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
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The Relationship Between Abraham
And Sarah In Rabbinic Literature

Abie Ingber

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

תשל"ז 1977

Referee: Prof. Edward Goldman

To Shelley, my שרה:

["... ...] how splen[did] and beautiful the form of her face and
how

[... ...] and how soft the hair of her head; how lovely are her
eyes and how pleasant is her nose and all the radiance

of her face []; how lovely is her breast and how beautiful
is all her whiteness! Her arms, how beautiful! And her hands,
how

perfect! And (how) [attrac]tive all the appearance of her hands!
How lovely (are) her palms, and how long and dainty all the
fingers of her hands. Her feet,

how beautiful! How perfect are her legs! There are no virgins
or brides who enter a bridal chamber more beautiful than she.
Indeed, her beauty

surpasses that of all women; her beauty is high above all of
them. Yet with all this beauty there is much wisdom in her;
and whatever she has

is lovely."*

*Dead Sea Scrolls, Qumran Cave #1

Acknowledgements

(Proverbs I. verses 1 - 7)

"The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel."

"To know wisdom and instruction":

Dr. Edward Goldman, רבי ומורי, whose guidance, wisdom and warmth helped make this thesis a meaningful learning experience. עשיתי לי רב וקניתי לי חכמה.

"To comprehend the words of understanding":

Gary Fink, my friend and colleague, who helped me understand the midrashic texts and aided me in their translation.

"To receive the discipline of wisdom, justice, right, and equity":

Karen Peterman and Stephanie Fink, my friends, who taught this Canadian the 'rights and wrongs' and rules of English grammar.

"To give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion":

Dr. Robert Katz, my teacher, who opened up for this young man the world of psychoanalytic interpretation of the Bible.

"That the wise man may hear, and increase in learning":

Shelley, my wife and best friend, whose patience and love this summer allowed me to increase my learning and finish my thesis.

"And the man of understanding may attain unto wise counsels":

Don Peterman, my dear friend, who wrote his thesis at the same time that I did mine, yet always had time for wise counsel.

"To understand a proverb, and a figure; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings":

Ermalou Rodda, my typist, who deciphered my words and dark sayings, and produced the final manuscript; and Rose Waspe, who helped me with punctuation. And Mark Shapiro, down the street, who listened when I found something exciting, and always had the text I needed.

Acknowledgements. (Continued)

The staff of the Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, and Marion Schild in particular.

And my fellow students who joined together to extend the library hours during the summer months.

"יראת ה' ראשית דעת."

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

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Digest

This paper presents the midrashic commentaries dealing with the relationship between Abraham and Sarah. The texts are dealt with in a chronological order paralleling the sequence of events as found in chapters eleven through twenty-five of Genesis.

The relationship between Abraham and Sarah involved many of the basic relationships of family life. They were able to overcome the inner conflicts of jealousy, competitiveness and insecurity, and the accompanying fear and aggression. They shared in the feelings of warmth, joy, cooperation and religious experience. More than any other biblical figures, the lives of Abraham and Sarah, the problems they faced, and how they overcame them, demonstrated marital life as it was and as it could be.

The paper deals as well with the analyses of certain psychoanalytic interpreters of the Bible. These observations provide significant insights into the rabbinic understanding of the text.

Most of the material is taken from Tannaitic and Amoraic sources, though sources up to the sixteenth century are included in the survey.

The relationship between Abraham and Sarah was a dominant feature of their lives. It is the nature of their shared experiences which this paper presents.

Introduction

In the seventh grade, one of my teachers gave me a book as a gift. In it he had inscribed:

"הפך בה והפך בה דכלא בה."

"Turn the pages again and again, for all things are in it." (Avot V)

As I delved deeper and deeper into my research topic, I began to feel the appropriateness of this saying to the rabbinic literature. The sections dealing with Abraham and Sarah were particularly rich and exciting. The biblical story of Abraham and Sarah is itself moving--the barrenness, the conjugal hardships, the jealousy of a concubine and her son, and the near-sacrifice of Isaac. The rabbinic literature embellishes still further each aspect of the relationship between Abraham and Sarah. The Rabbis had little difficulty understanding the biblical narrative. They not only studied the Bible; they immersed themselves in the text, savoring every word and allowing their fantasies free reign to search out every aspect of the meaning.

The relationship between Abraham and Sarah involved many of the basic relationships of family life. They were able to overcome the inner conflicts of jealousy, competitiveness and insecurity, and the accompanying fear and aggression. They shared in the feelings of warmth, joy, cooperation and religious experience. More than any other biblical figures, the lives of Abraham and Sarah, the problems they faced, and how they overcame them, demonstrated marital life as it was and as it could be.

The purpose of this paper is to present a picture of this relationship as it was portrayed in rabbinic literature. The first step in locating the rabbinic material was the use of Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, Kasher's תורה שלמה, and Hyman's תורה הכתובה והמסורה. These, along with the index volume to the Soncino Talmud, and the Soncino Midrash, and Goldschmidt's subject concordance to the Talmud, served to direct me to a multitude of primary texts. For the most part, research was in texts of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods, though later material until the period of the Yalkutim (the anthologies) was included. Where a scientific edition of a midrash text was available, I also used its subject and scriptural verse indices. The early research was done with the Hebrew or Aramaic editions of the original texts. At a later stage, translations of the texts were used when available. Where no translations were available, I composed my own.

At the suggestion of Rabbi Edward Goldman, I expanded my original thesis to include the comments of certain psychoanalytic interpreters of the Bible. This afforded me significant and unique insights into the interrelationship between Abraham and Sarah. Rather than detracting from my original purpose, I found these observations helpful in assessing the rabbinic understanding of the text.

Once the material had been gathered, it was organized by common themes, and arranged in an order parallel to the biblical narrative. The texts, together with my own running analysis of the material, constitute the body of the thesis.

Neither Abraham nor Sarah lived in a vacuum. By necessity,

there was a relationship between them. This relationship was the dominant feature of their lives. It is the nature of their shared experiences which this paper presents.

Chapter I.

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.¹

This genealogy begins the account of the lives of Abraham and Sarah--the first patriarch and matriarch. Nothing is known of Abraham's or Sarah's childhood and early adult life. Perhaps this is the intent of the text, since it is their relationship to each other, and their relationship to God, that occupies the foremost concern of the biblical authors.

The introductory verse itself poses a significant problem--who is יִסְחָר. This would seem to be the appropriate place for "the father of Milcah and the father of Sarai." The Rabbis offer two derivations for Iscah,² expounding both as synonyms for Sarah; and they never concern themselves again with this difficulty.

'Seven prophetesses.' Who were these?--Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther. "Sarah", as it is written, "The father of Milcah and the father of Yiscah," (Gen. 11:29) and R. Isaac said [on this], Yiscah is Sarah; and why was she called Yiscah? Because she discerned [sakethah] by means of the holy spirit as it is said, "In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken to her voice." (Ibid. 21:12) Another explanation is: because all gazed [sakin] at her beauty.³

Sifré Numbers adds a prooftext to the last derivation.

Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh. (Gen. 12:15)⁴

This rabbinic interpretation establishes the familial relationship of Abraham to Sarah. Abraham married the daughter of his younger brother, his niece. A conflicting picture of the family tree is presented by

Abraham himself in Gerar.

And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife.⁵

Here Sarah is Abraham's half-sister. Though this statement was made by Abraham to extenuate himself for posing as Sarah's brother, it nevertheless does not preclude an incestuous relationship.

In the Ancient Near East,

. . . marriages of half-siblings were not contrary to the law and custom of those times. Psychologically, things may have been otherwise. The obscurity in the text regarding Sarah's parentage may indicate an effort to deny feelings of guilt in the marital relationship on the part of Abraham. In a more than usual sense, he may have experienced his wife unconsciously as an incestuous object.⁶

These dynamics will play a continuing role as the biblical narrative unfolds.

An interesting aspect of Abraham and Sarah's common family (if not common father) is brought up in the following midrash quoted in the Yalkut.

Terah his father saw clearly that the world would be populated through him, but he did not know whether this would be through the men or through the women. Sarai was his daughter (granddaughter), as it is written, "the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah" (Gen. 11:29); and the whole world was filled through her.⁷

The concern regarding progeny is one of the central themes occupying the biblical mind. The first words spoken by God to Adam and Eve were "פרו ורבו." The ancient Hebrews projected this injunction back into the legends of the first human beings. The imperative of procreation was not peculiar to the ancient Hebrews, but prevalent throughout the Ancient Near East. The rabbinic lawmakers afforded

this command the distinction of being first in the list of 613 מצוות. In tractate Yevamoth, the Rabbis went as far as to say: "כל מי שאין⁸ עוסק בפריה ורביה כאילו שופך דמים. . . גורם לשכינה שחמלק מישראל."

It is not surprising, then, that the first characteristic that we are told about Sarah, Abraham's new wife, is: "ותהי שרי עקרה אין"⁹ "לה ולד."

R. Levi said: Wherever it says "hath none", it indicates that there would be in the future. [For instance], "And Sarai was barren, she had no child" (Gen. 11:30); but she did have one later, as it is said, "And the Lord remembered Sarah" (ibid. 21:1).¹⁰

Though the Rabbis offered this prognosis for the future, others offered an acute diagnosis of Sarah's present condition.

R. Judah said: This means, "And I will bless her," (Gen. 17:16) that she should give thee a son; "Yea, I will bless her" (ibid.) in respect of milk. Said R. Nehemiah to him: Had she then already been informed about her milk? This teaches, however, that God restored to her her youth. R. Abbahu explained it thus in the name of R. Jose b. R. Hanina: I will inspire all peoples with awe of her, so that they should not call her, "barren woman." R. Judan said in the name of Resh Lakish: She lacked an ovary, but the Lord fashioned an ovary for her.¹¹

Though the biblical text clearly states that it was Sarah who was barren, instinctively the question arises: but how do we know that the fault lay with her and not with Abraham?¹² Sarah herself implied that the fault lay with Abraham.¹³ And talmudically the woman is to be relied upon concerning such matters.

If the husband pleads, "The fault is hers" and the wife pleads, "The fault is his", R. Ammi ruled: In private matrimonial affairs the wife is believed. And what is the reason?—She is in a position to know whether emission is forceful, but he is not in a position to know it.¹⁴

The arena however is open for midrashic speculation as to who was at fault, and exactly what the difficulty was. The talmudic sources vary.

R. Ammi stated: Abraham and Sarah were originally of doubtful sex; for it is said, "Look unto the rock whence you were hewn and to the hole of the pit whence you were digged," (Isa. 51:1) and this is followed by the text, "Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bore you." (ibid. 2)¹⁵

and

R. Nahman stated 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 had not even a womb.¹⁶

The earliest midrashic authors debated the issue as well. For instance, whether Sarah's menstrual periods had altogether ceased or whether they were merely irregular.¹⁷

In reference to the biblical text . . . ולא ילדה לו ולא (Gen. 16:1),

R. Judah said: "To him" teaches that she did not bear to Abram, but had she been married to another she would have borne children. R. Nehemiah said: Neither to him nor to anyone else. How then does R. Nehemiah interpret "Did not bear to him"? Interpret "to him" and "to her," thus: She did not bear to herself--on Sarai's own account--nor "to him"--on Abram's account.¹⁸

Some of the Rabbis are quite indignant at the accusation of Abraham's lack of virility.

Abram was a year older than Nahor and Nahor was a year older than Haran; [hence Abram was] two years older [than Haran]; [now deduct] the year of pregnancy with Milcah and the year of pregnancy with Iscah, and you find that Haran begot children at six years of age, yet you say that Abram could not beget a child! [The reason, however, was]: "And Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Gen. 11:30).¹⁹

While R. Phinehas, commenting on Abraham and Sarah's rejuvenation, which led to the birth of Isaac, is quoted as saying:

the standing crop of our father Abraham had been dried up, but it now turned to ripe ears of corn.²⁰

Sarah, in Genesis 16:2, offers her own assessment of the situation.

She claims that there is no physical defect or abnormality:

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 "Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing." (Gen. 16:2)²¹

The קונטרס אחרון ממדבר ילמדנו picks up this interesting theme of divine intervention.

And thus, the Holy One, Blessed be He, troubled Abraham and Sarah by not granting them children, in order that Hagar, who was righteous should cohabit with Abraham, so he would produce a son through her.²²

and coincidentally continues:

Behold, Sarai was barren, as it is written, "Now Sarai was barren". But she did not say to him that she was barren, but rather "the Lord has kept me from bearing". Why did he listen to her (to marry Hagar)? Because he wanted to test himself to see whether he was barren or Sarai was barren;²³

generally the best way to settle any disputation.

Much of the surveyed psychoanalytical interpretation, Freudian in nature, centers on the guilt generated by the incestuous relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Adding to this the aspect of the father's daughter as a maternal surrogate, Zeligs concludes:

He remains childless for many years in spite of God's repeated promise that a son would be born to carry on the father's mission. The very fact of Abraham's long years of childlessness could have had a psychogenic significance. If Sarah was a mother surrogate, then the sexual relationship with her would be impaired and the emotional reasons for childlessness explained.²⁴

In a culture, however, which equated childlessness with destruction,²⁵ the lack of offspring by this couple was not destined to remain a private affair.

Now the people of the world had said: If he were a righteous man, would he not have begotten children?²⁶

and

The governors and the governors' wives. . . jeered
at Sarah, calling her "barren woman" . . .²⁷

It is indeed peculiar that in the biblical narrative, amid all the speculation and promises concerning fruitfulness and great numbers of offspring, the first matriarch would be barren. Indeed the oddity of this situation is enhanced by the fact that three of the four matriarchs were barren for a significant portion of their lives. Even the concubines of the patriarchs hardly fared any better.

This record compares rather unfavourably with the averages found to this day in those Middle Eastern societies where uncontrolled fertility is still practised and where the average number of children born to a woman during her lifetime ranges from six to eight. Barrenness remained the greatest single affliction that could befall a couple.²⁸

These statistics, and the fact that the Rabbis listed seven such barren women (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Manoah's wife, Hannah, and Zion^{29, 30}), attest to the seriousness of the problem. The Rabbis asked the question of why the matriarchs were barren, and in their characteristic style offered numerous plausible responses. The Talmud states:

Why were our ancestors barren?--Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous.³¹

While Rabbis quoted in Genesis Rabbah add the following:

R. 'Azariah said in R. Hanina's name: So that they might lean on their husbands in [spite of] their beauty. R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba said: So that they might pass the greater part of their life untrammelled. R. Huna, R. Idi, and R. Abin in R. Meir's name said: So that their husbands might derive pleasure from them, for when a woman is with child she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus the whole ninety years that Sarah did not bear she was like a bride in her canopy.³²

Joshua ibn Shuaib, the fourteenth century Spanish scholar, adds still another reason in his collection, דרשות על התורה.

Therefore, all of the matriarchs were barren so that their offspring would not come through the influence of the planets, as in the case of the other nations. As it is written, "these the Lord your God allotted to the other peoples (everywhere under heaven); But you the Lord took. . ." (Deut. 4:19,20) in order that we would be from the holy seed, born in the house of the Lord.³³

This problem constitutes the nucleus of the first part of the biblical narrative. Though generally in its latent phase, the problem often erupts to sabotage the conjugal relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Though this stress becomes more evident in character development later on, the overview of the relationship between Sarah and Abraham is a favourable one.

The Bible is replete with stories of undutiful husbands and wives. Sarah is an exception. R. Yehoshua bar Nachmani, after astute analysis, offers four reasons why men age prematurely:

From fear, from wrath toward children, from an evil wife, and from wars.

'From fear': as it is written concerning David, "But David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the Lord" (I Chron. 21:30). What is written subsequently?

"David was old" (I Chron. 23:1).

'From wrath toward children': as it is written concerning Eli, "Now Eli was very old, and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel" (I Sam. 2:22).

'From wars': (this is learned) from Joshua, that after he waged war with thirty-one kings, what is written concerning him? "And Joshua was old and well advanced in years" (Joshua 23:1).

'From an evil wife': as it is written, "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods" (I Kings 11:4).³⁴

Not so with Abraham.

But in regard to Abraham, his wife honored him, and called him 'my lord'; as it is written, "My Lord being old" (Gen. 18:12). And concerning her it is written, "A good wife is the crown of her husband" (Prov. 12:4). Therefore, it is written in regard to him "And the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things" (Gen. 24:1).³⁵

Similarly Abraham acted with unbounded honour and respect towards Sarah, not only later on in the instance of Sarah's complaint against Hagar, but in his normal routine.

"And pitched his tent (Ahalo)." (Gen. 12:8)
R. Hanina said: "Ahalah" (her tent) is written; after having pitched Sarah's tent he pitched his own.³⁶

Not that Sarah was undeserving of this attention. She was, in the words of the Rabbis, "as the shining sun"³⁷ and "even more beautiful than Eve"³⁸; though some say more beautiful than all the women in the world, but as a monkey compared to Eve's beauty.³⁹

Modesty was one of her exemplary characteristics as well. When the angels visit Abraham to bring news of the birth-to-be, they ask Abraham,

"Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, She is in the tent": (Gen. 18:9) this is to inform us that she was modest. Rab Judah said in Rab's name: The Ministering Angels knew that our mother Sarah was in the tent, but why [bring out the fact that she was] in her tent? In order to make her beloved to her husband.⁴⁰

Later in the narrative, Abraham reacts to Sarah's unwaivering modesty in an incident at the banquet honouring the weaning of Isaac.

Women in the Ancient Near East were relegated to purely maternal functions. They enjoyed no privileges or rights and were at the mercy of their husbands. In contrast to the lowliness of their position,

Sarah clearly was an influential figure. She not only played a dominant (and occasionally domineering) role in Abraham's life and the life of those under his sheikdom; she took part as well in the more general aspects of Abraham's affairs. Sefer Hayashar gives us a glimpse of one of these roles.

And it was in those days that Sarah sent Eliezer to Sodom, to Lot, to bring him greetings and to see him.⁴¹

Sarah's strong character did not go unnoticed by the Rabbis. It seems Abraham was often the brunt of her strengths and forcefulness.

R. Aha said: Her husband was crowned through her, but she was not crowned through her husband. The Rabbis said: She was her husband's ruler. Usually, the husband gives orders, whereas here we read, "In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Gen. 21:12).⁴²

This last verse in particular prompted the Rabbis to go as far as to exclaim that:

Abraham was subsidiary to Sarah in the matter of prophecy.⁴³

Sarah's unique relationship with the God of Abraham earned her a distinctive place in Jewish tradition. Coupled with her own forceful personality, she exerted a powerful influence upon the neighbouring people with which she and Abraham came into contact. Since Abraham was commanded by God to leave Haran and travel to Canaan, the biblical narrative relates that he and Sarah took with them: הנפש אשר עשר
 44 בדרך.

