there is no passion in this world."⁴²

Thus, one can conclude that when Sarah and Abraham were alive there indeed was passion between them.

Abraham and Sarah also are portrayed as sharing a common life-work, as seen through the massive conversion they effected in Haran:

Genesis 12:5 is applied to both Sarah and Abraham, "And the souls that they had made in Haran." This verse teaches that Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.⁴³

However, in comparison to Abraham, Sarah could not and was not pictured as being as righteous as Abraham by the Rabbis:

Another interpretation, "I found only one human being in a thousand," that is Abraham. "But a woman among all these have I not found," that is Sarah. (Eccl. 7:28)⁴⁴

Sarah could never be as good or righteous as Abraham.

This perspective is not surprising considering the prevalent attitudes about male superiority.

In addition, when Abraham told Sarah to make cakes, he said: "Quick, three measures of choice flour! Knead and make cakes! (Gen. 18:6)" A Talmudic passage elaborates:

Scripture writes, "flour" and here it is written, "Choice flour." R. Isaac said: "This shows that a woman looks with a more grudging eye upon guests than a man."⁴⁵

This comment explicates the seeming superfluous word, "solet" (choice). Thus, Abraham had to give Sarah specific instructions to provide fine meal rather than everyday flour. This passage presents Sarah in a unflattering light while praising Abraham for his gracious hospitality.

They did not have children for many years. Genesis 16:1 states, "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Since the Torah does not explicitly state why they did not have children, thus the midrash attempts to explain their barren condition. An unusual passage from the Talmud states that they were originally of doubtful sex.⁴⁶ Another midrash relates:

Whether it was she or he who was infertile, our mother Sarah said, "See, Adonai has kept me from bearing."⁴⁷

The responsibility for their infertility is definitively attributed to Sarah by her use of the word "me." Once she

took responsibility for Abram's lack of children, she told him to consort with her handmaid, Hagar, through whom she hoped to have a son. Abram agreed to her request. As a result, the Rabbis wrote:

The Holy One said: "Listen to me; no one who hearkens to my words will suffer a loss." The Rabbis taught: there have been occasions when a man listened [to his wife] and, as a result, profited. This is the case of Abraham. When do we learn this? It is said, "And Abram heeded Sarai's request (Gen. 16:2)."48

This passage is a positive rabbinic statement about the relationship between Sarah and Abraham. The Rabbis are saying that Abraham was right to listen to Sarah's demand to take Hagar as his concubine. As a reward for listening to Sarah, he merited having a son, Ishmael.

As we know, the relationship between Sarah and Hagar became complicated as a result of Hagar's pregnancy. Hagar's respect for her mistress decreased and Sarah was furious. The following midrash expresses Sarah's anger but directs it to Abraham:

Ladies used to come to inquire how Sarai was, and she would say to them: "Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman [Hagar]." Hagar would tell them: "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly. She appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, so many years would not have passed without her conceiving; whereas I conceived in one night!" Said Sarah: "Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her? No, I will argue the matter with her master!"49

Sarah's anger over Hagar's behavior became focused on her husband. This rabbinic comment is in agreement with the "peshat" (plain meaning) of Genesis 16:5. Nevertheless, the

Rabbis castigated her for her outburst against Abraham:

R. Abin said: "One who invokes the judgment of Heaven against one's fellow human being is punished first [for one's own sins], as it says: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault!'" and it is subsequently written, "and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her" (Gen. 23:2).⁵⁰

This passage contains a rather negative view of Sarai's outburst against Abraham. As a result of her improper behavior, her punishment was that she had to die before Abraham. I am surprised there are so many commentators who believed that an early death was the appropriate punishment for her!

On the other hand, the following midrash more fully explicates the pain and suffering Sarah experienced because of her barrenness. It paints a portrait of Abraham as a husband who lacked empathy for his wife:

Sarai said to Abram: "My judgment and my pain are in your hands. I left my land, my birthplace, and my father's house (Gen.12), and you brought me with you on faith. I came up with you; I went with you before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and I said that you are my brother so that they would not kill you. I took Hagar, the Egyptian, as my servant and I gave her to you as a wife. You said to me that she is going to give birth. If that child to whom she will give birth is the only means by which I will be built up, I [will suffer] being looked upon contemptuously by her. Therefore, let God be revealed and judge between me and you, and let God be filled with mercy upon me and you. May God make peace between me and you, and let the world be filled from me and you. Then, we will not need the son of Hagar. She is one of the peoples of the world who threw you into the fire of the Chaldeans."⁵¹

This passage restates Sarah's claim that Abraham is

responsible for her pain and suffering. In it she retells the history of their years together in order to emphasize that she has been a loyal and brave wife, enduring much travail through their wanderings. She prays that God will judge between them, and give them children. The author is justifying her later mistreatment of Hagar who is unworthy. This perspective is seen in the sentence: "She is one of the peoples of the world who threw you into the fire of the Chaldeans." We can conclude that the Rabbis did not look favorably upon Sarah's angry words to Abraham. Despite the fact that her barrenness was a subject of great unhappiness between the two of them, Sarah still should not have showed so little respect for him.

In light of these midrashim, one wonders how they survived the trials of so many years of marriage. Perhaps the answer is Sarah's strength of character in comparison to Abraham, which is described in the following passage:

The Holy one tries the righteous according to ones deeds. You find that it was so with Sarah. For twenty-five years, from the time she came to the Land of Israel, the Holy One tried her. It is written, "Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran" (Gen. 12:4). Sarah was sixty-five at that time; he being older than she by ten years. At the age of ninety, she gave birth to a child. Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac was born. Isaac was the answer to his question, "Shall a child be born unto him who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah who is ninety bear?" (Gen. 17:17). Thus you find that the Holy One tried her according to her strength.⁵²

As a result of her character, she merited giving birth to Isaac. Yet, once God told them that they would have a

son, the Rabbis looked for hints in the text which might indicate that a change had occurred in Sarah:

It is written, "Quick, three measures of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!" (Gen. 18:6). But it is also written, "He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared" (Gen. 18:8). Yet he brought no bread before them! Ephraim Maksha'ah, a disciple of R. Meir, said in his teacher's name: "Our patriarch Abraham ate hullin only when undefiled, for on that day our mother Sarah had gotten her period."⁵³

Abraham was unable to serve the bread she baked because it had become impure since she had gotten her menstrual period. Thus, Sarah's period became the sign that the birth of Isaac was possible.

Nevertheless, she laughed at him at him when it was announced that she would bear a son (Gen. 18:12). The following midrash explicates this verse:

"And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment-with my husband so old?' (Gen. 18:12). This is one of the texts which they amended for King Ptolemy, reading it, "And Sarah laughed before her relatives "be'kerovehah" saying, After I am waxed old, I shall have pleasure." She said thus: 'As long as a woman is young, she has her regular periods, while "after I am waxed old, I shall have "ednah" menses. The fact, however, is that, "My lord is old." R. Judah said: "He is virile, yet impotent. R. Judah be. R. Simon said: [The Holy One said:] "You declare yourself young and your companion old, yet, "Is anything too wondrous for Adonai?" (Gen. 18:13).⁵⁴

Sarah ridiculed the promise on account of Abraham's age, thus implying that she herself was young enough. This midrash explains her feelings about her potential pregnancy at an old age. In addition, it shows her attitude toward Abraham and their difference in age.