"And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot their brother's son, and all their substance which they had gathered, and the souls that they had made in Haran" (Gen. 12:5). R. Leazar observed in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: If all the nations assembled to create one insect they could not endow

it with life, yet you say, "And the souls that they had made!" It refers, however, to the proselytes [which they had made]. Then let it say, 'That they had converted'; why 'That they had made?' That is to teach you that he who brings a Gentile near [to God] is as though he created him. Now let it say, 'That he had made'; why "That they had made?" Said R. Hunia: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women.⁴⁵

All of the earliest midrashim, the talmudic references, and most of the later sources refer to the proselytizing activities of both Abraham and Sarah. Sifré Deuteronomy and Tanḥuma mention only Abraham's activities,⁴⁶ and Avot D'Rabbi Nathan, version one, explains in the notes that the phrase "ולא אברהם לבד עשה כן אלא אף שרה" is a later addition not found in the manuscripts.⁴⁷ Avot D'Rabbi Nathan, version two, however specifically mentions:

'That he had made' is not written here, rather "that they had made" (Gen. 12:5). This teaches that both of them are equal in merit.⁴⁸

Song of Songs Rabbah delineates some of the particulars of the process in which Abraham was involved:

It teaches that Abraham our father used to bring them into his house and give them food and drink and be friendly to them and attract them and convert them and bring them under the wings of the "Shechinah." You learn from this that if a man brings one creature under the wings of the "Shechinah," it is accounted to him as if he had created him and formed him and moulded him.⁴⁹

Sarah was similarly involved. Midrash Hagadol quotes a midrash from an unknown source:

That she brought strangers under the wings of the Shekinah.⁵⁰

With the move from Haran behind them, the interpersonal relationship between Abraham and Sarah was soon to undergo an unusual series of events.

Notes. Chapter I.

1. Gen. 11:29. All biblical quotes in the body of this thesis are from The Torah, Jewish Publication Society, 1973, unless otherwise stated. Biblical translations within the context of a quote from another source have not been altered.
2. From the Aramaic root נָזַח, to gaze, to look.
3. This midrash is from Megillah 14a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Sanhedrin 69b; Sifré Numbers Be-Ha'alotkha 99; Midrash Sheloshah Ve'Arba'ah in Otzar Midrashim p. 540; Midrash Tadshe in Beit Hamidrash volume III, p. 191; Lekha Tov Lekh Lekha 16:2, Be-Ha'alotkha 12:1; Seder Olam Rabbah 2,21; Yalkut Shimoní I No'ah 62, Be-Ha'alotkha 738; Ibid. II Ps. 105 863; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 11:29; Ibn Shuaib Hayyei Sarah 9.
4. Sifré Numbers Be-Ha'alotkha 99.
5. Gen. 20:12.
6. Zeligs, Psychoanalysis and the Bible, p. 9.
7. Yalkut Shimoní Lekh Lekha 76.
8. Yevamoth 63b, 64a. Translation: "Anyone who does not engage in the propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood. . .does he not thereby cause the Divine presence to depart from Israel!"
9. Gen. 11:30. Translation: "Now Sarai was barren, she had no child."
10. This midrash is from Lam. Rabbah 1:3:26. Parallel midrashim with minor variations can be found in: Lam. Rabbah 1:17:52; Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 18:3; Pesikta Rabbati 32:2; Num. Rabbah 9:10; Tanhuma Buber Naso 12; Yalkut Shimoní I No'ah 62; Ibid. II I Sam. 1:77; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 11:30.
11. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 47:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 53:5; Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 16, Va-Yera 14; Yalkut Shimoní I No'ah 62.
12. Some midrashim refer only generally to Sarah's barrenness. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 18; Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 16; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 55; Yalkut Shimoní I Va-Yera 82, Balak 767.
13. Gen. 18:12. "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment--with my husband so old?"
14. Yevamoth 65a. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:2, relates this ruling specifically to Sarah's case: לִי עֵצָה וְלָךְ לֹא עֵצָה.

Notes. Chapter I. (Continued)

15. Yevamoth 64a, 64b. A parallel midrash is quoted in Yalkut Shimoni I No'ah 62.
16. This midrash is from Yevamoth 64b. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 47:2, 53:5; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 14; Yalkut Shimoni I No'ah 62.
17. This midrash is from Gen. Rabba' 48:16. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in: Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
18. Gen. Rabbah 45:1. A parallel midrash is Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
19. Gen. Rabbah 38:14. A parallel midrash is Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
20. Gen. Rabbah 53:9.
21. Gen. Rabbah 45:2.
22. תנחומים אדרון 9 in Yalkut Shimoni, Salonica.
23. Ibid. 10.
24. Zeligs, Psychoanalysis and the Bible, pp. 12, 13.
25. See below, chapter two.
26. Gen Rabbah 54:2.
27. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 42:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Va-Yera 17; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 91.
28. Patai, Family, Love in the Bible, p. 66.
29. This midrash is from Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 20:1. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Aggadat Bereshit 53:3.
30. Zion is not the proper name of a woman, but used to denote Israel.
31. This midrash is from Yevamoth 64a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 45:4; Song of Songs Rabbah 2:14:8; Tanhuma Toledot 9; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79; Ibid. II Song of Songs 2 986.

Notes. Chapter I. (Continued)

32. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Song of Songs Rabbah 2:14:8; Tanhuma Toledot 9, Va-Yeze 7; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79; Ibid. II Song of Songs 2 986.
33. Ibn Shuaib Hayyei Sarah 9.
34. Tanhuma Hayyei Sarah 2.
35. Ibid.
36. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 39:15. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 67; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:8.
37. Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5.
38. Gen. Rabbah 40:5. A parallel midrash is found in Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 67.
39. Bava Bathra 58a.
40. This midrash is from Bava Mezi'a' 87a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 9; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
41. Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 61.
42. Gen. Rabbah 47:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 82, Va-Yera 89.
43. Exod. Rabbah 1:1. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Tanhuma Shemot 1.
44. Gen. 12:5. Translation: "And the persons that they had acquired in Haran."
45. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 39:14. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: 'Avodah Zarah 9a; Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version I 12; Ibid. version II 26; Gen. Rabbah 84:4; Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3; Pesikta Rabbati 43:6; Num. Rabbah 14:11; Lekha Tov Lekh Lekha 5; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 66; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:5.
46. Sifré Deuteronomy Va-Ethannan 32; Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 12. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Esther Rabbah 6:2; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yeshev 140, Va-Ethannan 837; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:5.

Notes. Chapter I. (Continued)

47. Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version I 12.
48. Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version II 26.
49. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3.
50. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:1.

Chapter II.

It is ironic, perhaps, that no sooner than Abraham had arrived and encamped in the land which God had promised to him, that a terrible famine engulfed the region. Abraham and Sarah were forced to continue their journey. Seeking relief from the famine, they made their way southward to Egypt, and at some point crossed the Nile River. "As he (Abraham) was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are.'"¹ The Rabbis were astounded at Abraham's statement.

She was with him all these years, yet now he says to her, "Behold, now I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon!" (Gen. 12:11)²

The earliest midrashic sources offer some possible explanations:

The reason, however, is because travelling takes toll of one's beauty. R. Azariah said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: [Abraham said to Sarah:] We have traversed Aram Naharaim and Aram Nahor and not found a woman as beautiful as you; now that we are entering a country whose inhabitants are swarthy and ugly, "Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake," etc. (Gen. 12:13).³

The talmudic sources take Abraham's statement at face value:

Rab said: Dust should be placed in the mouth of Job; he refrained from looking at other men's wives. Abraham did not even look at his own, as it is written, "Behold now I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon," (Gen. 12:11) which shows that up to then he did not know.⁴

A Tanḥuma source, a few hundred years later, elaborated on the logistics of this 'revelation'.

When they reached the port of Egypt and stood by the Nile, Abraham saw Sarah's reflection in the water resplendent like the sun.⁵

Midrash Aggada, a twelfth century work based on the writings of Moshe Hadarshan (11th century, France), embellished this episode still further, adding perhaps a touch of medieval chivalry.

Abraham never had looked at his wife. As they approached Egypt, they encountered a river. He waded in, but she fell into the river, and he helped her up. When they came to the river bank to wring out her clothes, he looked and saw her thigh. Immediately he said, "Now I know (what a beautiful woman you are)." (Gen. 12:11)⁶

By the fourteenth century, an anonymous midrash is quoted in Midrash Hagadol:

Even at this time he did not fully look at her; as it is written, "Now I know" (Gen. 12:11). But it is not written 'Now I see'. This demonstrates the modest character of Abraham, our father.⁷

In any event, regardless of the circumstances of Abraham's 'discovery,' Abraham is uneasy about entering Egypt. He anticipates that because of his wife's great beauty, and the Egyptians being שטורפים בזנות,⁸ Sarah will be appropriated for Pharaoh's harem. In that event, he assumes his own life would be in danger. Fearing that the Egyptians would not hesitate to kill the husband of a woman they desired, Abraham instructs Sarah to pose as his sister. The biblical narrative paints a picture of a man in a state of anxiety, uncertain of himself, his wife, and his foreign surroundings.

The medieval sources, Midrash Hagadol in particular, suggest that Abraham has Sarah refer to herself specifically as his sister, because היה בטוח עליה כאלו על אחותו,⁹ certain that her devotion and faithfulness to him would remain unchallenged.

Sefer Hayashar recreates the scene and the dialogue:

And Abram said to Sarai, "Since God has created you with such a beautiful countenance, I am afraid of the Egyptians lest they should slay me and take you away, for the fear of God is not in this place. Surely then you will do this, say that you are my sister to all who ask you, in order that it may be well with me and we shall live and not be put to death." Abram also instructed all the people who accompanied him to Egypt because of the famine, and also Lot, his nephew, saying, "When the Egyptians inquire regarding Sarai, tell them that she is Abram's sister."¹⁰

Abraham nevertheless remains unsatisfied with his preliminary precautions.

Despite all this, Abram was not secure concerning this matter, so he took Sarai, locked her in a trunk, and hid her beneath their possessions because he was very fearful for Sarai because of the evil ways of the Egyptians.¹¹

As the episode unfolds, it is the earlier sources which now supply the minute details.

And where was Sarah? He had put her in a box and locked her in it. When he came to the customs-house, he [the customs officer] demanded, 'Pay the custom dues.' 'I will pay,' he replied. 'You carry garments in that box,' said he. 'I will pay the dues on garments.' 'You are carrying silks,' he asserted. 'I will pay on silks.' 'You are carrying precious stones.' 'I will pay on precious stones.' 'It is imperative that you open it and we see what it contains,' he insisted. As soon as he opened it the land of Egypt was irradiated with her lustre [beauty].¹²

The Egyptian princes (messengers) were captivated by her beauty and sang of her praises before Pharaoh. The most beautiful account of these praises comes not from the established midrashic sources, but rather from one of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, the fourth scroll found in Qumran Cave #1. Written in Aramaic, the paleographical date is set at the end of the first century B.C.E., or the first half of the first century C.E.¹³

["... ...] how splen[did] and beautiful the form of her face, and how [... ...] and how soft the hair of her head; how lovely are her eyes and how pleasant is her nose and all the radiance of her face []; how lovely is her breast and how beautiful is all her whiteness! Her arms, how beautiful! And her hands, how perfect! And (how) [attrac]tive all the appearance of her hands! How lovely (are) her palms, and how long and dainty all the fingers of her hands. Her feet, how beautiful! How perfect are her legs! There are no virgins or brides who enter lridal chamber more beautiful than she. Indeed, her beauty surpasses that of all woman; her beauty is high above all of them. Yet with all this beauty there is much wisdom in her; and whatever she has is lovely." When the king heard the words of Hirqanos and the words of his two companions--for the three of them spoke as one man--he coveted her very much. He sent off in haste (and) had her brought (to him). When he beheld her, he marvelled at all her beauty and took her to himself as a wife. He sought to kill me, but Sarai said to the king, "He is my brother," so that I might be benefited by her. And I, Abram, was spared because of her.¹⁴

Abraham's fears are realized and Sarah is taken from him and brought to Pharaoh. Pharaoh, alone with Sarah at night, tries to proceed with his amorous intentions. But through God's intervention, a plague falls upon the house of Pharaoh. The Rabbis are more specific:

"And his house." (Gen. 12:17) R. Aha said: Even the beams of his house were smitten, and all exclaimed, 'It is "because of Sarai Abram's wife." (ibid.) R. Berekiah said: Because he dared to approach the shoe of that lady. And the whole of that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Thine assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is without this prison while I am within!' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for thy sake, and all will say, "It is "because of Sarai Abram's wife."' R. Berekiah said: Because he dared to approach the shoe of that lady. R. Levi said: The whole of that night an angel stood with a whip in his hand; when she ordered, 'Strike,' he struck, and when she ordered, 'Desist,' he desisted. And why such severity? Because she told him [Pharaoh], 'I am a married woman,' yet he would not leave her.¹⁵

The later sources elaborated more fully on the text of Sarah's prayer.

Sovereign of the Universe, Abraham came on Your assurance, for You said to him, "I will bless those who bless you" (Gen. 12:3), and I didn't know anything. But when he said to me that you had said, "Go forth (from your native land)" (Gen. 12:1), I believed Your words. Now I am left alone, without father, mother, or husband, and this tyrant will come and have his pleasure of me! Act for the sake of Your great name, and for the sake of our trust in Your words.¹⁶

Tanḥuma Hanidpas is the only source I have found which contains a text for Abraham's prayer, alluded to in other sources merely as Abraham's crying¹⁷ or praying.¹⁸

Sovereign of the Universe, is this how my trust in You is requited! Now act for the sake of Your compassion and lovingkindness, that I be not ashamed of my hope.¹⁹

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.²⁰

Why does it say 'Abram's wife'? (Gen. 12:17) Because "Two are better than one" (Eccl. IV, 9), and it says: "And he dealt well with Abram for her sake" (Gen. 12:16).²¹

Sarah's true identity is revealed and Pharaoh, so impressed with the power of the Hebrew God, desists from his intentions, and not only allows both Sarah and Abraham to leave, but rewards them heavily.

An interesting aside is that the manuscript text of Pesikta D'Rav Kahana contains a reference that when Sarah arrived in Egypt, she was pressed into service as a handmaid, and was made to work כד נוח בריחים.²² Ginzberg criticizes Buber's emendation of the text to למחון בריחים (to grind at the mill), and maintains:

The expression כידנו לריחים (different edition?) corresponds exactly to the English expression "like a horse in a mill," except that in Hebrew the donkey takes the place of the horse.²³

Strangely, Ginzberg ignores Buber's more important emendation (maintained in the Pesikta D'Rav Kahana translation by Braude and Kapstein) that the entire midrash refers not to Sarah, but to Serah the daughter of Asher. The ס in Serah was corrupted to a ש (שׁ), and a subsequent copyist added the traditional שׁוֹרָה after Sarah's name.

Meanwhile, back in Pharaoh's palace, Pharaoh lavishes gifts upon Abraham. Among these gifts, he presents Abraham with maidservants. The Rabbis cannot resist the temptation of "discovering" one of these maidservant's true identity. The Rabbis suppose that this handmaid is none other than Hagar.

R. Simeon b. Yoḥai said: Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah's behalf in his own house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah, saying, 'Better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another house;' thus it is written, "And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar," (Gen. 16:1) he (Pharaoh) saying, 'Here is thy reward (agar).'24

The Rabbis analyzed this entire episode and came to the conclusion that there was, indeed, a reason for all this showering of gifts. It was because Abraham made himself of secondary importance and subordinated himself:

R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Reuben: Two people were principal actors and yet made themselves subordinate, viz. Abraham and Barak. Abraham was the principal, as it is written, "And Abram took Sarai his wife" (Gen. 12:5), but he made himself of secondary importance, saying, "Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister," whereupon he really became subordinate to her, as it is written, "And he dealt well with Abram for her sake" (*ibid.* 16).25

Zeligs deals with this episode on a psychoanalytical basis:

The same weakening of his defenses and sublimations that caused Abraham to abandon the Promised Land may also have been the basis of his anxiety on entering

Egypt and Gerar, territories of the powerful father-kings. Abraham was then ready to surrender the forbidden woman in order to save himself from death, a fantasied death which is here a derivative of castration anxiety, the punishments for oedipal misconduct. For, indeed, the incidents both in Egypt and Gerar, with their strangely repetitive pattern and the fact that Abraham anticipated them before they occurred, have a decidedly unrealistic aspect. They are more understandable as fantasies stemming from anxiety based on unconscious factors.²⁶

The Rabbis saw in this episode with Pharaoh a foreshadowing of another journey into Egypt--the four hundred year Egyptian slavery.

Concerning Abraham it is written, "There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Gen. 12:10). And concerning his children when they returned to Egypt, (it is written), "But the famine in the land was severe" (Gen. 43:1). Abraham went down to Egypt because of famine, and his children also went down to Egypt because of famine, as it is written, "So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to get grain rations in Egypt" (Gen. 42:3). When Abraham went down, the Egyptians accosted him, for "The Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was" (Gen. 12:14). Similarly, concerning the children, (as it is written), "Let us, then, deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies in fighting against us and gain ascendancy over the country" (Ex. 1:10).²⁷

Abraham, as well, was thinking about the future. However his concerns were more immediate. God's promises to him were of a grandiose nature: his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand by the sea, as abundant as the stars of the heavens above. But, in the meantime, he had no offspring. Concerned that he would leave no heir born of his seed, he seized an opportunity to appeal to God.

O Lord God, what can you give me, seeing that I shall die childless?²⁸

The biblical text is quite specific, Abraham, it would seem, was very apprehensive about not having any sons.

Abraham pleaded before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, what pleasure can all that thou hast promised bring to me, seeing that I have no children?'²⁹

and:

Abraham said to God: 'Master of the Universe, if it is due to me that I should have children, then give them to me, and if not, give them to me for mercy's sake.'³⁰

Abraham's appeal is passionate and forceful. Regardless of its merits or its justification, Abraham's plea was an appeal to grant children to one who has suffered childlessness for so many years.³¹ On the other hand, the Rabbis offer what seems to be an inciteful interpretation of the text:

R. Judan and R. Aibu in R. Johanan's name said: Two men said the same thing, Abraham and David. Abraham said: "O Lord God:" 'Sovereign of the Universe,' he cried out to Him, 'if I am destined to beget children who will anger Thee, 'twere better for me "that I go childless."' (Gen. 15:2)³²

Could this be the same Abraham? The same ever hopeful "father"? Was his faith to stand in the way of that which was his life-long hope? Could this be a genuine religious assertion? The Rabbis possessed keen psychological insight in recognizing an ambivalence and sense of tension in Abraham's attitude.

The psychoanalytic interpreters of the Bible feel that the Rabbis were correct in discerning Abraham's genuine feelings of ambivalence toward a son. The rationale, however, was couched in religious terms. A further analysis of this tremendous conflict will surface as we deal with the Akedah, the attempted infanticide. Nevertheless, certain aspects of this dilemma must be presented at this point.

Throughout the biblical narrative, the majority of Abraham's problems

and internal conflicts centre around the father-son nucleus. The very nature of God's grand promise for multitudinous descendants may contain an unconscious reversal of the real wish--that Abraham never have a son, an heir, a competitor. Why does Abraham, given the opportunity to ask for whatever he might desire, inform God that, if his children are to anger the Almighty, it were better if he remain childless?

Moreover, why is Abraham so submissive and self-defeating when he has an opportunity of assuring himself of an heir merely by stating his wish? That this desire was uppermost in his mind is evident by the fact that he voices it in a negative form, asking God not to grant him what he most wants. His rationalization, the fear of God's possible displeasure which might be brought about by Abraham's descendants, is exactly the opposite of what God has just told him--that there would be pious people among his descendants, who would also be a shield to their generation. Perhaps Abraham is not too pleased with this prophecy about others, unconsciously, a son, who might take his place in God's love.³³

Or perhaps his fears are even greater. Parenthood, in that particular historical period, involved great personal sacrifice on the part of the father. Most essentially, this meant renunciation of superiority.

The patriarchal leader feared that he would be overthrown, ousted from his possessions and lose his leadership. This fear was particularly great and real with his natural successor, namely his firstborn son.

Even more tantalizing was the father's fear of being outmatched by his son in his possession of his wife or wives. Incestuous wishes of the son towards his own mother and his desire to possess other wives of his father's clan were a terrible reality.

The greatest danger was the possibility that the son, in order to achieve leadership and possession of women, would kill the father.³⁴

We can only speculate to what degree these subconscious fears plagued Abraham. The extent to which they became part of his consciousness is

attested to by the above midrash, and, of course, by the Akedah itself. Abraham's relationship with Sarah, of necessity, must have been impaired. Sexual impotence, of psychological rather than physical causation, may have been a direct result. We cannot, however, be excessive in our flaunting of grave subconscious stirrings within Abraham. It is undeniably clear that Abraham's dearest wish was to have a son to carry on the patriarchal and inspirational role. We cannot question these feelings, nor deny that they are profoundly real. That Abraham, however, could harbour ambivalent feelings, largely in his subconscious, attests only to Abraham's essential human nature.³⁵

As Abraham stood outside, gazing at the heavens, the voice of the Lord spoke to him and said: **"הבט נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים אם"**
תוכל לספר אחם ויאמר לו כה יהיה זרעך."³⁶

The Rabbis, never at a loss for an innovative mode of exegesis, assigned numerical value to the word **יהיה**, thereby deriving, through gematria, that Abraham was destined to have thirty **צדיקים** among his progeny, exactly what the world was lacking.³⁷

It is not coincidental that God took Abraham outside for the Divine promise of greatness. The ancient Near Eastern mind was very much attuned to the effect of planetary influences on health, fertility, and life in general. The science of astrology was valued, not so much for its importance in calendrical calculations, but, rather, for its supposed power of forecasting the future. Abraham, the Rabbis say, was an astrologer. More properly, he was acquainted with the astronomical order and, undoubtedly, believed in its influences on the earth. The stars, however, were not in his favour:

[Abraham said:] My planetary fate oppresses me and declares, 'Abram cannot beget a child.'³⁸

The Rabbis agree that Abraham read the stars correctly; however, they argue that God could extricate Abraham from these influences. The talmudic sources offer God's reply as follows:

Go forth from thy astrological speculations:
Israel is not subject to planetary influences.³⁹

R. Levi, in Genesis Rabbah, declares that Abraham was not an astrologer after all, but a prophet, in as much as only those beneath the stars could be subject to their influence. But Abraham was above the stars and, hence, could ignore their influence.⁴⁰

Genesis Rabbah, and later midrashim, suggest that God alters the future course of events, not by altering the heavenly influences, but by affecting the situation on earth.

But the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Thou didst indeed read the stars correctly, for as thou livest, Abram, as Abram, is not destined to beget children. What then do I mean to do for thee? I will change thy name and thou wilt beget, as is said "Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham" (Gen. 17:5). Sarai also, as Sarai, is not destined to bear children, as is said "Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30); but as Sarah she will bear children, as is said "The Lord remembered Sarah" (Gen. 21:1).⁴¹

The change of name is sufficient to avert the harsh decree. The Rabbis included change of name in a list of a number of "changes":

R. Isaac further said: Four things cancel the doom of a man, namely, charity, supplication, change of name and change of conduct. Charity, as it is written, "And charity delivereth from death." (Prov. 10:2) Supplication, as it is written, "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses." (Ps. 107:6) Change of name, as it is written, "As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be;" (Gen. 17:15) and it continues, "And I will bless her and moreover

I will give thee a son of her." Change of conduct, as it is written, "And God saw their works," and it continues, "and God repented of the evil which he said he would do unto them and he did it not." (Jonah 3:10) Some say that change of place [also avails], as it is written, "Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country," and it proceeds, "and I will make of thee a great nation." (Gen.12:1) And the other [-why does he not reckon this]? -In that case it was the merit of the land of Israel which availed him.⁴²

The Rabbis offer other reasons for the change in the biblical names, including one which sees the extended name as a distinctive mark of honour.

"Now Jethro . . . Heard." (Exod. 18:1) Originally they called him merely Jether, as it is said: "And Moses went and returned to Jether his father-in-law" (Exod. 4:18). After he had performed good deeds, they added one more letter to his name so that he was called Jethro. You find this also in the case of Abraham, whom they originally called merely Abram. And when he performed good deeds, they added one letter more, and he was called Abraham. You find this also in the case of Sarah. Originally they called her merely Sarai. But when she performed good deeds they added to her name by putting in a larger letter so that she was called Sarah.⁴³

The astrological prediction, however, at least in one midrashic source, was enough to generate confusion among the patriarchs.

"May El Shaddai grant you mercy" (Gen. 43:14). As it is written, "It is beyond my knowledge; it is a mystery; I cannot fathom it" (Ps. 139:6). What is 'beyond my knowledge'? Something that man finds difficult, as it is written, "If a case is too baffling for you" (Deut. 17:8). 'Beyond my knowledge': Jacob said, 'I cannot fathom this matter. The Holy One Blessed be He promised Abraham my grandfather that He would establish twelve tribes from him, as it is written, "Look toward heaven, etc." (Gen. 15:5) (Just as) by twelve heavenly constellations the world is led, so I will establish twelve tribes from you to guide the world. As it is written, "so shall your offspring be" (ibid.) When Ishmael begot twelve chieftains, as it is written, "He shall be the father

of twelve chieftains" (Gen. 17:20), Abraham thought that perhaps these were the twelve tribes, as it is written, "Oh that Ishmael (might live by Your favor!)" (Gen. 17:18). The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, 'It is not as you think, for behold, Sarah will give birth, as it is written, "And God said, nevertheless, Sarah, your wife, (shall bear you a son)" (Gen. 17:19); "For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you" (Gen. 21:12). Concerning him I told you "so shall your offspring be"' (Gen. 15:15). When Isaac had grown up and married Rebekah and she was found to be barren, he said, 'How will you fulfill that which you said to Abraham, "so shall your offspring be" (Gen. 15:5), since she is barren, as it is written, "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren"' (Gen. 25:21).

"And the children struggled in her womb" (Gen. 25:22): She began to worry and said, "If so, I am troubled, for I have one belly." "She went to inquire of the Lord" (Gen. 25:22): She went to the house of study of Shem, "And the Lord answered her, 'Two (nations are in your womb)'" (Gen. 25:23). Why did she say, "If so, why do I exist (למה זה)?" (Gen. 25:22) "זה" in gematria equals twelve. God said to her 'It is not what you think that will be established from you, but rather, "two nations are in your womb."' At Jacob's departure to go to Laban, Isaac summoned him and said to him, 'Know that from you the Holy One Blessed be He will establish twelve tribes, as it is written, "So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him, etc." (Gen. 28:1) "May El Shaddai, etc." (Gen. 28:3). "May He grant you the blessings of Abraham, etc." (Gen. 28:4). This is the blessing that He blessed Abraham when "He said to him, 'Look toward heaven.'" (Gen. 15:5)⁴⁴

Ironically, despite the rabbinic protestations that God excluded Israel from planetary influences, the Talmud states that: בראש השנה
נפקודה שרה רחל ורחנה.⁴⁵

On one day, and under one specific astronomical configuration, these three women, who had been childless for so long, were remembered. Sarah, however, realized that astrological influences were not responsible for her barrenness.

Said she: 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 "Behold now, the Lord hath restrained

me from bearing." (Gen. 16:2)⁴⁶

The Rabbis referred to Sarah, and to all barren women, in exceptionally harsh terms; as one who is dead:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: A man who is childless is accounted as dead, for it is written, "Give me children, or else I am dead." (Gen. 30:1) And it was taught: Four are accounted as dead: A poor man, a leper, a blind person, and one who is childless. A poor man, as it is written, "For all the men are dead [which sought thy life.] (Exod. 2:13) A leper, as it is written, "[And Aaron looked upon Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses...] let her not be as one dead." (Num. 12:10-12) The blind, as it is written, "He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old." (Lam. 3:6) And he who is childless, as it is written, "Give me children, or else I am dead." (Gen. 30:1)⁴⁷

and as one who is demolished:

It was taught: He who has no child is as though he were dead and demolished. As though dead: "And she said unto Jacob: Give me children, or else I am dead." (Gen. 30:1) As though demolished: "It may be that I shall be builded up through her," (Gen. 16:2) and only that which is demolished must be builded up.⁴⁸

The verse that follows in the text resulted in the rabbinic legislation regarding divorce on the grounds of childlessness.

Mishnah. If a man took a wife and lived with her for ten years and she bore no child, he may not abstain [any longer from the duty of propagation].

Gemara. Our Rabbis taught: If a man took a wife and lived with her for ten years and she bore no child, he shall divorce her and give her her ketubah, since it is possible that it was he who was unworthy to have children from her. Although there is no definite proof for this statement there is nevertheless a [Scriptural] allusion to it: "After Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan." (Gen. 16:3) This teaches you that the years of his stay outside the Land were not included in the number.⁴⁹

Brichto, in his monograph Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife, offers still another explanation for the anxiety producing situation. Brichto sees strong evidence for a biblical belief in afterlife, where the goodness of the afterlife is dependent on the descendants' performance of memorial rites and their continued existence on the family land.⁵⁰

Abraham's anxious concern to leave behind a son should not be understood "only as a peculiar, sentimental desire on the part of biblical man to be held in remembrance."⁵¹ Abraham feared for his own after-life!!

Whatever the motivating factors, barrenness in the ancient Near East was a problem of very serious proportions. The resulting pressures were such that Sarah, in dire frustration, "said to Abram, 'Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.'"⁵² Though we were introduced to Hagar earlier, through midrashic sources, this is the first biblical mention of her. Late midrashic sources refer to her in very flattering terms:

And thus, the Holy One, Blessed be He, troubled Abraham and Sarah by not granting them children, in order that Hagar, who was righteous, should cohabit with Abraham, so that he would produce a son through her.⁵³

How tremendous the strain must have been on Sarah for her to approach Abraham with this suggestion, and to lead another woman to her husband's bed. Raphael Patai offers an understanding of the motivation which was powerful enough to overcome the reluctance.

The motivation. . . was the belief that, by having the other woman give birth to her child on the knees of the sterile wife, the latter, too, would become fertile and begin to bear children.

Thus when Sarah was childless, she gave her handmaid Hagar to Abraham, saying: "Go in, I pray thee, unto my handmaid; it may be that I shall be builded up through her". . . The procedure referred to in these passages has been interpreted as a form of adoption; the barren wife adopts the child born to her husband by her handmaid. However, in view of the fact that. . . the wife ultimately conceived following the union of her husband with her handmaid, it seems probable that the intended purpose was to achieve fertility. Bodily contact can transfer something of the powers of the fertile woman unto the sterile woman. This is in strict accordance with the principles of contagious magic which still have world-wide currency in folk societies.⁵⁴

One of the traditional methods was for the barren woman to sit on the birthstool immediately after it was used in birth. Another belief

was that, if the birth of a child of one's own husband and of one's handmaid took place on the wife's knees, the power of fertility would pass onto the mistress,⁵⁵ hence from Hagar to Sarah.⁵⁶

It was Sarah's misfortune that even this endeavour was not initiated smoothly. The early midrashic sources indicate that Hagar had to be persuaded to enter into this arrangement.

"And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian" (Gen. 16:3). She persuaded [took] her with words: 'Happy art thou to be united to so holy a man,' she urged.⁵⁷

It is only a late source which gives us a rationale for Hagar's hesitation.

She did not want to take him because he was old.⁵⁸

It would not have surprised the ancient mind that, following Hagar's pregnancy, Sarah too might become fertile. The Rabbis, as well, see Sarah's subsequent fertility as a direct result of her actions. Divine reward was the precipitating factor, not the folk cures.

And just as whoever abuses his fellow man is punished, so you find that anyone who, like Sarah, abases himself, will receive his reward. For she said: "Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing" (Gen. 16:2). The Holy One, blessed be He, thereupon declared: Because thou didst abase thyself, saying "The Lord hath restrained me,"--thee, as thou livest, [not Abraham],--I shall particularly remember. And the proof of His remembering? The verse read in the lesson for the day "And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said." (Gen. 21:1)⁵⁹

Unlike the above source, which referred to Hagar as a צדקה,⁶⁰ each midrashic strata related the following analogy:

"And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived" (Gen. 16:4). R. Levi b. Haytha said: She became

pregnant through the first intimacy. R. Hanina b. Pazzi observed: 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!⁶¹

Midrash Hagadol quotes an anonymous midrash which states that Sarah had such a strong character that she was not jealous of her handmaid, אלה נתכרנה לשם נאמיה.⁶² The ensuing biblical text, and the difficulties which arise between Sarah and Hagar, seem to cast suspicion upon this opinion. An early midrash, quite to the contrary, relates:

Seeing that it is already written, "And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived," (Gen. 16:4) why is it further stated, "Behold, thou wilt conceive (ibid. 11)?" This, however, teaches that an evil eye took possession of her and she miscarried.⁶³

The next months were fraught with tension. Hagar conceived and a conflict of jealousy arose between the two women. Hagar despised her mistress. Sarah returned her in kind and mistreated her. Abraham was dragged in as Sarah complained bitterly to her husband. The Rabbis relate, of course, that Hagar's mocking of Sarah was not only unfounded, but a direct affront to the repeated kindness of her mistress.

Ladies used to come to inquire how she 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, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!'⁶⁴

Sefer Hayashar differs quite radically. The authors, though they do not deny this midrash, assert that Hagar said this בלבה.⁶⁵ And they add:

When Sarai saw that Hagar had conceived by Abram, Sarai was jealous of her handmaid. She said to herself, "This would not be, were she not much better than me."⁶⁶

How could Sarah think, for a moment, that Hagar was better than her?

This may have had something to do with the ancient Near Eastern belief that sin and sterility were interrelated. The common belief was that sins could result in an overt manifestation, such as sterility. Adultery, in particular, would result in sterility.⁶⁷ Even Levitical laws make mention of this cause and effect situation.

If a man lies with his uncle's wife, it is his uncle's nakedness that he has uncovered. They shall bear their guilt: they shall die childless. If a man marries the wife of his brother, it is indecency. It is the nakedness of his brother that he has uncovered; they shall remain childless.⁶⁸

Could it be that Sarah, Abraham's niece or half-sister, harboured feelings of guilt regarding their incestuous relationship? Could Sarah think that this could be the cause of her sterility? Perhaps this is why Sarah took to heart Hagar's challenge of her righteousness.

Genesis Rabbah, on the other hand, states that Sarah paid Hagar no heed.

Said Sarah: "Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No; I will argue the matter with her master!"⁶⁹

Brichto argues that Sarah's fears for her own afterlife may not have been dismissed as a result of the child which would be born to her husband through her handmaid.⁷⁰

Whether or not Sarah reacted visibly to Hagar at this point cannot be ascertained. However, the fact that she became tremendously upset, and indeed regretted her scheme, cannot be denied. The

language, the urgency, and the emotion in her bitter complaint to Abraham attest to this.

And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!"⁷¹

The majority of the midrashic authors explain that Sarah voiced two criticisms of Abraham:

Thou wrongest me with words, since thou hearest me insulted yet art silent;⁷²

and, secondly, that when Abraham prayed for a child,⁷³ he prayed only for himself, and did not include Sarah in his petition.⁷⁴ The Rabbis demonstrated this through the use of two examples:

R. Berekiah explained it in R. Abba's name: I have a grievance against thee. For 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, hadst thou said, 'We go childless,' then as He gave thee a child so would He have given me; since, however, thou saidest, "And I go childless" (Gen. 15:2), He gave thee 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.' Said his companion 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, hadst thou said, 'Behold, to us Thou hast given no seed,' then as He gave thee so had He given me. Now however that thou didst say, "Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed" (*ibid.* 3), He gave to thee but not to me.⁷⁵

It seems reasonable to assume that Abraham's refusal to become involved in the conflict situation enraged Sarah still further. Midrash Hagadol and Yalkut Shimoni are the only late sources to continue an early midrash from Genesis Rabbah. Sarah not only complained bitterly to Abraham, she scratched his face.⁷⁶ The Rabbis play on the word, חָמַס, deriving it from חָמַס, to scratch.

Not surprisingly, the Rabbis are upset by Sarah's hostility to, and criticism of, her husband. Though they offer no vindication of Abraham's non-involvement, they do voice strong criticism of Sarah's emotional outburst.