Earlier in the Biblical text, even Abraham remarks that he, himself, is too old to bear a child. He says, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" (Gen. 17:17). R. Judan interpreted this verse to mean that in regard to ability to conceive children, a man does not grow older, but a woman does. Thus, he understands that there was nothing improbable about Abraham begetting children, he was only surprised because of Sarah's age.²⁵

In both Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 Abraham heeds Sarah's demands. In the former, she wanted him to do something about Hagar's lack of respect. In the latter, Sarah wants him to expel Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham made up his own mind in Genesis 16, while in Genesis 21 he needed God's words to convince him to expel them. Thus, it is written, "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says'" (Gen. 21:12). This verse is midrashically interpreted to show that Sarah rules over Abraham:

"For she is a married woman" (Gen. 20:3).
 R. Aha said: "Her husband was crowned through her, but she was not crowned through her husband."
 The Rabbis said: "She is her husband's ruler.
 Usually the husband gives orders, whereas here we read [that she gave him the order]."²⁶

This passage is another piece of evidence which shows that the Rabbis understood the multifaceted dynamics in their relationship. Sarah and Abraham experienced many traumas as well as miracles in their many years together.

In this regard, a midrash explains that though they both got old, white-haired, and abstained from the way of husband and wife in the world, they miraculously began to recover the vigor of their youth. Abraham and Sarah attributed this miracle to everything that had happened to them up to that point.⁵⁷

The Torah relates that Sarah died before Abraham and, as noted earlier, many commentators attribute this to her strong words to him in Genesis 16:5. When she died, Abraham had to purchase land for her burial (Genesis 23). One midrash emphasizes that even though God had promised him the land, he had to buy it. Thus, because Abraham did not question God's promise that the land belonged to him, this shows that he had great faith.⁵⁸

Abraham mourned Sarah's death, as it is said, "And Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her" (Gen. 23:2). The following midrash explicates this verse:

Now, should you maintain that it is in honor of the living [that he acted thusly, it is true], he delayed Sarah's [burial] and Sarah herself was pleased that Abraham should attain honour through her.⁵⁹

This passage shows that the delay in burial meant that Abraham had more time to show honor to Sarah, his dead.

Finally, the Torah relates that both Sarah and Abraham were buried in Mamreh, at Kiriath-arba. A midrash explains the meaning of Kiriath-arba as the city of the four couples: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah.⁶⁰

Though the relationship between Abraham and Sarah is primary, it is also important to describe the interaction between Abraham and Hagar from the rabbinic point of view. Their interaction is very different than that of Abraham and Sarah; the Torah does not relate any conversation between them. Abraham and Sarah openly argued and spoke to each other while, in contrast, we do not know very much about how Abraham and Hagar felt about each other. Thus, it is the role of the midrash to fill in these many gaps.

The Torah relates that Sarah initiated the relationship between Abraham and Hagar in order that she would have a child through Hagar (Gen. 16:2). As explained earlier, Sarah was responsible for providing Abraham with a son; Hagar was the means to this end. However, we are interested in how Abraham felt about taking Hagar as his concubine. The midrash explicates:

Gen. 16:2 does not say that Sarai was barren, rather it says, "Adonai has kept me from bearing." Why did Abram listen to her [and agree to marry hagar]? He wanted to check if he was infertile or if Sarai was infertile.⁶⁰

Once Hagar conceives, she thought less of Sarah, her mistress. Sarah became furious over this disrespect and demanded that Abraham take action. He agrees and the midrash elaborates his feelings about Sarah's demand:

"Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands'" (Gen. 16:6). He said: "I do not care at all what happens to her [Hagar]. It is written: 'Since you had your will of her, you must not enslave her' (Deut. 21:14); after we vexed her, can we now enslave her again?"⁶¹

Abraham refuses to become personally involved in order to solve the problem between Sarah and Hagar. He does not care to help Hagar because she insulted Sarah, yet he, himself, is unwilling to do Hagar any harm because she is his wife. Thus, he tells Sarah that she can deal with Hagar, as it is said, "Deal with her as you think **right**" (Gen. 16:6). Yet, the superfluous word "to" **right** shows Abraham's real concern for Hagar. He is hinting to Sarah that she should take good care of her servant, who is his wife.