R. Hanan said: He who invokes the judgment of Heaven against his fellow is himself punished first, as it says, "And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee" (Gen. 16:5) etc., and it is subsequently written, "And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her" (Gen. 23:2).⁷⁷

Sarah should have reached Abraham's years, but because she said, "The Lord judge between me and thee," (Gen. 16:5) her life was reduced by forty-eight years.⁷⁸

In the Masoretic text of the Bible, there is a dot above the second yod in רַבִּינֶיךָ.⁷⁹ This would mean that the yod is to be disregarded rendering the reading רַבִּינְךָ, and your son. Her complaint, therefore, was not against Abraham, but only concerning Hagar, the mother of Abraham's son-to-be.⁸⁰

some say, concerning those that sowed dissension between him and her.⁸¹

Other Rabbis explain that Sarah was invoking God's wrath on בִּינֶךָ, on Abraham's yet unborn son.

R. Hoshaya said: Binka (thy son) is written. Seeing that it is already written, "And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived," (Gen. 16:4) why is it further

stated, "Behold, thou wilt conceive" (*ibid.* 11)? This, however, teaches that an evil eye took possession of her and she miscarried.⁸²

Abraham, however, ostensibly refused to become involved in the conflict between his wife and his concubine. Was Abraham weak? Was Sarah indeed a domineering wife? There probably is an element of this in Abraham's response. Abraham saw the conflict as existing solely between Sarah and Hagar. He had acted only at Sarah's request, and had proven his virility. It was Sarah who regretted her initial decision, and thus, she would have to solve her problem. But Abraham surely must have felt some affection towards Hagar, the mother of his heir-to-be. The Rabbis have difficulty with Abraham's turning of Hagar's future over to the hands of the enraged mistress. They therefore explain that Abraham offered some constraints in his response to Sarah.

Said he: "I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm." It is written, "Thou shalt not deal with her as a slave, because thou hast humbled her" (Deut. 21:14): after we have vexed her, can we now enslave her again? I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm. It is written, "And Sarah dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face" (Gen. 16:6), while it is written, "To sell her unto a foreign people he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her" (Ex. 21:8): after we have made her a mistress, shall we make her a bondmaid again? I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm.⁸³

The editor of Midrash Hagadol sees Abraham's response as a very positive aspect of his character.

"Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands.'" The verse reveals the virtue of Abraham our father, and his subdued desire. He did not long for her (Hagar), but rather said to her (Sarah), "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right."⁸⁴

Abraham's instructions to Sarah not only represent an aspect of his own feelings, but are according to the laws of those times. His response bears a striking resemblance to the ancient Code of Hammurabi.

If a man marries a priestess--naditum (a hierodule, or temple servant, forbidden to bear children)-- and if she gives her husband a bond-maid to bear him children, and if afterward this bond-maid demands equal honour with her mistress because of the children she has borne, the priestess must not sell her, but she may be returned to bondage among her fellow-slaves.⁸⁵

The biblical narrative seems to follow the Hammurabi stipulation, while the rabbinic interpretation above seems to indicate that Abraham questioned whether Hagar should again be reduced to the status of a slave woman. The time difference between the biblical authorship and the rabbinic period seems to play a significant role in assessing Abraham's response to the situation.

Sarah, of course, responded as she deemed appropriate. Her treatment of her handmaid was so harsh that Hagar fled into the wilderness. There an angel appeared and, comforting her, told Hagar to return to Sarah.

The midrash is quite explicit as to Sarah's ill-treatment of Hagar:

R. Abba said: She restrained her from cohabitation.
R. Berekiah said: She slapped her face with a slipper. R. Berekiah said in R. Abba's name: She bade her carry her water buckets and bath towels to the baths.^{86, 87}

The tension between the patriarch and the barren matriarch is an oft repeated episode in the Genesis narrative. Abraham's response and actions became the paradigm by which the other patriarchs were

measured. When Rachel complained about her childlessness to Jacob,⁸⁸ Jacob responded:

"And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel" (Gen. 30:2). The Rabbis of the south said in the name of R. Alexandri, and Rabana said in the name of R. Abba b. Kahana: "Should a wise man make answer with windy knowledge" (Job. 15:1): this applies to Abraham [of whom it is written], "And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah" (Gen. 16:2). "And fill his belly with the east wind" (Job loc cit.) applies to Jacob, as it says, "And Jacob's anger was kindled." Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By thy life, thy children will one day stand [in supplication] before her son [Joseph], [who will answer them, "Am I in the place of God?"'] (Gen. 50:19)]

"And he said: Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?" (Gen. 30:2) From thee He withheld it, but not from me. Said she to him: 'Did then your father act so to your mother? Did he not gird up his loins by her?' 'He had no children,' he retorted, 'whereas I have children.' 'And did not your grandfather [Abraham] have children,' she pursued, 'yet he too girded up his loins by Sarah?' 'Can you then do what my grandmother did?' he asked her. 'And what did she do?' 'She brought her rival into her home,' he replied. 'If that is the obstacle,' she returned, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her. . . and I also may be builded up through her" (*ibid.*): as she [Sarah] was built up through her rival, so was she [Rachel] built up through her rival.⁸⁹

Notes. Chapter II.

1. Gen. 12:11.
2. Gen. Rabbah 40:4.
3. Gen. Rabbah 40:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 12:11; Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 11; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 67; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:12.
4. Bava Bathra 16a. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:11.
5. Tanhuma Lekh Lakha 5.
6. Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 12.
7. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:11.
8. Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Tanhuma Buber Lekh Lekha 5. Translation: "steeped in lewdness."
9. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:2. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:1.
10. Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 51.
11. Ibid.
12. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 40:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5; Tanhuma Buber Lekh Lekha 5; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 51; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 67; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 12:4.
13. Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon, p. 15.
14. Ibid., p. 63.
15. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 41:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5; Tanhuma Buber Lekh Lekha 5; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha 52; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 69.
16. This midrash is from Tanhuma Buber Lekh Lekha 5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 41:2; Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 52; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 69.
17. Tanhuma Buber Lekh Lekha 5.

Notes. Chapter II. (Continued)

18. Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 52.
19. Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5. This midrash uses both crying and praying to preface the prayer.
20. Gen. 12:17.
21. Exod. Rabbah 20:1.
22. Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, Buber edition 7:63.
23. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol. V, p. 222.
24. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer 26; Midrash Aggadah Lekh Lekha 16.
25. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 40:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 67; Ibid. II Judges 4 43.
26. Zeligs, Psychoanalysis and the Bible, p. 12. Gerar refers to a similar episode with Abimelech in Genesis 30.
27. Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 9.
28. Gen. 15:2.
29. Num. Rabbah 2:12. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Aggadat Bereshit 37:1.
30. Deut. Rabbah 2:7.
31. Aggadat Bereshit 28:1.
32. Gen. Rabbah 44:9.
33. Zeligs, Psychoanalysis and the Bible, p. 17.
34. Ibid., pp. 19, 20.
35. Ibid., p. 13.
36. Genesis 15:5. Translation: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "so shall your offspring be."
37. Tanhuma Va-Yera 13.

Notes. Chapter II. (Continued)

38. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 44:10. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Shabbath 156a; Nedarim 32a; Pesikta Rabbati 43:1; Num. Rabbah 2:12; Aggadat Bereshit 37:1; Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 15:3; Yalkut Shimoni II Isa. 41 447; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 15:5; Ibn Shuaib Hayyei Sarah 9.
39. This midrash is from Nedarim 32a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Shabbath 156a; Num. Rabbah 2:12; Yalkut Shimoni II Isa. 41 447; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 15:5; Ibn Shuaib Hayyei Sarah 9.
40. Gen. Rabbah 44:12.
41. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 43:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 44:10; Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 28:3; Eccles. Rabbah 5:6:1; Pesikta Rabbati 52:3; Aggadat Bereshit 37:1.
42. This midrash is from Rosh Hashana 16b. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 44:12; Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 28:3; Eccles. Rabbah 5:6:1; Pesikta Rabbati 52:3; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 63.
43. Mekhilta D'Rabbi Ishmael Amalek 3. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Mekhilta D'Rabbi Simeon b. Jochai, Yitro 18.
44. Aggadat Bereshit 73:1.
45. Rosh Hashanah 11a. Translation: "On New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were remembered."
46. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:2; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
47. This midrash is from Nedarim 64b. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 45:2; Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:2; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
48. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:2; Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 16; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
49. Yevamoth 64a. This law is referred to in the following sources: Tosefta Yevamoth 8; Gen. Rabbah 45:3; Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:3.
50. Brichto, Kin Cult, Land and Afterlife, p. 61.

Notes. Chapter II. (Continued)

51. Ibid., pp. 30, 31.
52. Gen. 16:2.
53. קונטרס אדרון in Yalkut Shimoni, Salonica.
In Midrash Tadshe in Beit Hamidrash vol. III, p. 191, Hagar is referred to as one of נשים הסירות גירות מן הגרים נשים כשירות.
54. Patai, Family, Love and the Bible, pp. 70, 71.
55. Ibid., p. 37.
56. Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 55, specifically mentions Sarah's plan for Hagar to give birth on Sarah's knees.
57. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:3. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 16; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 78.
58. Midrash Aggada Lekh Lekha 16.
59. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 42:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Va-Yera 14; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 32.
60. As above, footnote #53.
61. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:4; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79; Ibid. II Song of Songs 2 986; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:4.
62. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:2.
63. Gen. Rabbah 45:5.
64. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:4; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79. The former makes no mention of Sarah's kindness.
65. Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 55. Translation: "to herself (lit. in her heart)."
66. Ibid., pp. 55, 56.
67. Patai, Family, Love and the Bible, pp. 74, 75.
68. Lev. 20:20, 21.

Notes. Chapter II. (Continued)

69. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:4; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79.
70. Brichto, Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife, p. 55.
71. Gen. 16:5.
72. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:5; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 56; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79.
73. Gen. 15:2. "But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what can you give me, seeing that I will die childless.'"
74. Gen. Rabbah 45:5; Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:5; Sefer Hayashar Lekh Lekha p. 56.
75. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:5; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79.
76. Gen. Rabbah 45:5; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:5.
77. This midrash is from Bava Qamma 93a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:5.
78. Gen. Rabbah 45:5. Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:5, has a parallel midrash which states 38 years, though Buber in his notes corrects this to read 48 years.
79. Gen. 16:5. יִשְׁעָה' בִּינִי וּבִינִיךְ.
80. Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version I 34; Num. Rabbah 3:13.
81. Num. Rabbah 3:13. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version I 34.
82. Gen. Rabbah 45:5.
83. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:6. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:6; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79.
84. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 16:6.

Notes. Chapter II. (Continued)

85. Patai and Graves, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis, p. 159.
86. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:6. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 16:6; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 79.
87. Patai and Graves explain the slapping of the face with a slipper as an act of asserting possession, as a reminder of Hagar's servitude. Patai and Graves, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis, p. 159.
88. Gen. 30:1-3.
89. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 71:7. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta Rabbati 43:7; Aggadat Bereshit 52:1.

Chapter III.

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael,¹ the Lord appeared to Abraham and established an everlasting covenant with him, and with his offspring. This covenant took the form of circumcision of every male child. It cannot be merely coincidental that the covenant was established after the birth of Ishmael and but one year before the birth of Isaac. Isaac thereby would be the destined heir, the first son born after the circumcision rite sealed the perpetual covenant.

The Rabbis cleverly dismiss other significant stages in Abraham's life when the circumcision rite might have been appropriate:

Why should he not have circumcised himself at the age of forty-eight, when he recognised his Creator? In order not to discourage proselytes. Then why not be circumcised at the age of eighty-five, when [God] spoke with him between the pieces? In order that Isaac might issue from a holy source. Then let him be circumcised at the age of eighty-six, when Ishmael was born? Said R. Simeon b. Lakish: [God said]: "I will set up a cinnamon tree in the world; just as the cinnamon tree yields fruit as long as you manure and hoe around it, so [shall Abraham be] even when his blood runs sluggishly and his passions and desires have ceased."²

Zeligs psychoanalytically interpreted the circumcision and the subsequent birth of Isaac.

If we accept the common psychoanalytic significance of circumcision as a symbolic castration, the penalty for incestuous wishes, it is understandable why the ritual should have preceded the birth of Isaac rather than that of Ishmael. Hagar was an Egyptian, a stranger, with whom incestuous bonds would be remote. Sarah was not only the desired woman, the beloved wife, but she was also a kinswoman and therefore much more likely to be an unconsciously forbidden object. The price of a son from her would more clearly involve the submissive act toward the father which circumcision implies.³

The circumcision rite, together with the change of both Sarah and Abraham's names,⁴ set the stage for the announcement of the birth of Isaac.

I (God) will bless her (Sarah); 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.⁵

At last, God's promise to Abraham comes out of the realm of general and grandiose, and deals in specifics. A son will be born of Sarah!

Had this news come thirty years earlier, perhaps even twenty, Abraham would have reacted with absolute joy. In these last years, however, it had seemed as if he was constantly facing a series of trials and difficulties. Out of tiredness and frustration, Abraham reacted uncharacteristically, yet very humanly:

Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"⁶

The Rabbis attempted to analyze this behaviour.

Four are mentioned in Scripture as having been smitten: one, upon being smitten, rebelled; one, upon being smitten, laughed; one, upon being smitten, sought his friend; and one asked: "Why is the lash held back? Strike me again!" . . . The second one who was smitten, laughed; this was Abraham, of whom it is said "When Abraham fell upon his face, he laughed" (Gen. 17:17). The Lord and Abraham--with whom may they be compared? [With a man and his son]. The man beating his son swore that he would continue to beat him, saying: "My son, I have sworn that I would continue beating thee." The son replied: "Thine is the power!" The father continued beating his son, thinking that his son would say: "I have had enough." As the son was smitten more and more, however, the father finally said: "Enough of beating him!" Even so, it is said "The Lord appeared unto Abram, and said unto him: I am God: 'Shaddai!'--that is, 'It is enough!'" (Gen. 17:1): I am He who said to My world: "It is enough!" I am also He who said of thy trial: "It is enough!"⁷

It would appear, then, that it was Abraham who possessed the strength, and God, the father, who relented in his trial of the son. Abraham may have been able to withstand God's trials for many more years, but the Rabbis conclude that Sarah may not have had the necessary inner strength.

What then is meant by the words that follow: "and a man is tried according to his praise"? (Prov. 27:21) The Holy One, blessed be He, tries the righteous man according to what his praiseworthy deeds have proved him to be. 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, blessed be He, tried her. It is written that "Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran" (Gen. 12:4), and Sarah at that time sixty-five years old, he older than she by ten years. At the age of ninety she gave birth to a child, Abraham being a hundred years old when Isaac was born, Isaac who was the answer to his question "Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" (Gen. 17:17). Thus you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, tried her according to her strength.⁸

The Rabbis suggest that Abraham laughed not because he doubted his own virility, but because of Sarah's disabilities.

"And said in his heart: Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old, etc." (Gen. 17:17)
R. Judan interpreted: "Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old?" Why [this astonishment]? For, [said he], "Shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" A man does not grow aged, but a woman does. When is a woman to be regarded as aged? Said R. Simeon b. Lakish: When she is called "Mother So-and-So" and does not mind.⁹

After the rite of circumcision, in fact during Abraham's convalescence, three angels of God appeared to him. Abraham hurriedly ran about to make the preparations for a banquet for his visitors.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אִי־הָאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בָאֵהָל¹⁰

And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife?
And he said, Behold, She is in the tent: (Gen. 18:9)

this is to inform us that she was modest. Rab Judah said in Rab's name: The Ministering Angels knew that our mother Sarah was in the tent, but why [bring out the fact that she was] in her tent? In order to make her beloved to her husband.¹¹

The Rabbis deal as well with the Masoretic text and the dots above the three letters of וְיָאָבֵן:

The alef, yod, and waw are dotted, but the lamed is not dotted. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Wherever you find the plain writing exceeding the dotted letters, you must interpret the plain writing; if the dotted letters exceed the plain writing, you must interpret the dotted letters. Here that the dotted letters exceed the undotted, you must interpret the dotted text. Thus, [the angels asked Sarah,] "Where is he--Abraham?" R. 'Azariah said: Just as they said to Abraham, "Where is Sarah," (Gen. 18:9) so they said to Sarah, "Where is Abraham?"¹²

The Torah thereby taught etiquette, that a man must enquire of his hostess [about his host] .¹³

And what a host Abraham was! Jewish tradition portrays Abraham as the host par excellence, the paradigm of one who observes the מצוה of הכנסת אורחים.

Sarah, however, does not fare well in the rabbinic assessment of her as a hostess. Abraham ran into Sarah's tent and said: "Quick, three measures of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!"¹⁴ However, the critique of Sarah was of women in general, and not of her specifically.

Scripture writes (ordinary) meal, and (it is then written) fine meal. (Gen. 18:6)--Said R. Isaac: This shows that a woman looks with a more grudging eye upon guests than a man.¹⁵

The biblical text makes no mention of Abraham bringing his guests the bread that Sarah was to prepare.

Now where was the bread? Ephraim Miksha'ah, a disciple of R. Meir, said in R. Meir's name: Sarah

became menstuous and the dough was defiled.
 The Rabbis said: He certainly brought them
 bread too, for if he brought them what he had not
 offered, how much more what he had offered!¹⁶

Sarah listened at the entrance of her tent as Abraham entertained
 his guests. The Rabbis offer no explanation why Sarah felt it neces-
 sary to eavesdrop. This character trait brings to the fore other
 negative characteristics of women in general. The Rabbis are severely
 critical of these:

The Rabbis said: Women are said to possess four
 traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful,
 and envious. Greedy, as it says, "And she took of
 the fruit thereof, and did eat" (Gen. 3:6); eaves-
 droppers: "And Sarah heard in the tent door" (*ib.*
 18:10); slothful: "Make ready quickly three measures
 of fine meal" (*ib.* 6); envious: "Rachel envied her
 sister" (*ib.* 30:1). R. Joshua b. Nehemiah said:
 She is also a scratcher and talkative. A scratcher:
 "And Sarai said unto Abram: My scratch be upon thee."
 (Gen. 16:5) Talkative: "And Miriam spoke against
 Moses" (Num. 12:1). R. Levi said: She is also prone
 to steal and a gadabout. Prone to steal: "And Rachel
 stole the teraphim" (Gen. 31:19). A gadabout: "And
 Dinah went out" (*ib.* 34:1).¹⁷

It was all these negative traits that made the first creation of woman
 such a difficult decision for the Almighty.

When God was about to create Eve from Adam, He was
 considering whence to create her, as it is said,
 "And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the
 man, made He (*wayyiben*) woman," etc. (Gen. 2:22).
 God said: "I shall not create her from the eye,
 that her eye may not be haughty, nor from the ear,
 that she may not be an eavesdropper, nor from the
 mouth, that she may not be talkative, nor from the
 hand, that she may not be a thief, nor from the
 foot, that she may not be a gadabout; whence then
 shall I create her? From his most private limb, from
 the thigh." And yet it was of no avail. And every-
 thing that God intended should not be in her is to be
 found even in the best of women. God said: "I will
 not create her from the eye that her eye may not be
 haughty," yet of Eve it is written, "And when the
 woman saw, etc." (*ib.* 3:6); "I will not create her

from the ear that she may not be an eavesdropper," [yet it is written,] "And Sarah heard" (ib. 18:10); "I will not create her from the hand that she may not be a thief," [yet it is written], "And Rachel stole the teraphim" (ib. 21:19); "I will not create her from the foot that she may not be a gadabout," yet of Leah it is written, "And Leah went out to meet him," etc. (ib. 30:16); "I will not create her from the mouth that she may not be talkative," yet of Miriam the pious, it is written, "And Miriam spoke." (Num. 12:1)¹⁸

The biblical text continues with what seems to be an editorial comment: "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women."¹⁹

This feeling must very adequately reflect the thoughts that were going on in Sarah and Abraham's minds at the moment. The Rabbis, however, interpret Abraham and Sarah's old age as an honour shown to them:

"The fruit of the hadar tree." (Lev. 23:40)
Hadar symbolises Abraham, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honoured (hiddero) with good old age; as it says, "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age" (Gen. 24:1), and it is written, "And honour (wehadarta) the face of the old man" (Lev. 19:32).

Another exposition of the text, "The fruit of the hadar tree." Hadar symbolises Sarah whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honoured (hidderah) with a good old age; as it says, "Now Abraham and Sarah were old" (Gen. 18:11).²⁰

Midrash Hagadol quotes an anonymous midrash which demonstrates a remarkable understanding of inter-personal relationships:

"Now Abraham and Sarah were old." The verse speaks in praise of their compatibility. If he were young and she was old, he would be sexually aggressive toward her, but she would not be aggressive toward him. If he were old and she was young, she would be sexually aggressive toward him, but he would not be aggressive toward her. Since they were both equally old, their cohabitation was pleasant and praiseworthy.²¹

Abraham and Sarah may indeed have been majestic in their old age, but

God fulfilled in them the verse from Psalms: עֹד יַנּוּבֵן בְּשִׁיבָה

דשנים ורעננים יהיו.²² The Rabbis derive this rejuvenation from an apparent repetition in the text:

R. Johanan said: Since it is now written, "Now Abraham and Sarah were old," (Gen. 18:11) why is it again written, "Now Abraham was old" (Gen. 24:1)? The reason is because the Holy One, blessed be He, restored him to the days of his youth, therefore, "And Abraham was old" must then be written a second time. R. Ammi said: Here old age combined with virility is meant, while further on it means old age without virility.²³

Abraham was restored to his youth, Sarah was restored to her youth. All the inhabitants of the world gathered around them and said, "What is the nature of these occurrences on your behalf?" Immediately, Abraham sat down and told them all that had happened to him in the world from Ur of the Chaldeans until the present, as it is written, "Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step?" (Is. 41:2) When they heard the words of Torah from him, they appointed him their leader.²⁴

So impressive was their rejuvenation that the Rabbis tell us that coins were struck bearing their likenesses.

What was the coin of Abraham our Patriarch?--An old man and an old woman on the one side, and a young man and a young woman on the other.²⁵

Though none of the texts are specific as to who these likenesses were, the explanations and the notes all agree that the old man and woman represented Abraham and Sarah. The majority indicate that the young man and woman represented Isaac and Rebekkah. But Friedmann, in the notes to Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, strongly argues that the other references are incorrect. Both sides, he contends, refer to Abraham and Sarah as the old couple, and as the rejuvenated young man and woman.²⁶

Sarah, listening at the entrance to her tent, overheard the visitors' prediction that she will bear a son: "And Sarah laughed to

herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment-- with my husband so old?'²⁷

The Rabbis elaborate on the meaning of this verse:

"After I am waxed old, I shall have 'ednah' [E.V. 'pleasure']. She said thus: 'As long as a woman is young she has finery, whereas "after I am waxed old, I shall have 'ednah," that means finery, as in the verse, "I decked thee also with ornaments"-- 'edi (Ezek. 16:11). A woman, as long as she is young, has her regular periods, while "after I am waxed old, I shall have 'ednah," i.e. menses. The fact, however, is that "my lord is old." Rab Judah said: He is virile, yet impotent.²⁸

Sarah presented herself as one who was capable of bearing a son:

After the flesh is worn and the wrinkles have multiplied, the flesh was rejuvenated, the wrinkles were smoothened out, and beauty returned to its place.²⁹

The problem lay with her husband who was impotent. Since the woman's status in the Ancient Near East depended to a large extent on her ability to produce children, it is not surprising that Sarah would accuse Abraham of being the cause of her childlessness.³⁰

For the second time,³¹ God's promise of a son has been received with laughter. The biblical narrative relates the following dialogue:

Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the time that life is due, and Sarah shall have a son." Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh."³²

The Rabbis were unquestionably uncomfortable with a biblical text which relates that Sarah, or for that matter Abraham, dared to doubt God's powers to fulfill His promise. Even more problematic is the fact that, in this instance, God chastises Sarah for laughing, whereas in the previous chapter, there is no mention of a reproof following

Abraham's laughter.

None of the early sources deal with this problem directly.

Midrash Aggada bases its explanation on the fact that Abraham laughed

בִּלְבוֹ (in his heart), while Sarah laughed בְּקֶרְבָּהּ.

Therefore, why was the Holy One, Blessed be He, annoyed with Sarah because she laughed? Was it not also written concerning Abraham, "and he laughed" (Gen. 17:17), yet the Holy One, Blessed be He, was not annoyed? Concerning Sarah it is written (that she laughed) "to herself" ("בְּקֶרְבָּהּ") (Gen. 18:12), but concerning Abraham, it is not written, "to himself" ("בְּקֶרְבוֹ"). What is the meaning of "to herself" ("בְּקֶרְבָּהּ")? She looked at herself and exclaimed, 'Shall these shrivelled breasts flow with milk?' Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, was annoyed with her.³³

Midrash Hagadol quotes an anonymous midrash which does not deny that both Abraham and Sarah laughed to themselves; nor that both acted in an identical manner. However:

Why does Scripture rebuke Sarah, but not Abraham, of whom too it relates, "Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed"? (Gen. 17:17) This is to teach that when two, a greater and a lesser, do something improper, only the lesser is rebuked, and then the greater will himself understand.³⁴

Furthermore all the sources do indirectly admit that there was no significant difference. Therefore, in order to make this incident understandable to King Ptolemy, the Rabbis had to make a textual emendation in the translation. Tractate Megillah supplies the details:

R. Judah said: When our teachers permitted Greek, they permitted it only for a scroll of the Torah. This was on account of the incident related in connection with King Ptolemy, as it has been taught: It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, 'Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master.' God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote

for him, "God created in the beginning," (Gen. 1:1)
 "I shall make man in image and likeness," (Gen. 1:26)
 "And he finished on the sixth day, and rested on the
 seventh day," (Gen. 2:2) "Male and female he created
 him," (Gen. 5:2) [but they did not write 'created
 them']. "Come let me descend and confound their
 tongues." (Gen. 11:7) "And Sarah laughed among her
 relatives;" (Gen. 18:12)³⁵

They amended the Genesis text so that Ptolemy might understand that
 God was angry with Sarah because she had laughed publicly (בקרוביה--
 among her relatives), while Abraham had laughed only to himself. The
 fact that the Rabbis permitted this emendation demonstrates their own
 difficulty with this episode.

An easier problem for the Rabbis to handle was Sarah's denial of
 her laughter.

"And Sarah denied": Hence we learn that all women
 are deniers, and Sarah proves this, as it is written,
 "And Sarah denied" (Gen. 18:15).³⁶

Sarah's denial angered the Rabbis. Their opinion of Sarah reflected
 their opinion of women in general. They claimed that women denied
 their statements when frightened:

Therefore, our Rabbis disqualified women as witnesses.³⁷
 and continued very harshly regarding Sarah:

Had not God promised Abraham a son from Sarah, she
 would not have borne child, because of her disbelief.³⁸

Notwithstanding the motivating factors, God did indeed speak to Sarah.
 According to the Rabbis, this was the only time God spoke directly with
 a woman.

Rabbi Johanan quoting Rabbi Eleazar b. Rabbi Simeon
 said: We do not find that the Holy One, Blessed
 be He, ever conversed with any woman except Sarah.
 But is it not written, "And to the woman he said,
 'I will make most severe, etc. (Gen. 3:16)'"?
 Rabbi Jacob from the village of Hanin said: '(He

spoke that) through an intermediary.' But is it not written, "And the Lord answered her, 'Two nations are in your womb (Gen. 25:23).'" Rabbi Abba b. Kahana said that the word of God fell down to her. Rabbi Beerī said: What a roundabout way the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to hear the discourses of righteous women: "He said, "But you did laugh" (Gen. 18:15).³⁹

The Rabbis point out a very significant aspect of God's response to Sarah's doubting. As God speaks to Abraham, He apparently quotes Sarah: "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'"⁴⁰

Sarah's original remarks differ very significantly: "Am I to have enjoyment -- with my husband so old?"⁴¹

Was there a mistake in the text? Or rather, was God misquoting Sarah?

It is written, "And my lord is old:" (Gen. 18:12) but it is also written, ["And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child,] seeing that I am old?" (ibid. 13) the Holy One, blessed be He, not putting the question in her words!--The School of Ishmael taught: Peace is a precious thing, for even the Holy One, blessed be He, made a variation for its sake, as it is written, "Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I am waxed old, Shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also;" whereas it is further written, "And the Lord said unto Abraham etc. . . .seeing that I am old."⁴²

God's mis-statement was an attempt to preserve שלום בית, domestic peace between Abraham and Sarah. This became the paradigmatic statement for peace in Jewish tradition.

The next event of importance in the relationship between Abraham and Sarah is a modified repetition of their journey to Egypt. This time Abraham and Sarah journeyed to Gerar. There is little of the preamble of the earlier narrative:

Abraham journeyed from there to the region of the Negeb and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was sojourning in Gerar, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech King of Gerar had Sarah brought to him.⁴³

It is almost as if the text intends for us to fill in the details from our knowledge of the previous episode.⁴⁴ The question must be asked: Why would Sarah agree, once again, to Abraham's ruse? Genesis Rabbah offers a very specific answer: She was not consulted!

"And Abraham said of Sarah his wife: She is my sister"(Gen. 20:2)--without her will or consent.⁴⁵

Lekah Tov explains this:

"Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister' " (Gen. 20:2). Without her will or consent. In the first instance (Egypt), he said to her, "Say, then, that you are my sister" (Gen. 12:13), but she did not want to. Therefore it is written, "Abraham said".⁴⁶

Yalkut Shimoni, however, amends the text to read as follows:

"So Abimelech, King of Gerar, sent, and took Sarah" (Gen. 20:2). Is it possible (that she went by her own desire)? No, he took her without her will or consent.⁴⁷

It was Abimelech's taking of Sarah to which the midrash refers when it says "without her consent".

Pesikta Rabbati offers the complete story:

"And Abimelech king of the Philistines sent, etc." (Gen. 20:2). When Abimelech sent and had Sarah seized, [the Word of] the Holy One, blessed be He, leaped out to him: "God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night" (Gen. 20:3). According to R. Johanan, God's appearing to Abimelech was one of the instances where the All-Pure saw fit to defile Himself. When Abimelech sought to have his will of Sarah, God revealed Himself at once, saying to him: "Behold, thou shalt die, because of the woman. . .for she is a man's wife" (Gen. 20:3). What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do to him? He caused all the wells of the body to dry up--Abimelech's and his

household's and those of people everywhere in the kingdom: "For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs"(Gen. 20:18), [that is, all the openings of the body]. R. Eliezer taught: The adults as well as the children, the men as well as the women, the servants also--the Holy One, blessed be He, closed fast the wells of their bodies. Not one of them could urinate, move his bowels, drop moisture from his nose or a tear from his eyes--all the wells were closed fast, sealed tight, dried up. And why such things? "For the sake of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (*ibid.*), in order to clear Sarah of suspicion. But now could such things clear her? In the following way: Imagine one of them, one of the Philistines, that is, standing about with his friend on the morning after Abimelech sent for Sarah, and saying to his friend: You cannot guess what happened to me last night! Such-and-such dryings up befell me. To which his friend replies: "Befell me, too." And as these two go on telling other people what befell them, the others say: "By heaven, one more night like the last and we're all dead men!" But just how would such talk clear Sarah of suspicion? Because the Philistines would go on to say this: "If such dryings up befell us even though she was far away from us, then what of the one next to whom she slept--Abimelech? Need you ask what befell him, what judgments were executed upon him?" Hence, "For the Lord had fast closed. . .for the sake of Sarah."

When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abimelech: "Behold, thou shalt die, because of the woman whom thou hast taken"(Gen. 20:3), Abimelech replied: Master of the universe, things concealed and unconcealed are all known to Thee. Since I did not touch her, wouldst Thou slay me? Truly, as Scripture tells, "Abimelech had not come near her"(Gen. 20:4), and so he asked: "Wilt Thou slay even a righteous Gentile?" (*ibid.*) In saying "even a righteous Gentile," he could have meant, "Even though I am a Gentile, I am God-fearing." Or, taking the passage to read, "Wilt Thou slay this Gentile? then also righteous," Abimelech could have meant: If Thou slayest me--if Thou slayest this Gentile, "then also righteous," then the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion of the races of man were also, I maintain, righteous; if, that is, Thou didst punish them without serving warning upon them, as presumably Thou dost intend to punish me. "Wilt Thou slay this Gentile? then also righteous."

Or again, by the words "this Gentile, then also the righteous" Abimelech could have meant: If Thou slayest

the Gentile, Thou must also slay the righteous. If Thou slayest Abimelech, slay Abraham also. How could he demand such a thing? Because, according to R. Berechiah Berabbi the Priest, of what he claimed took place. By his account, Abimelech said: I asked Abraham, "What is she--your wife?" He replied, "She is my sister." Then I asked Sarah, "Are you his wife?" She replied, "No, I am his sister." Nevertheless, I went on to ask the people of his household, and they likewise said that she was his sister. "Said he not himself unto me: She is my sister? And she, even she herself, said: He is my brother. In the simplicity of my heart. . . have I done this" (Gen. 20:5): Scripture does not say "she" alone, but "and she," the "and" signifying the members of Sarah's and Abraham's household who also declared her to be his sister: "In the simplicity of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this."

The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: "Yea, I know that in the simplicity of thy heart thou hast done this" (Gen. 20:6). Yet thou art not the one to be praised for not sinning. "It was I who withheld thee from sinning against Me" (*ibid.*). R. Levi said: God may here be likened to a man riding a horse before whom a child happened to fall. As the galloping horse was about to trample the child, the rider pulled on the bridle and the horse stopped. Every one began praising the horse, but the man said to them: Is it the horse that you should praise? Had I not pulled on the bridle, would the child have stayed alive? Likewise, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "It was I who withheld thee from sinning against Me."

Then God went on to say, "Restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet" (Gen. 20:7).⁴⁸

The Rabbis applied a gzerah shavah to show that the disease which plagued Pharaoh also afflicted Abimelech, and vice versa.⁴⁹ Rubenstein deals with the nature of the punishment of both Pharaoh and of Abimelech. In both cases, the attempted sexual offense led to some impairment.

In the Bible, God punishes Abimelech by closing up the wombs of all the members of his household. In the Rabbinic retelling, God closes up every single orifice of both the males and the females of the house of Abimelech. . . This was functionally equivalent to castration. . . . The Bible relates that Pharaoh was

smitten with plagues for attempting to molest Sarah. The Rabbis asserted that Pharaoh's affliction was leprosy. Leprosy is frequently mentioned as a punishment. Leprosy is functionally equivalent to castration. The fear of leprosy undoubtedly contains some elements of castration anxiety. The terminal stages of leprosy involve the spontaneous amputation of the appendages. Even before that, the leper is hardly capable of leading a meaningful sex life.⁵⁰

Whatever the exact nature of the affliction, Abimelech not only was pleased to be rid of Abraham and Sarah, but rewarded them, and:

begged him (Abraham) to pray in 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 "And Abraham prayed unto God; and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children" (Gen. 20:17).⁵¹

The biblical text, relating Abimelech's gifts, is problematic:

"ולשרה אמר הנה נתתי אלה כסף לאחריך הנה הוא לך כסות עינים לכל

"אשר אתך ואת כל הנכחה".⁵²

Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer makes mention of an interesting point:

Whatever Pharaoh gave, he gave to Sarah;
whatever Abimelech gave, he gave to Abraham.⁵³

The Talmud maintains that these payments to Abraham were justified halachically:

Mishnah. Even though the offender pays him [compensation], the offence is not forgiven until he asks him for pardon, as it says: "Now therefore restore the man's wife etc." (Gen. 20:7). Whence can we learn that should the injured person not forgive him he would be [stigmatised as] cruel? From the words: "So Abraham prayed unto God and God healed Abimelech" (*ibid.*, 17).

Gemara. Our Rabbis taught: All these fixed sums stated above specify only the payment [civilly due] for Degradation. For regarding the hurt done to the feelings of the plaintiff, even if the offender should

bring all the 'rams of Nebaioth' (Isa. 60:7) in the world, the offence would not be forgiven until he asks him for pardon, as it is written: "Now therefore restore the man's wife for he is a prophet and he will pray for thee." (Gen. 20:7).⁵⁴

A number of varying midrashic interpretations explain what is meant by תנה הוא לך כסות עינים⁵⁵

R. Judah b. R. Ilai said: [Abimelech reproached Abraham:] 'You went to Egypt and made merchandise of her, and you came here and traded in her. If you desire money, here is money and cover up [your] eyes from her.' That is the meaning of, "Behold, it is for thee a covering of the eyes." (Gen. 20:16)

'Behold, it is for thee a covering (kesuth) of the eyes.' R. Johanan explained it: [Abimelech said to Abraham:] 'Make thee a garment that all may look at it, not at her beauty,' "A covering of the eyes meaning a garment which attracts the eyes." R. Berekiah said: He [Abimelech] made her a noble lady, "A garment of the eyes" meaning one in which she would be covered from the eyes. R. Simeon b. Lakish said: He wished to make her discontented with her husband, that she might complain: All those years he had been with her and had not made her any finery, yet this man did all this for her because of a single night. [Another interpretation:] He [Abimelech] said to him: 'You covered my eyes; therefore the son that you will beget will be of covered eyes.'⁵⁶

Then Abraham prayed on behalf of Abimelech, and God healed Abimelech and his household:

Lest one think that God gave the Philistines relief for the sake of Abraham alone, Scripture says that He did so for Sarah's sake also: "On the word of Sarah Abraham's wife" (Gen. 20:18).⁵⁷

The majority of the midrashic sources, however, see Abraham as the central figure in the efficacy of this prayer. The irony of the situation is such that Abraham, himself childless by his wife Sarah, prays for healing of Abimelech, a healing which made it possible for Abimelech's wives to bear children. The Rabbis offered an analogy to this situation:

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 in behalf of Abimelech and his wife, and all the Philistines conceived and bore children, the angels rose up, complaining: "Master of the universe, all these years Sarah was barren, and Abimelech's wife was barren." (Whence is it known that Abimelech's wife was barren? Because it is said "And 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; even his maidservants were. These were remembered, but Sarah remains barren. Justice demands that she also be remembered." Well did R. Eliezer teach that wherever Scripture says, "And the Lord," the phrase refers not only to the Lord [of mercy], but also to His court [of angels of justice].