In Genesis 21 Sarah commands him to expel Hagar and Ishmael. The Biblical text clearly emphasizes his concern for Ishmael and thus we are left to ask: How did he feel about expelling Hagar? The midrash attempts to offer an answer:

"She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slavewoman'" (Gen. 21:10). This was his ninth test because Sarah told him to expel that slavewoman [Hagar] after she [Sarah] had been built up through her.⁶²

This passage concludes that Abraham had to make a separate, difficult decision to expel Hagar. It is also interesting to note that the author believes that Sarah had already been built up through her. This phrase indicates clearly that Hagar was the means Sarah used to achieve her end, a son. Nevertheless, the text emphasizes that Abraham did care about Hagar, it was a difficult test for him! The following midrash elaborates even further on Abraham's feelings of concern toward Hagar:

"Early next morning" (Gen. 21:14). Abraham rose up early, and wrote a bill of divorce, and gave it

to Hagar, and sent her and her son away from himself, and from Isaac his son, from this world and from the world to come, as it is said, "Early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water." He sent her away with a bill of divorcement and he took the veil and bound it around her waist, so that it should drag behind her to disclose [the fact] that she was a bondwoman. Not only this, but also because Abraham desired to see Ishmael, his son, and to see the way they went.⁴³

The authors of this midrash are uncomfortable with Abraham's treatment of Hagar. As a result, they add that he divorced her by giving her a get, a religious divorce, which shows that he considered Hagar to be his wife. Abraham, our father, would not have simply expelled Hagar without fulfilling his proper religious responsibility which is understood to refer to a get by latter Jewish legislation. This passage also emphasizes Abraham's concern for both Hagar and Ishmael and his desire for continued contact. He put the veil around her so that he could watch and follow them; he would not send them away without watching over them in some way.

It is clear that Abraham's relationship with Hagar centers on their son Ishmael. The midrash relates:

"And her son" (Gen. 21:14). Abraham's tenth test was to send Ishmael, his son, away and it was more difficult for him than all the other tests.⁴⁴

It is interesting to add that here, the tenth test is expelling Ishmael, while it usually is expelling Isaac, as in Genesis 22. Thus, through this comparison of midrashim, one can see the love he had for Ishmael. One can image the agony Abraham experienced when Sarah told him to expel

Ishmael, his son. Sarah uses the word: "her son" as a means of distancing Abraham from his relationship with Ishmael. She was saying that Ishmael is not Abraham's son; Isaac is the only son of Abraham. Yet, from this passage we can conclude that Abraham was primarily concerned with Ishmael, and only secondarily interested in Hagar's safety.

The Torah relates that after Sarah dies, Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. The Rabbis interpret Keturah as another name for Hagar. Thus, Abraham is pictured as remarrying Hagar after Sarah died. The tie is in the fact that Hagar had settled in Beer-lahai-roi and Isaac went to fetch her there:

"Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi" (Gen. 24:62). He had come back from a mission to fetch someone. And where had he gone? To Beer-lahai-roi. He had gone to fetch Hagar, the one who had sat by the well and besought God who is the life "lachai" of all worlds, saying: "Look upon "riei" my misery." 65

All of this rabbinic interpretation is based on Genesis 25:1: "Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah." They explicate:

R. Judah said: "This was Hagar." R. Nehemiah said to him: "But it is written, 'Abraham took another wife.'" "He took her by Divine Command, replied he, as you read, 'And the Lord spoke to me yet again' (Isa. 8:5). 'But it is written, 'whose name was Keturah?'" "That implies that she united mitzvot and good deeds, replied he." Said [R. Nehemiah to R. Judah]: "But it is written: 'But to Abraham's sons by concubines' (Gen. 25:6)? [R. Judah] replied: "the word 'pilagsheem' is written defectively which implies that she sat by the well and cried out to God who is the life of all my worlds, 'See my unhappiness.'" 66

The Rabbis read the word "pilagsheem" (concubines) as "pilgash sham" (the concubine sat there). This interpretation shows the Rabbis' discomfort with Abraham's treatment of Hagar. As a result, they wanted Abraham and Hagar to reconcile after Sarah's death.