"And Abraham prayed unto God; and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children" (ibid.). Thereupon, says Scripture, "And the Lord remembered Sarah."⁵⁸

Sarah is rewarded because Abraham solicited mercy for his fellow.

Genesis Rabbah spots a minor difficulty, in that it is Sarah who is remembered because of Abraham's prayer. The other sources apparently dismiss this, but Genesis Rabbah returns the focus once again to Sarah.

R. Isaac said: It is written, "And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then shall she be cleared, and shall conceive seed" (Num. 5:28). Then this woman [Sarah] who had 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. Huna said that there is an angel appointed over desire, Sarah had no need for such, but He in His glory [made her conceive]; hence, "And the Lord remembered Sarah." (Gen. 21:1)⁵⁹

Notes. Chapter III.

1. Gen. 16:16, 17:1.
2. Gen. Rabbah 46:2.
3. Zeligs, Psychoanalysis and the Bible, pp. 30, 31.
4. Gen. 17:5, 15.
5. Gen. 17:16.
6. Gen. 17:17.
7. Midrash Tehillim 26:2. A parallel midrash with minor variations can be found in Yalkut Shimoni II Job 10 905.
8. Pesikta Rabbati 43:5.
9. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 47:3. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Lekh Lekha 17:17; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 82.
10. Gen. 18:9.
11. Bava Mezi'a' 87a. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
12. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 48:15. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Bava Mezi'a' 87a; Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version I 34; Sifré Numbers Be-Ha'alotkha 69; Num. Rabbah 3:13; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82; Be-Ha'alotkha 722; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:9.
13. Bava Mezi'a' 87a. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:9.
14. Gen. 18:6.
15. Bava Mezi'a' 87a. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:6.
16. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 48:14. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Bava Mezi'a' 87a; Tanhuma Va-Yera 13.
17. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 45:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version II 45; Deut. Rabbah 6:11; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
18. This midrash is from Deut. Rabbah 6:11. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 18:2; Tanhuma

Notes. Chapter III. (Continued)

Va-Yeshev 6; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yishlah 17; Yalkut Shimoni I Bereshit 24; Ibid. II Isa. 3 398

19. Gen. 18:11.
20. This midrash is from Lev. Rabbah 30:10. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 27; Pesikta Rabbati 51:2; Yalkut Shimoni I Emor 651.
21. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:11.
22. Psalms 92:15. Translation: "In old age they still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness."
23. Gen. Rabbah 48:16.
24. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 6.
25. This midrash is from Bava Qamma 97b. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 39:11; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 6; Lekhaḥ Tov Lekh Lekha 12:2; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:11.
26. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 6.
27. Gen. 18:12.
28. Gen. Rabbah 48:17.
29. This midrash is from Bava Mezi'a' 87a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 41; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:12.
30. Patai, Family, Love and the Bible, p. 37.
31. See above, Gen. 17:17.
32. Gen. 18:13-15.
33. Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 41.
34. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:13.
35. This midrash is from Megillah 9a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Avot D'Rabbi Nathan version II 37; Gen. Rabbah 48:17; Mekhilta D'Rabbi Ishmael Pisha 12; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
36. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:15.
37. יְקִינְטָרִס אֶזְרָרָן¹⁴ in Yalkut Shimoni, Salonica. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 18:15.

Notes. Chapter III. (Continued)

38. Ibid.
39. This midrash is from Yerushalmi Soṭah chapter 7 halacha 1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 20:6, 45:10, 48:20, 63:7.
40. Gen. 18:13.
41. Gen. 18:12.
42. This midrash is from Bava Mezi'a' 87a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yevamoth 65b; Yerushalmi Peah chapter 1 halacha 1; Gen. Rabbah 48:18; Lev. Rabbah 9:9; Sifré Numbers Naso 42; Pesikta Rabbati 50:6; Num. Rabbah 11:7; Tanhuma Zav 7, Shofetim 18; Tanhuma Buber Zav 10; Midrash Aggāda Va-Yera 41, Zav 16; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82, Va-Yehi 162, Naso 711; Ibid. II Ps. 29 711.
43. Gen. 20:1-3.
44. Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 64 does exactly that in its account.
45. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 52:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Lekah Tov Va-Yera 20:2; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 87.
46. Lekah Tov Va-Yera 20:2.
47. Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 87.
48. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 42:3. Significant portions of this midrash, with minor variations, are found in: Gen. Rabbah 52:6, 52:13; Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 26; Pesikta Rabbati 42:6; Exod. Rabbah 20:1; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 20:7.
49. Gen. Rabbah 52:13; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 69.
50. Rubenstein, The Religious Imagination, pp. 78, 79.
51. Pesikta Rabbati 42:3. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 65.
52. Gen. 20:16. Translation: "And to Sarah he said, 'I herewith give your brother a thousand pieces of silver; this will serve you as vindication before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone.'"
53. Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 26.

Notes. Chapter III. (Continued)

54. Bava Qamma 92a. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 20:7.
55. Gen. 20:16.
56. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 52:12. The various explanations with minor variations, are found in later midrashic sources: Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 27; Aggadat Bereshit 26; Lekah Tov Va-Yera 20:16; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 47; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 89. All the above sources except for Gen. Rabbah 52:12, explain that Abimelech made Sarah a garment of nobility so that men would fear that she was a queen, and therefore maintain their distance.
57. Pesikta Rabbati 42:6.
58. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 42:3. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Bava Qamma 92a; Tanhuma Va-Yera 14, 16; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 32, 34, 36; Aggadat Bereshit 28; Yalkut Shimoni II Job 42 928.
59. Gen. Rabbah 53:6.

Chapter IV.

The birth of Isaac is ushered in with very little biblical fanfare. God merely fulfilled that which He had promised and remembered Sarah.

In like manner you interpret: "And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said" (Gen. 21:1). And where had He said it? "Nay, but Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son" (*ibid.*, 17:19). In like manner you interpret: "And the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken" (*ibid.*, 21:1). And where had He spoken? "In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: Unto thy seed have I given this land" (*ibid.*, 15:18).¹

Though it was the angels who brought the news of Sarah's pregnancy-to-be to Abraham, it was significantly God who took note of Sarah.

The Rabbis explain:

There are three keys that the Holy One, blessed be He, entrusts to no creature--not to an angel, nor to a seraph, nor even to a troop [of seraphim]--but are kept in His own hand: the key of rain, as is said "The Lord will open unto thee His good treasure the heaven to give the rain of thy Land in its season" (Deut. 28:12); the key of resurrection, "Behold, I will open your graves" (Ezek. 37:12); and the key of the womb, "And the Lord remembered Sarah."²

The Rabbis attach special significance to the choice of the word *זָכַר*. The midrashic authors may have been hesitant about the concept of God remembering (as though He could forget!), and understood *זָכַר* as its other meaning, to deposit. God, therefore, repaid or requited Sarah's deposit. But what does this mean?

R. Aha said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish, the Holy One, blessed be He, 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 man comes and deposits gold coins;

another comes and deposits thorns. Then they come to get them back from him. He who deposits money with him, to him the trustee returns money; he who deposits thorns with him, to him the trustee gives back thorns. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said: I act as trustee. Whatever a man deposits with Me, I return to him. Thus it was with Abraham. You find that he deposited souls with the Holy One, blessed be He, as is written "Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, etc., and the souls that they had made in Haran" (Gen. 12:5).

It was by their conversion of men and women that Abraham and Sarah are said to have created souls--brought them in under the wings of the Presence. Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: As ye live, you deposited souls with Me; I will requite your trust in kind: "And the Lord requited Sarah's trust in kind. . . And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age" (Gen. 21:1-2).³

The Rabbis extrapolated from this instance of repayment of deposits, to a generalization about God's rewarding of good deeds.

The Holy One, blessed be He, 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 ordain to have My name remembered, I will come to thee and bless thee" (Exod. 20:21). Consider Abraham: what is said of him? "Because Abraham hearkened to Me [in the matter of blessings and spoke] in a voice [that held blessing]" (Gen. 26:5), I blessed him: "And the Lord had blessed Abraham because of all [the blessings he spoke]" (Gen. 24:1).⁴

What greater blessing for Abraham than:

The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken.⁵

Moses' birth was spoken of in similar language: "The woman conceived and bore a son." (Exod. 2:2) This led the Rabbis to equate the conception with the birth.

It compares the bearing of the child to its conception; as the conception was painless so was the bearing painless. Hence [it is learnt] that righteous women were not included in the decree upon Eve.⁶

What was true of Jochebed therefore, was also true of Sarah. The midrashic authors leave no questions unanswered, not even the question of when the birth took place. There are no differences of opinion among the Rabbis as to the date of Isaac's birth, though there are no clear indications in the biblical text. Pesikta Rabbati maintains that Isaac was born in Nisan.

Whence do we know that Isaac was born in Nisan?
From Scripture: for when the angels came to Abraham, what he said to Sarah was "Knead it, and [quickly] make cakes [before the dough rises]" (Gen. 18:6), the time being Passover. Then they said to him: "I will certainly return unto thee at the time of the mark; and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son" (Gen. 18:10).⁷

Other sources add that Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashanah, and gave birth in Nisan, seven months later.⁸ And this son was given the name Isaac. Midrash Hagadol, quoting from an unknown source, explains the choice of the name.

God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife (shall bear you a son), and you shall name him Isaac (יִצְחָק)" (Gen. 17:19). Because they laughed (לָחָצוּ) at this matter: concerning Abraham it is written, "Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed" (Gen. 17:17; and concerning Sarah it is written, "And Sarah laughed to herself" (Gen. 18:12). The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, "You have laughed at this matter; by your lives, this will be his name: Isaac." And thus, Sarah says, "God has brought me laughter" (Gen. 21:6).⁹

The account of the birth of Isaac did not generate great excitement among the Rabbis. Rather, this birth and the remembrance of one who was barren, who was destroyed, brought hope to their own lives.

Whether in Israel, laid desolate by the Romans, in Babylonian exile, or in any of the later lands of the dispersion, the belief that God would some day 'remember' them was reaffirmed. The Rabbis combed the biblical literature, and not surprisingly found numerous allusions to this theme. I quote only those sources which are maintained throughout the various strata of rabbinic literature.

The prophetic literature, as the Rabbis read it, was replete with such allusions. The most common analogy was to the barren tree which once again bore fruit or flowers.

"And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said" (Gen. 21:1). It is thus that Scripture writes, "And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish; I the Lord have spoken and done it" (Ezek. 17:24). R. Judan said: Not like those who speak but do not perform. R. Berekiah said on the verse, 'I the Lord have spoken and done it': Where did He speak it?—"At the set time I will return unto thee. . . and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:14). 'And I have done it'—"And the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken." 'And all the trees of the field shall know' refers to the people, as you read, "For the tree of the field is man" (Deut. 20:19). 'That I the Lord have brought down the high tree' alludes to Abimelech; 'Have exalted the low tree'—to Abraham; 'Have dried up the green tree'—to Abimelech's wives, as it is written, "For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech" (Gen. 20:18). 'And have made the dry tree to flourish' alludes to Sarah.¹⁰

and from Habakuk:

"For though the fig-tree doth not blossom," etc. (Hab. 3:17). This alludes to Abraham, as in the verse, "I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season" (Hos. 9:10). "Neither is there fruit in the vines" (Hab. loc. cit.), alludes to Sarah, as you read, "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine" (Ps. 128:3). "The labour of the olive faileth" (Hab. loc. cit.): the faces of those angels who gave the good tidings to Sarah shone like an olive: were they lying? No, but "The fields (shedemoth)

yielded no food," which means, the withered breasts (shadayim methin) yielded no food. "The flock is cut off from the fold" (Hab. loc. cit.) has the same connotation as in the verse, "And ye My flock, the flock of My pasture, are men" (Ezek. 34:31). "There is no herd in the stalls" (Hab. loc. cit.), has the meaning it has in the verse, "And Ephraim is a heifer well broken, that loveth 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, For I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exalt in the God of my salvation' (Hab. 3:18). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: Since thou didst not lose thy faith, I too will not give thee cause to lose faith. But rather, "And the Lord remembered Sarah," etc. (Gen. 21:1).¹¹

Similarly:

"Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine" (Ps. 128:3) When is your wife like a fruitful vine? "When she is modest I will bless your house, then shall your sons be like olive saplings" (ibid.). Thus you find concerning Sarah, "And He said, 'She is in the tent' (Gen. 18:9), and He said, 'I will certainly return to thee (and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son)'"¹²

Psalm 113 was applied directly to Sarah and the other barren women.

"The Lord our God. . . causeth a woman to dwell barren in her house in order to make her the joyful mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I had Sarah dwell as a barren woman in her house, as is said "Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30), in order to make her rejoice the more in children.¹³

The barren mother had wept, and now she was given cause to rejoice.

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Ps. 126:5). Of such was Abraham, who wept and pleaded before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed" (Gen. 15:3). At once he was given good tidings: "In Isaac shall seed be called to thee" (Gen. 21:12). Hence it is said shall "reap in joy."¹⁴

Sarah had been compared earlier with ruins; the analogy was completed with exposition of a verse from Ezekiel:

"Then all the nations shall know. . . that I the Lord have restored the ruins, and planted that which was

desolate; I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it"(Ezek. 36:36). To the governors and the governors' wives who for so long jeered at Sarah, calling her "barren woman," to them Scripture says, "I the Lord have restored the ruins," Abraham and Sarah who were ruined by the years: "Now Abraham and Sarah were old"(Gen. 18:11). "I planted that which was desolate"--that is, I renewed her youth in Sarah after she asked, "When I am waxed old, can the flush of my youth return?" (Gen. 18:12). "I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it:" "And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken."¹⁵

And what ruins were more critical in Jewish history than those of Jerusalem:

"And the Lord remembered Sarah"(Gen. 21:1). As it is written, "Who confirms the word of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers" (Isa. 44:26). "Who confirms the word of His servant": This (servant) is Abraham, since it mentions that it was on account of Abraham, my servant, who prayed for Abimelech, as it is written, "Abraham then prayed to God"(Gen. 20:17). "And performs the counsel of His messengers": For the angels announced to him, "I will return to you when life is due" (Gen. 18:10). "Who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built!'" (Isa. 44:26). How does the former (God's remembering of Sarah) relate to the latter (Jerusalem)? As the nations despaired that she would not be rebuilt, she will yet be rebuilt, as it is written, "Who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,'" and as it is written, "For the Lord will build up Zion" (Ps. 102:16). If you are skeptical, then "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isa. 51:2), for just as I did for Abraham and Sarah, so will I do for Jerusalem.¹⁶

What great joy awaited the birth of Isaac, indeed the entire world rejoiced.

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me."¹⁷

R. Berekiah, R. Judah b. R. Simon, and R. Hanan in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: If Rueben has cause to rejoice, what does it matter to Simeon? Similarly, if Sarah was remembered, what did it matter to others? But when the matriarch Sarah was

remembered [gave birth], many other barren women were remembered with her; many deaf gained their hearing; many blind had their eyes opened, many insane became sane.¹⁸

Despite these beautiful rabbinic extrapolations, the fact remained that Sarah was ninety at the birth, and Abraham was one hundred years old. Sarah, herself, reminded Abraham of this fact when she said:

Who would have said (ללד לך) to Abraham
That Sarah would suckle children!
Yet I have borne a son in his old age.¹⁹

R. Phinehas said in R. Hekkiah's name: Not amar or dibber but millel is written: thus she indirectly drew his attention to the fact that he had begotten child at the age of a hundred years.²⁰
[This being the numerical value of 'millel'; מ (40) and ל (30) twice = 100.]

The neighbouring people were very skeptical of this spurious birth. There were those who accused Sarah of stealing seed from someone other than her one hundred year old husband, and those who doubted that Sarah, barren for so many years, could give birth at the age of ninety. The Rabbis anticipated these criticisms, and they had a ready retort available, solidly grounded in Scriptures:

"And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son."
(Gen. 21:2). This teaches that she did not
steal seed from elsewhere.²¹

The most logical accusation was that Abimelech was the real father. The story of the Divine intervention to protect Sarah's purity was but a fabrication. And had not the incident taken place less than one year ago? The Rabbis rebuff of this accusation was not one hundred percent conclusive.

R. Judan said: He was born at nine months [of pregnancy], so that it might not be said that he was

a scion of Abimelech's house. R. Hunia said: He was born at seven months, which were nine incomplete months.²²

They, therefore, enlisted additional convincing evidence.

Come and see the power of peace: At the time that Sarah passed from the hands of Pharaoh to the hands of Abimelech and conceived with Isaac, the nations of the world were saying, "Can a child be born to someone a hundred years old? Rather, she must have conceived from Abimelech or from Pharaoh." Abraham was uncertain on account of these accusations. What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do? He said to the angel who determines the features of the child, "Make all his physical characteristics resemble his father in order that all will witness that he is the son of Abraham." From whence (do we derive this)? From what is written: These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son (Gen. 25:19). By implication from what is written "Isaac, Abraham's son," do I not know that Abraham begot Isaac? And what is the meaning of "Abraham begot Isaac" (Gen. 25:19)? That everyone who saw Abraham would say, "Certainly, Abraham begot Isaac," because facial features were alike. Therefore, it is written, "Abraham begot Isaac."²³

Aggadat Bereshit adds a beautiful analogy to this midrash.

This can be compared to a dove that was chased by hawks and ravens. She escaped from them, and returned to sit on her nest. People were saying, "These eggs are from the hawk," but others said, "They are from the raven." One person said to them, "As long as they are still eggs, one cannot tell whether they are from the hawk or from the raven. But wait until they hatch and become chicks, and then you will know from whom they came." Similarly, Sarah was taken numerous times, (e.g.) by Pharaoh, by Abimelech. Therefore, people began to say that she conceived by Pharaoh, and others said that she conceived by Abimelech. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, "For the mouths of liars will be stopped" (Ps. 63:12). "Wait until she gives birth, and then you will see whom the child resembles." He immediately told the angel who determines children's features to make the child resemble not its mother, but its father, so that everyone would know that he was from his father. When the child was born, it resembled his father, therefore it is written "These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son," (and Scripture adds) "Abraham begot Isaac."²⁴

This may have helped to convince the people of the identity of the father, but Sarah, the mother, had not yet been vindicated. The Rabbis expounded on the repetitive wording in Genesis 17:16.

"And I will bless her, and moreover I will give thee a son from her; yea, I will bless her," etc. (Gen. 17:16). R. Judah said: This means, "And I will bless her," that she should give thee a son; "Yea, I will bless her" in respect of milk.²⁵

This 'blessing of milk' became the rabbinic midrash. 'רָר excellence' in establishing Sarah as the mother of Isaac. The Rabbis base their exposition on the fact that the plural form of son is used in הַנִּיקָה בְּנִים שָׂרָה.²⁶ The setting of this midrash differs slightly in the various sources.

R. Berechiah, citing R. Levi, said: You find that when our mother Sarah gave birth, 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--she gave birth to him, they said. [To prove that Sarah had indeed given birth to Isaac], what did the Holy one do? He 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.²⁷

Alternatively, Bava Mezi'a states:

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 wet-nurse. . .²⁸

while Pesikta Rabbati claims that the nations of the earth said:

He is really the son of her maidservant, and she makes believe that she is suckling him.²⁹

Whatever the preamble and the accusation, the response was the same:

In instant reply to them Abraham said to Sarah:
"Sarah, don't just stand there! This is not a time
for modesty. For the hallowing of the Name arise
and uncover yourself." Sarah arose and uncovered
herself,³⁰

and a miracle happened unto our mother Sarah, her
breasts opened like two fountains, and she suckled
them all.³¹

At 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 give children suck." Now some of them
in all sincerity brought their children for Sarah
to give them suck, 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 give
children suck." How is the expression "give children
suck" to be interpreted? That these children of the
nations of the earth became children of Israel. And
according to our Masters, 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)³²

The joy of this occasion was not destined to continue. The tension
between Sarah and Hagar had grown still more acute after the birth
of Isaac. "וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הָגָר הַמִּצְרִיָּת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מַצְדָּק" ³³

The editors of the New Torah Translation translate מצדק as playing.

The midrashic authors did not have anything quite so innocent in mind.³⁴

"Making sport." (Gen. 21:9) Now "Making sport" refers
to nought else but immorality, as in the verse, "The
Hebrew servant, whom thou hast brought unto us, came
in unto me to make sport of me" (Gen. 39:17). Thus
this teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens,
seduce married women and dishonour them. R. Ishmael
taught: This term Sport refers to idolatry, as in the
verse, "And rose up to make sport (Ex. 32:6). This

teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them. R. Eleazar said: The term sport refers to bloodshed, as in the verse, "Let the young men, I pray thee, arise and sport before us" (II 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, whilst pretending to be playing. Thus it is written, "As a madman who casteth fire-brands, arrows, and death; so is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith: Am not I in sport" (Prov. 22:18f.)? But I say: This term sport [mockery] refers to inheritance. For when our father Isaac was born all rejoiced, whereupon Ishmael said to them, 'You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion.' You may infer this from Sarah's protest to Abraham: "For the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). "With my son," even if he were not Isaac; or "With Isaac," even if he were not my son; how much the more, "With my son, with Isaac!"³⁵

It is not clear whether this incident took place on the day of the weaning celebration. If this was the case, then the very sight of Ishmael may have been enough to arouse Sarah's anxiety and anger.

Therefore:

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."³⁶

Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer is more specific:

Thus and thus has Ishmael done to Isaac, but (now) arise and write (a will in favour) of Isaac, (giving him) all that the Holy One has sworn to give to thee and to thy seed. The son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac, as it is said, "And she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son" (Gen. 21:10).³⁷

Ishmael had become a source of dissension and reproach between Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Abraham was very grieved about this situation. The time had come to make a decision about his son, Ishmael, and the boy's mother, Hagar. The Rabbis explain that some of Abraham's uneasiness may have stemmed from a sense of guilt for

not having raised Ishmael properly.

Anyone who refrains from chastising his son causes him to fall into evil ways and thus comes to hate him. This is what we find in the case of Ishmael who behaved wickedly before Abraham his father, but he did not chastise him, with the result that he fell into evil ways, so that he despised him and cast him forth empty-handed from his house.³⁸

Sarah was concerned that Isaac would begin to learn Ishmael's evil ways, unless drastic action was taken.³⁹ Sarah clearly had a great deal of influence on Abraham's thoughts. Zeligs concludes that this resulted in Abraham's vindicating his conscience about the expulsion, by projecting upon God the decision to act.⁴⁰

In that night the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed unto him. He said to him: Abraham! Dost thou not know that Sarah was appointed to thee for a wife from her mother's womb? She is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant; Sarah is not called thy handmaid, but thy wife; neither is Hagar called thy wife, but thy handmaid; and all that Sarah has spoken she has uttered truthfully.⁴¹

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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.⁴²

Sending Ishmael away was a form of renunciation. This may even have been a form of atonement in order to retain the love of Sarah. Not that Abraham was a weakling, but Ishmael's presence would always remain an aggravation to Sarah. Though Sarah had requested that Abraham cohabit with Hagar, Ishmael nevertheless remained a symbol of Abraham's infidelity. Abraham may have acted to preserve domestic peace.

Abraham's attachment to Sarah showed strongly monogamous traits. Although childless for many years, he did not follow the usual custom of those days and take a concubine until Sarah herself proposed this solution. That this gesture on Sarah's

part represented a tremendous effort is apparent by her subsequent attitudes toward both Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah, too, had the need for exclusive possession of the love object, a factor which must have strengthened Abraham's tendencies in this direction and helped to create a kind of symbiotic relationship between the two.⁴³

It was the strength of this relationship which enabled Abraham to act in a decisive manner.

The Rabbis place the onus of responsibility for this action on Sarah and on God. Abraham is portrayed almost as a puppet. It is Abraham, nevertheless, who sends his son and his maidservant into the wilderness. The later midrashic sources try to make amends for Abraham's behaviour. They tell how Abraham yearned for his son.

"From afar, father and son never ceased loving one another."⁴⁴

After three years Abraham went to see Ishmael his son, having sworn to Sarah that he would not descend from the camel in the place where Ishmael dwelt. He arrived there at midday and found there the wife of Ishmael. He said to her: Where is Ishmael? She said to him: He has gone with his mother to fetch the fruit of the palms from the wilderness. He said to her: Give me a little bread and a little water, for my soul is faint after the journey in the desert. She said to him: I have neither bread nor water. He said to her: When Ishmael comes [home] tell him this story, and say to him: A certain old man came from the land of Canaan to see thee, and he said, Exchange the threshold of thy house, for it is not good for thee. When Ishmael came [home] his wife told him the story. A son of a wise man is like half a wise man. Ishmael understood. His mother sent and took for him a wife from her father's house, and her name was Fatimah.

Again after three years Abraham went to see his son Ishmael, having sworn to Sarah as on the first occasion that he would not descend from the camel in the place where Ishmael dwelt. He came there at midday, and found there Ishmael's wife. He said to her: Where is Ishmael? She replied to him: He has gone with his mother to feed the camels in the desert. He said to her: Give me a little bread and water, for my soul is faint after

the journey of the desert. She fetched it and gave it to him. Abraham arose and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, for his son, and [thereupon] Ishmael's house was filled with all good things of the various blessings. When Ishmael came [home] his wife told him what had happened, and Ishmael knew that his father's love was still extended to him, as it is said, "Like as a father pitieth his sons" (Ps. 103:13).⁴⁵

Berditchevsky, in מאמר האגדה, acknowledges Sefer Hayashar as the source for his repetition of this midrash. He does, however, offer a text for Sarah's instructions to Abraham prior to the journey, a text which is not found in the current editions of Sefer Hayashar.

Sarah said to him, "Go as you have spoken, but swear to me that you will not dismount from the camel, and as soon as you arrive, return immediately." Abraham swore to her that he would heed her words.⁴⁶

Abraham not only listened to his wife in this midrash, he was instructed to do so by God, Himself:

Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says.⁴⁷

"But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell securely, and shall be quiet without fear of evil" (Prov. 1:33). In connection with hearkening, four kinds of hearken-ers are spoken of in Scripture: one who hearkened and suffered loss therefor; one who hearkened and gained reward therefor; one who did not hearken and suffered loss therefor; and one who did not hearken and won reward therefor.

[Abraham] was the one who hearkened and gained reward therefor.

God said: . . . "All that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Gen. 21:12). And what reward did he win? [The continuation of his line through an exemplary son]: "In Isaac shall seed be called to thee" (ibid.). . .⁴⁸

Notes. Chapter IV.

1. This midrash is from Mekhilta D'Rabbi Ishmael Pisha 12. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 36; Aggadat Bereshit 28:3; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 91, Bo 207; Ibid. II Judg. 4 43.
2. Pesikta Rabbati 42:7. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 35.
3. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 43:6. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Midrash Samuel 18:1; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 91; Ibid. II I Sam. 16 118.
4. Pesikta Rabbati 43:1. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 12.
5. Gen. 21:1, 2.
6. This midrash is from Sotah 12a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 37; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 92.
7. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 6:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Rosh Hashanah 11a; Tanhuma Va-Yera 17; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 14.
8. Rosh Hashanah 11a; Tanhuma Va-Yera 17; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 14. For a fuller treatment of the duration of the pregnancy, see below, this chapter.
9. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 17:9. Elie Wiesel has been referred to as a modern author of midrash. In his book, Messengers of God, he offers the following "midrash":

Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh. (p. 97)
10. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer 52; Tanhuma Va-Yera 15; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 33; Yalkut Shimoni II Ezek. 17 357; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:1.

Notes. Chapter IV. (Continued)

11. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:3. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta Rabbati 42:5; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 31.
12. This midrash is from Yalkut Shimoni II Ps. 128 881. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 31; Aggadat Bereshit 28:3; Midrash Samuel 16:1.
13. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 43:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 20:1; Midrash Samuel 6:4; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 91; Ibid. II Ps. 113 873.
14. Pesikta Rabbati 42:7.
15. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 42:5. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Va-Yera 17; Aggadat Bereshit 28:3; Yalkut Shimoni II Ezek. 17 357.
16. Tanhuma Va-Yera 16.
17. Gen. 21:6.
18. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:8. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 22:1, supplement 6:2; Pesikta Rabbati 42:4; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 37; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:6.
19. Gen. 21:7.
20. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:9. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Buber Va-Yera 37; Yalkut Shimoni I 93.
21. Gen. Rabbah 53:6.
22. Ibid. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Aggadat Bereshit 37:5; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 92.
23. This midrash is from Tanhuma Toledot 1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Bava Mezi'a' 87a; Sanhedrin 107b; Gen. Rabbah 53:6; Tanhuma Toledot 6; Tanhuma Buber Va-Yishlah 25; Aggadat Bereshit 37:5; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 92, 93; Ibid. II Kings 13 233; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:2, 24:1, 25:19.
24. Aggadat Bereshit 37:5.
25. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 47:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 53:5; Pesikta Rabbati 42:4; Lekha Tov Lekh Lekha 17:16; Yalkut Shimoni I Lekh Lekha 82, Va-Yera 91.

Notes. Chapter IV. (Continued)

26. Gen. 21:7. Translation: "that Sarah would suckle children."
27. This midrash is from Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 22:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 52; Midrash Hallel in Beit Hamidrash volume 5, pp. 92, 93; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:7.
28. This midrash is from Bava Meẓi'a' 87a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanḥuma Toledot 3; Tanḥuma Buber Va-Yera 37; Midrash Hallel in Beit Hamidrash volume 5, pp. 92, 93; Lekah Tov Va-Yera 21:7; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:7.
29. Pesikta Rabbati 43:4.
30. Ibid. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 53:9; Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 22:1; Midrash Hallel in Beit Hamidrash volume 5, pp. 92, 93; Lekah Tov Va-Yera 21:7; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Ibid. II Job 12 906; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:7.
31. This midrash is from Bava Meẓi'a' 87a. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta Rabbati 43:4; Tanḥuma Toledot 3; Midrash Hallel in Beit Hamidrash volume 5, pp. 92, 93; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Ibid. II Job 12 906; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 21:7. Lekah Tov Va-Yera 21:7, adds "she suckled one hundred children everyday."
32. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 43:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 53:9; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 93; Ibid. II Job 12 906, Prov. 11 947.
33. Gen. 21:9. Translation: "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing."
34. Berditchevsky in מאורץ האגדה p. 47, adds: ויהיר כי גדלו הנערים יחד ויחלו להציק איש לאחיו.
35. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:11. The individual explanations appear with some variation in the following sources: Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 30; Exod. Rabbah 1:1; Tanḥuma Shemot 1; Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 66; Yalkut Shimoni Va-Yera 94.
36. Gen. 21:10.
37. Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 30. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 94.
38. Exod. Rabbah 1:1.
39. Ibid.

Notes. Chapter IV. (Continued)

40. Zeligs, The Role of the Mother, p. 302.
41. Pirḳe De Rabbi Eliezer 30.
42. Gen. 21:12, 13.
43. Zeligs, The Role of the Mother, p. 304.
44. Wiesel, Messengers of God, p. 99.
45. This midrash is from Pirḳe De Rabbi Eliezer 30. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera pp. 67-68.
46. Berditchevsky in מאמר האגדה, p. 47.
47. Gen. 21:12.
48. This midrash is from Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 14:2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Deut. Rabbah 4:5; Yalkut Shimoni I Bereshit 37; Ibid. II Jer. 2 264, Lam. 1 1000.

Chapter V.

The biblical narrative concerning Abraham began with the Divine command of לך לך .¹ Abraham's journey has taken him through numerous difficult episodes and trying life experiences. Sarah has been with him throughout this period. These stages of development seem almost necessary to achieve the emotional and spiritual maturity that were necessary for Abraham's task as a leader. Now, God once again appears to Abraham and directs him to לך לך :

God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go (לך לך) to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you."²

In this entire chapter of the binding of Isaac, there is no mention of Sarah. It is inconceivable to think that Abraham could have taken Isaac for this Divine test without some interaction with Sarah. The Rabbis dealt with Sarah's role in this episode. First, however, we will deal with the psychoanalytic interpretation of this unique event.

At the time of the Akedah Abraham was an old man. He was at the height of his achievements and he may have feared that his powers as husband and leader would soon be on the decline. In chapter four we established the rabbinic opinion that Isaac was identical in appearance to Abraham. This had the purpose of proving that Isaac was indeed the son of the centenarian Abraham. It must also be understood in the light of an Ancient Near Eastern belief.

Similarity of father and son was regarded in primitive society as an alarming sign that the father had died

and was born or reincarnated in his son. This meant that the role of the father had become endangered.³

This may have generated some anxiety in Abraham. An additional danger was that the son, to ensure his leadership, would kill the father. Wellisch cleverly states, "patricide in primitive times was common, although the fathers saw to it that it was less common than infanticide."⁴

Primitive man must have been conscious to some extent of the true motives of his fears of his son. This must have generated tremendous guilt feelings. As infanticide developed as the mode of solution of this problem, the father rationalized its real motives. Projection onto the deity was the most frequent response. This sacrifice of the first-born son then became a tribute paid to the gods. The death of the child became a substitute for the death of the father, who obtained a new lease of life by the sacrifice. Reik adds that the child was killed not so much as a substitute for the father, but because it was believed that the newborn son endangered the father's life by absorbing his spiritual essence.⁵ This "migration of the souls" would result in the father's extinction.

In fact, it comes to this, Are you to live? or is he? It is a painful dilemma. Parental affection urges you to die that he may live. Self-love whispers, "Live and let him die. You are in the flower of your age. You adorn the circle in which you move. You are useful, nay, indispensable, to society. He is a mere babe. He never will be missed."⁶

Moreover, the new father reacts from emotions originating in his infantile Oedipus complex.

The son, who in childhood had wished the death of the father in order to take his place with the mother, has now himself become a man and a father. A fundamental change in the mental life of the man

now sets in. . .The new-made father fears that his son's attitude towards him will be the same as his own once was towards his father.⁷

This fear of retaliation prevailed in the new-made father. Abraham must have surely felt some guilt, yet he harboured these emotions in his heart. He shared these feelings with no one, not even Sarah. The Genesis narrative does not even mention that Abraham told Sarah of his departure with Isaac. The Rabbis, however, recount that Abraham deliberately hid the truth from Sarah.

Abraham said, "What shall I do? If I reveal this to Sarah, (she would be unable to bear it), for as women are frail-minded concerning unimportant matters, how much the more so concerning a matter of such magnitude. Yet if I do not reveal this to her and I steal him away from her, (then) when she cannot find him, she will kill herself." What did he do? He said to Sarah, "Prepare for us food and drink, and let us eat and rejoice." She said to him, "Why today of all days?" and "What is the nature of this festivity?" He said to her, "When old people like ourselves bear a son in their old age, it is appropriate to feast and rejoice." She went and prepared the repast. As they dined, he said to her, "You know that when I was three years old, I recognized my Maker. Yet this youth is grown up but has not been initiated. There is a place, not far from here, where they initiate young men. Let me take him and initiate him there."⁸

Although this behavior can be explained by Abraham's agonizing inner struggle, it points at the same time to an unresolved conflict in him.