As for the meaning of Hagar's being called Keturah, The Rabbis explain in several ways:

Her name was Keturah, because she was perfumed with all kinds of spices.⁶⁷

This interpretation is derived from the Ishmaelites' occupation. In the wilderness they were the buyers and sellers of precious spices:

Another explanation of Keturah is: Her actions were as beautiful as incense, and she bore him six sons. They were all called according to the name of Ishmael, as it is said, "And she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah" (Gen. 25:2).⁶⁸

The final interpretation of the name Keturah is:

Rabbi said: "She is called Keturah because she is tied like a leather skin."⁶⁹

This rabbinic comment links the skin of water which Abraham gave Hagar before she was sent into the desert to the name Keturah.

The final comments pertaining to the relationship between Abraham and Hagar are focused on the additional children she bore him which is pictured above as beautiful:

Ishmael was the principal [son of Hagar], yet the children of Keturah are recorded as additions as it is written of them, "She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah" (Gen. 25:2).⁷⁰

The Rabbis interpreted the meaning of her children's names:

Ammi b. Ezekiel and the Rabbis debated this. Ammi b. Ezekiel interpreted: "Zimran means that they wrought destruction "mezammerin" in the world. Jokshan: that they were cruel "mitkashin" in the world." The Rabbis interpreted: "Zimran means that they sang "mezamerin" hymns with the tabret to idols; Jokshan: that they beat "mekashin" the tabret in honour of idols."⁷¹

The Rabbis might have debated with Ammi b. Ezekiel exactly what these means meant, but, nevertheless, they were all negative interpretations. It shows their dislike and disdain for the Ishmaelites, the descendants of these characters. One might conclude that while the Rabbinic portrait of the relationship between Abraham and Hagar attempts to resolve their conflict by reuniting them, some of the Rabbis harbored negative feelings about Hagar's descendants.

Thus, we can conclude that Abraham and Hagar's relationship was tumultuous during Sarah's life. However, once Sarah died, the Rabbis attempted to reconcile them through their interpretation of Keturah as Hagar. They believed that not only did they remarry, but they produced many children together, spending the rest of their years happily together.

Conclusion

Having gathered and analyzed the vast amount of material in this thesis, it is very important to summarize the findings of this study of the rabbinic views of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. Then, we will be able to draw conclusions about the material which may be useful for us today.

First, one clearly sees that there are two different incidents related about their interaction in the Bible. Genesis 16 tells the story of Sarah's decision to give Hagar to Abraham in order to provide him with a son. Hagar's conception and change in attitude ruins Sarah's carefully laid plans. As a result, Sarah is furious at Hagar, and she complains to Abrahaham expecting him to intercede on her behalf. When he allows Sarah to do with Hagar as she wants, she treats her harshly and as a result, Hagar runs away. In the end, however, Hagar returns to their camp and bears Abraham a son, Ishmael.

In Genesis 21, the birth of Isaac impacted greatly on Abraham's family. Up to this point in the Genesis narratives, Sarah was barren and very unhappy. After his birth, by contrast, she is happy and laughs saying, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6). However, once he was weaned, she became protective of her son's future inheritance and orders Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. She has now twice ordered him to do something about Hagar. Abraham is very unhappy that Sarah wants his son expelled, so God has to

reassure him that it is through Isaac that the line shall be continued. When he expels them, Abraham gives her only the bare necessities for them to survive in the desert. When the water runs out, she is saved only through Divine intervention. Finally, the birth of Isaac has affected Hagar so profoundly that she cannot return to live with Abraham and Sarah.

I believe the Rabbis clearly see the power struggle which has developed in the Biblical narratives. They understand that in Genesis 16, Hagar is the pawn in Sarah's hands, used to insure that she has a son. Yet, in Genesis 21, they perceive her to be an innocent bystander, suffering because of Sarah's jealousy and protectiveness. They are sensitive to her plight in both narratives, as seen in their interest in knowing the exact number of angels she encountered. While they are somewhat sympathetic to Hagar, they realize that she is the slave and Sarah is the mistress. As such, they acknowledge Sarah's superior position over her. Also, they are aware of God's words in Genesis 21:12; "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you." However, I believe that the Rabbis were embarrassed by Abraham's lack of involvement with Hagar in Genesis 16. She was pregnant with their child and he let Sarah's fury transcend his sense of concern for her. I think that they found Abraham in Genesis 21 to be a better model, for there

he argues with Sarah and shows concern, at least for Ishmael if not also for Hagar.

I think the Rabbis were divided in their opinions of Sarah. Generally, they praised her as righteous, modest, beautiful, and strong-willed. However, midrashim were found which described her as inquisitive, lazy, and a complainer. Thus, we can conclude that the Rabbis painted a realistic portrait of Sarah which included both her positive and negative character traits.

By contrast, most of the Rabbis' comments about Hagar show their negative opinion of her. While she may have descended from the royal stock of Pharaoh or Abimelech, she quickly reverted to the idolatry when she wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (Gen. 21:14). In addition, they interpreted her actions at the well when she filled the skin with water (Gen. 21:19) as showing that she lacked faith. However, another side of Hagar's character is derived from her experiences with God. Since God intervened to save her, she must have been meritorious.

In regard to the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, the Rabbis compare and contrast their contact with God to determine who was more righteous. The Rabbis conclude that Hagar deserves great merit even though she is called "bondmaid." As a reward for her trials and tribulations, she was rewarded by encountering many angels, i.e. she had extended contact with God. Yet, occasionally, the Rabbis stress that Sarah indeed had contact with God and hers was

direct while Hagar's was not. We must conclude that there was not a unified rabbinic view regarding Hagar's merit, though Rabbis did not consider Hagar to have been as righteous a woman as Sarah.

Another aspect of the rabbinic portrait of Sarah and Hagar's interaction regards the issue of Sarah's infertility and her giving her handmaid to Abraham. One unusual midrash was found which depicted Sarah as trying to convince Hagar that she was lucky to be given to Abraham. This passage pictures Sarah as being sensitive to Hagar's feelings of discomfort at being treated as an object that can be given to another person. It is important to note, however, that the passage does not include Hagar's response to Sarah. The writer of this midrash must have felt uncomfortable with Hagar's total passivity in the Biblical text, and wanted it to appear as if she was lucky and had to be persuaded by her mistress to have sexual relations with Abraham.

Yet, the Rabbis even see a clear difference between Sarah and Hagar in regard to their ability to conceive. Hagar is a thorn which sprouts up without needing any care, while Sarah is wheat which much be carefully cultivated. While Sarah was unable to conceive without much pain and toil, both she and her offspring were considered valuable and necessary for the perpetuation of the Hebrew tribe. Hagar, on the other hand, is clearly seen as the progenitor of the Bedouins and other Arab groups. As such, she is not

looked upon favorably. This rabbinic attitude is understandable for it derived from a time of strife between Jews and Arabs. It is my hope that a better understanding of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar as portrayed by the Rabbis (and Islam) could lead to better relations between Jews and Arabs.

Finally, the Rabbis interpret the wife Abraham took after Sarah's death (Keturah) to be Hagar. This shows their discomfort with the manner in which she was treated by him. In fact, one passage relates that the reconciliation was facilitated by Isaac who went down to Beer-lahai-roi to get her after his mother's death. This, too, could serve as part of a model for renewed discussion between Arabs and Jews.

Thus, in conclusion, I see that the Rabbis saw Sarah and Hagar as individuals with both positive and negative character traits. However, they also saw them as representatives of the Jewish and Arab people and, as such, they were more sympathetic to Sarah than to Hagar.

I gained a great deal from the process of writing this thesis. First, I developed better skills in the areas of analyzing Biblical narratives and Rabbinic midrashim. Second, I am more confident in my ability to confront both the Biblical text and Rabbinic comments in order to understand the mindset and historical perspective of the Biblical authors and the Rabbis. Finally, I deepened my appreciation for the richness of both Biblical and Rabbinic

material. I hope that I will be able to adapt the Rabbinic model of reading the Biblical text and developing answers which reflect my own time in order to continually renew Torah. Ken Ye-hi Razon. May it be God's Will!

Notes

Introduction

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Part Two

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4. Ibid.
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6. Bereshit Rabbah 45:1.
7. Ibid.
8. Tanhuma haNidpas, Lech L'cha #5.
9. Midrash Shemuel #4.
10. Vayikrah Rabbah 2:1 and Kohelet Rabbah 7:27.
11. Midrash Tehillim 112:1.
12. Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah #4.
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16. B.T. Yebamot 64b.
17. Bereshit Rabbah 53:3 and Pesikta Rabbati 42:5.
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19. Bereshit Rabbah 53:6.
20. Midrash Mishlei, chapter 18.
21. Pesikta Rabbati 43:1.
22. Bereshit Rabbah 44:10.
23. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30 and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:14.
24. Bereshit Rabbah 53:14 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #95.

25. Shemot Rabbah 3:16.
26. Bereshit Rabbah 45:13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #80.
27. Bereshit Rabbah 45:7, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:9.
28. Bereshit Rabbah 45:13 and 48:20, and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #80.
29. Bereshit Rabbah 45:3 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79.
30. Ibid.
31. Bereshit Rabbah 45:4, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:4.
32. Sefer Hayashar to Gen. 16:4.
33. Bereshit Rabbah 45:4 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79.
34. Bereshit Rabbah 45:6 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79.
35. Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:8.
36. Bereshit Rabbah 53:14 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94.
37. Bereshit Rabbah 53:9.
38. Eikhah Rabbah 2:4.
39. Esther Rabbah 7:11.
40. Bereshit Rabbah 63:5.
41. B.T. Sanhedrin 69b.
42. B.T. Baba Batra 58a.
43. Bamidbar Rabbah 14:11 and Shir haShirim Rabbah 1:3.
44. See note #10 above.
45. B.T. Baba Metzia 87a.
46. B.T. Yebamot 64a.
47. Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:2.
48. Devarim Rabbah 4:5.
49. See note #33 above.

50. B.T. Rosh Hashanah 16b, B.T. Baba Kamma 93a, Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79, and Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 16:5.
51. Targum Yerushalmi to Gen. 16:5.
52. Pesikta Rabbati 43:5.
53. B.T. Baba Metziah 87a.
54. Bereshit Rabbah 48:17.
55. Bereshit Rabbah 47:3.
56. Bereshit Rabbah 52:5.
57. Tanna DeBe Eliyyahu, chapter (5)6.
58. B.T. Sanhedrin 111a.
59. B.T. Eruvin 53a.
60. Judah David Eisenstein, *Otzar Midrashim* (New York: E. Grossman's Hebrew Bookstore, 1956), Midrash Yelammedaynu, p.223, vol.1.
61. Bereshit Rabbah 45:6 and Yalkut Shimoni, Lech L'cha #79.
62. Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:10.
63. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30, Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera #94, Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:14.
64. Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 21:10.
65. Bereshit Rabbah 60:14 and Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah, #8.
66. Bereshit Rabbah 61:4.
67. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 30.
68. Ibid.
69. Tanhuma haNidpas, Hayyei Sarah, #8.
70. Bereshit Rabbah 61:4.
71. Bereshit Rabbah 61:5.

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