Sarah said, "You have spoken well. Go my lord, and do unto him as you have said. However, do not separate my son from me, and do not tarry there too long, for my soul is bound to his." Abraham said to Sarah, "My daughter, trust in God, he will do right with us." Sarah took Isaac her son, and he spent that night with her, and she kissed and embraced him, and instructed him until morning. She said to him, "My son, how will I be able to part from you." And she again kissed and embraced him, and

wept with him, and instructed Abraham concerning him. Sarah said to Abraham, "Please, my lord, take care of your son and watch over him for I have no other son or daughter except for him. Do not abandon him; if he is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him drink. Do not allow him to walk on foot, nor to sit in the sun. Do not let him journey alone, or deprive him of what he wishes, but rather do whatever he asks." And Sarah continued to weep bitterly that night concerning Isaac, and instructed him until morning. In the morning, Sarah took a very fine garment from among the garments that Abimelech had given her which were in the house. She dressed her son Isaac, and wrapped a turban about his head, and placed a precious stone in the turban. She gave them food for the journey, and Isaac and Abraham his father departed. Some of their servants accompanied them to send them on their way. Sarah also escorted them and they said to her, "Return to your tent." When Sarah heard the words of Isaac her son, she wept bitterly, and Abraham her husband wept with her. Isaac her son also bitterly wept, as well as all those who had come out to send them on their way. Sarah caught hold of Isaac her son, and held him in her arms, embraced him, and kissed him, and cried even more with him. Sarah said, "Who knows if I shall ever see you again after this day?" And they all wept together--Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and all those who had escorted them. And afterward, Sarah turned away from Isaac, weeping bitterly, and all her servants and handmaidens returned with her to her tent.⁹

We cannot read this exposition without feeling that Sarah was suspicious of Abraham's intentions. Sarah deeply loved her son. The Rabbis perceived an antagonism between Sarah and Abraham because of her love for Isaac.

On the one hand, God is demanding the sacrifice of Isaac; on the other hand, Sarah would like to hold on tenaciously to her son. Abraham is caught in the middle. Zeligs offers an interesting view of Abraham in each of these relationships.

Abraham's attachment to Sarah showed strongly monogamous traits. Although childless for many years, he did not follow the usual custom of those days and take a concubine until Sarah herself proposed

this solution. Abraham's tendency to monogamy and his monotheistic views in religion bear further exploration. The man who wants to have exclusive possession of the mother also wants to be the exclusive object of love. This need to be the only one, when projected onto a Deity, leads to monotheism. "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me."¹⁰

That a similarity exists is definite; that the same causation led to both views is speculation. It is true, however, that the patriarchal figure and the spiritual leader, Abraham, was a pathfinder in both of these realms.

The midrashic authors seem to indicate that rebellious emotions against his father may not have been unknown to Isaac.

While Isaac was walking with his father, what did Satan do? He came and placed himself on Isaac's right and said to him: "O thou hapless one, son of a hapless mother! How many fasts did thy mother fast, and how many prayers did she pray, until thou camest to her! And yet this old man, gone mad in his old age, is about to cut thy throat!"

Thereupon Isaac turned his face to his father, saying to him: Father, see this man and hear what he is saying to me! Abraham replied: He came to dishearten you. The Holy One, blessed be He, will Himself keep His lamb in sight.¹¹

Tanhuma mentions that Satan appeared to Isaac in the disguise of a youth.¹² Wellisch maintains that this often happens in dream images, and the implication is that Satan was an extension of Isaac's own personality.¹³

On the one hand, Isaac behaved as if he were obediently following his father's command; but on the other hand, he considered if it were not better to kill his father before he was killed by him. In a sense, Isaac and Abraham fought the same battle. Isaac's hostile feelings to his father and tender feelings for his mother were expressed in the following midrash:

And Isaac again spoke to his father, "My father, when you have slaughtered me and burned me as a sacrifice, take the ashes that remain and bring them to my mother Sarah, and say to her, "This is the pleasant offering of Isaac." But do not tell her this near a well or a high place lest she throw herself down on account of me and die." When Abraham heard Isaac's words, he cried out and the tears of Abraham fell on to Isaac his son. Isaac, as well, cried bitterly, and said to his father, "Quickly, father, do to me the will of God as He commanded you."¹⁴

At the height of his agony Isaac completely conquered his Oedipus hatred. By his surrender to his father's command, he was the first to resolve his complex.

It is important to mention that the biblical story does not describe these psychological conflicts. The story, however, including the rabbinic exposition, does contain features and details which psychoanalytic investigation has shown to be symbolic of these unconscious conflicts.

The Rabbis elaborated on Satan's escapades during this episode.

Samael went to the Patriarch Abraham and upbraided him saying: What means this, old man! Hast thou lost thy wits? thou goest to slay a son granted to thee at the age of a hundred! Even this I do, replied he. And if He sets thee an even greater test, canst thou stand it? said he, as it is written, "If a thing be put to thee as a trial, wilt thou be wearied" (Job 4:2)? Even more than this, he replied. Tomorrow He will say to thee, "Thou art a murderer, and art guilty," "Still am I content," he rejoined.¹⁵

Satan's approach to Isaac, as mentioned above, met with failure as well.

In the final moment of the Akedah, Abraham realized that the God he worshipped was a God of love, who did not demand this cruel deed from him. But this awareness had not come easily.

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.¹⁶

Abraham's Lais Complex towards Isaac was of a particularly tenacious nature. When in the last moment God commanded him not to lay his "hand upon the lad" he could not fully accept this immediately but wanted to shed at least a little of Isaac's blood (Gen. Rabbah 56:7). Abraham, in this impulse, wanted to modify the infanticidal act by at least inflicting a vicarious injury to the son. . . But God said further: "Neither do thou anything unto him." This changed Abraham's heart completely and extinguished the last trace of his Lais Complex.¹⁷

Sarah does not appear personally in this episode, but her influence on its course is great.

Sarah's central experience was her experience of Abraham's call of God. This destined her to overcome her Jocasta Complex completely. She unconsciously felt what the purpose of Abraham's journey was and was tempted to prevent Isaac from following his father. By letting Isaac go she conquered her Jocasta Complex.

But her undivided love for her husband and son accompanied both in their final, bitter struggle, protected and saved them. The love of Sarah was with Abraham and Isaac during the three days of the journey.¹⁸

Sarah was a moving force in the Akedah. Her love was central to it, and greater than that of the father or son. Wellisch offers a uniquely interesting observation regarding Sarah's role:

In the Iconography of the Akedah the saving angel is often painted as a female figure of beauty. This is of psychological interest as the Bible only knows male angels. . . According to psychological interpretation the female figure of the angel would

have to be taken as a symbolic image of Sarah. And indeed, the thought is justified that Sarah's influence arrested the blade, brought the ram, and stood by Abraham's and Isaac's side in the moment of their greatest need.¹⁹

The initiative of Abraham, however, was the outstanding phenomenon in overcoming the family conflict. "By his struggle, agony and practical example Abraham gave the lead for the resolution not only of his Latus Complex but also of the Oedipus Complex of Isaac and the Jocasta Complex of Sarah."²⁰

The biblical narrative showed that Isaac was saved at the last possible moment. The psychoanalytic interpreters of the Bible saw in this episode a complete resolution of all the complexes. The Rabbis, though rejoicing in the saving of Isaac, bring the news of a drastic turn of events.

When Abraham returned from Mount Moriah in peace, the anger of Samael was kindled, for he saw that the desire of his heart to frustrate the offering of our father Abraham had not been realized. What did he do? He went and said to Sarah: Hast thou not heard what has happened in the world? She said to him: No. He said to her: Thy husband, Abraham, has taken thy son Isaac and slain him and offered him up as a burnt offering upon the altar. She began to weep and to cry aloud three times, corresponding to the three sustained notes (of the Shophar), and (she gave forth) three howlings corresponding to the three disconnected short notes (of the Shophar), and her soul fled, and she died.²¹

A number of the sources maintain that it was Isaac himself who appeared to his mother and related his experience.

When Isaac returned to his mother, she asked him, 'Where have you been, my son?' He answered her, 'Father took me, led me up mountains and down valleys, took me up a certain mountain, built an altar, arranged the wood, bound me upon it, and took hold of a knife to slay me. If an angel had not come from heaven and said to him, "Abraham, Abraham, lay not thy hand upon the lad," (Gen. 22:12) I should have been slain.' On his mother, Sarah, hearing this,

she cried out, and before she had time to finish her cry her soul departed.²²

Sefer Hayashar recounts that Sarah died not of grief, but rather of happiness. The authors give explicit details of the last days of her life after Satan informed her of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac.

And Sarah lifted up her voice and wept, and cried bitterly on account of her son. She threw herself upon the ground, and cast dust upon her head, and cried, "O my son, Isaac, my son; O that I had died instead of you today!" And she continued to weep and said, "It grieves me for you since I have reared you, and brought you up, and my rejoicing has turned to mourning. I longed for you in prayer and outcry until I bore you at ninety years. And now, you have served this day for the knife and the fire to be made an offering. But I console myself with you, my son, in its being the word of God, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature. You are just, the Lord our God, for all Your works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with Your word which You commanded, and while my eyes weep bitterly, my heart rejoices." And Sarah laid her head upon the bosom of one of her handmaids, and she became as still as a stone. She afterward rose up and went about making inquiries until she came to Hebron. And she inquired of all the travellers whom she met on the road, and none could tell her what had happened to her son. And she arrived in Kiryat Arbah, which is Hebron, with her handmaids and servants. She asked about her son, and remained there while she sent some of her servants to seek where Abraham and Isaac had gone.

They went to seek them in the house of Shem and Eber, but could not find them there, or anywhere in the land. And behold, Satan came to Sarah in the guise of a man, and he stood before her and said to her, "I spoke falsely to you, for Abraham did not kill his son, and he is not dead." And when she heard that, she was so overjoyed on account of her son that her soul departed from joy, and she died and was gathered to her people.²³

The authors may have intended to account for Sarah's absence from Beersheba and Abraham's subsequent journey to Hebron. When Abraham found Sarah, she was dead. Abraham bitterly cried and lamented

the death of his wife. Isaac similarly mourned his mother. Sefer Hayashar offers a text for Isaac's lament.

O my mother, my mother, how could you leave me
and where have you gone? O how have you left me!²⁴

Though the earlier sources allude to Abraham's lament, only the later sources have any text whatsoever. Midrash Hagadol quotes an anonymous midrash: הוּרִי אֶחָת וְהוּרִי סוֹכֶנֶת.²⁵ Numerous other late sources say that Abraham referred the verses of Proverbs thirty-one to Sarah.

"A woman of valor"(Prov. 31:10), this is Sarah, as it is written, "Now I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold"(Gen. 12:11). "She is far more precious than jewels"(Prov. 31:10) for she came from afar, as it is written, "Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country"(Isa. 46:11). "The heart of her husband trusts in her"(Prov. 31:11). This refers to Sarah, as it is written, "Say, then, that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you"(Gen. 12:13). "And he will have no lack of gain"(Prov. 31:11), this refers to Abraham our father, as it is written, "Now Abraham was very rich"(Gen. 13:2). "She does him good and not harm"(Prov. 31:12), this is Sarah, as it is written, "And because of her it went well with Abraham"(Gen. 12:16). "She seeks wool and flax"(Prov. 31:13), between Ishmael and Isaac, as it is written, "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing. She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slavewoman, etc.'"(Gen. 21:9-10). "She is like the ships of the merchant"(Prov. 31:14), for she had moved from place to place and country to country just as this ship which travels from port to port. "She brings her food from afar"(Prov. 31:14), as it is written, "I [Abimelech] herewith give your brother [Abraham] a thousand pieces of silver, etc." (Gen. 20:16). "She rises while it is yet night"(Prov. 31:15). When? [It is written,] "And Abram rose early in the morning"(Gen. 22:3). "And provides food for her household and tasks (פְּתָה) for her maidens"(Prov. 31:15), [as it is written] "Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day"(Gen. 17:26), for there is no "task" other than circumcision, as it is written, "Which He confirmed to Jacob as a statute (פְּתָה), to Israel as an everlasting covenant"(Ps. 105:10). "She

considers a field and buys it" (Prov. 31:16), for while she was still alive, she considered acquiring the cave of Machpelah, bought it, and was indeed buried there. "With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard" (Prov. 31:16), as it is written, "(Abraham) planted a tamarisk" (Gen. 21:33). What is the meaning of "he planted"? As it says "And he planted a vineyard" (Gen. 9:20). "She girds her loins with strength" (Prov. 31:17), for Abraham said to her, "Quick, three measures of choice flour" (Gen. 18:6). "She perceives that her merchandise is profitable" (Prov. 31:18), as it is written, "And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?" (Gen. 21:7). "Her lamp does not go out at night" (Prov. 31:18). When? "At night, he and his servants deployed against them" (Gen. 14:15). "She is not afraid of snow for her household" (Prov. 31:21). When? When the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed her Gehenna, he informed her that none of her children would descend into it, as it is written, "There appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch" (Gen. 15:17). Why? Because they fulfill two requirements: "For all her household are clothed in scarlet" [Midrash--"two"] (Prov. 31:21), these are (the observance of) the Sabbath and circumcision. "She makes herself coverings" (Prov. 31:22). When? When "they said to him, 'where is your wife Sarah?'" (Gen. 18:9). He said to her that she was informed that she would give birth and from (her progeny) will come High Priests who serve in the Tent of Meeting. "Her clothing is fine linen and purple" (Prov. 31:22), as it is written, "Blue, purple, and crimson yarns" (Exod. 26:31). "Her husband is known in the gates" (Prov. 31:23). When Sarah died, Abraham quickly aged and was referred to as "old man," as it is written, "Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us" (Gen. 23:6). Indeed "her husband is known in the gates," for as soon as he took his place with the elders of the land, he, too, became old. Therefore it is written, "And Abraham was now old" (Gen. 24:1).²⁶

The very mention of Sarah's age at her death was interpreted by the Rabbis as a praise of her life.

"And the life of Sarah was a hundred years and seven years and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah" (23:1). It is written, "The Lord knoweth the days of them that are without blemish; and their inheritance shall be for ever" (Ps. 37:18). As they are whole [unblemished], so are their years whole: at the age of twenty she was as at the age of seven in beauty, and at the age of a hundred she was as at the age of twenty in sin.²⁷

Abraham buried Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah. The Rabbis tell us that Abraham knew of this cave well before the purchase from the Hittites. When Abraham had run to his flock to prepare food for the visiting angels, he had entered this cave and saw Adam and Eve lying in each other's arms asleep. Since the day Abraham had de~~vised~~ the cave of the field of Machpelah as his family tomb.²⁸

The Talmud relates an episode of a certain R. Bana'ah who used to mark out caves where there were dead bodies so that people would not walk over the caves and become unclean.

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. So he went in, surveyed the cave, and came out again. When he came to the cave of Adam, a voice came forth from heaven saying, Thou hast beholden the likeness of my likeness, my likeness itself thou mayest not behold. But, he said, I want to mark out the cave. The measurement of the inner one is the same as that of the outer one [came the answer]. (Those who hold that there was one chamber above another [say that the answer was], The measurement of the lower one is the same as that of the upper one.) R. Bana'ah said: I discerned his [Adam's] two heels, and they were like two orbs of the sun. Compared with Sarah, all other people are like a monkey to a human being, and compared with Eve Sarah was like a monkey to a human being, and compared with Adam Eve was like a monkey to a human being, and compared with the Shechinah Adam was like a monkey to a human being.²⁹

Following the burial of Sarah the text states:

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.³⁰

Midrash Tanhuma explains that God blessed Abraham more in his old age after the death of Sarah than in his youth, specifically so that the nations of the world would not say that Abraham was blessed only because of Sarah.³¹

Genesis Rabbah paints a beautiful picture of Abraham, in which God rewards Abraham and dresses him in a cloak of old age.

Thus it is written, "He that followeth after righteousness and love findeth life, prosperity and honour" (Prov. 21:21). 'He that followeth after righteousness' alludes to Abraham, as it says, "That they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19); 'And love'—for he acted lovingly towards Sarah. 'Findeth life,' as it says, "And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, a hundred three-score and fifteen years" (*ib.* 15:7). 'Prosperity and honour:' R. Samuel b. Isaac said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: It is My function to dispense love; since thou hast embraced My function, come and don My raiment: hence, "and Abraham was old, well advanced in age" (Gen. 24:1).³²

Aggadat Bereshit offers a totally different picture of Abraham.

It begins with an analogy:

A parable is told of a mighty sea-captain who commanded a ship and conquered the winds and the seas. Pirates attacked him, but he withstood the attack and slew them all. After some time, he arrived at the port, and encountered a storm and his vessel was wrecked. He began to entreat people for help, "I beg of you, save me!" They responded, "Yesterday you conquered the seas and slew the pirates, yet now you ask others to save you." He said to them, "While my ship stood, I was mighty, and had no need for assistance. But now that my ship is destroyed, my strength is broken." Similarly, Abraham was mighty. When pirates attacked him, he withstood their attack and slew them all, as it is written, "He and his servants deployed against them and smote them" (Gen. 14:15). In one day, he circumcised himself, Ishmael, and the members of his household, three hundred and eighteen in all, including those bought from outside. Behold his might: "That very day they were circumcised" (Gen. 17:27). They said to him, "Yesterday you ruled the world, as it is written, 'Blessed be Abram of

God, Most High' (Gen. 14:19), yet now it is written, 'I am a resident alien among you' (Gen. 23:4)". He replied to them, "What shall I do, now that my wife has died," as it is written, "that I may bury my dead" (Gen. 23:4). Immediately, [it is written], "Abraham was now old" (Gen. 24:1).³³

Abraham's life had not been an easy one. His journey was fraught with difficulties. The Rabbis used Abraham's life as a response to individuals who wished for only happiness in their own lives. God taught this lesson.

Abraham did not rejoice in My world, yet you ask for happiness in My world. An only son was born to Abraham at the age of one hundred, and ultimately the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, "Take your son, etc." (Gen. 22:2). Abraham journeyed for three days, as it is written, "On the third day, he looked up" (Gen. 22:4). What did he see? A cloud upon the mountain. He said to Isaac, "My son, do you see what I see?" Thus Scripture states, "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah" (Gen. 23:2). From where did he come? He came from Mount Moriah.³⁴

Isaac mourned for his mother for three years, until he met Rebekah.

Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.³⁵

The Rabbis used this opportunity to praise Sarah.

You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared; but when Rebekah came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that liberality ceased; but when Rebekah came, that openhandedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased, but when Rebekah came, they returned. And so when he saw her following in his mother's footsteps, separating her hallah in cleanness and handling her dough in cleanness, straightway, "And Isaac brought her into the tent." (Gen. 24:67)³⁶

After Isaac married, Abraham took another wife, Keturah.

R. Judan said: The Torah teaches you a rule of propriety, that if a man has grown-up sons, he must first see that they marry and then take a wife himself. From whom do you learn this? From Abraham: First [we read], "And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent," and after that, "And Abraham took another wife, and her name was Keturah" (Gen. 25:1).³⁷

The Rabbis explain that the Keturah was none other than Hagar.³⁸

Keturah bore him sons, but the text says, immediately after enumerating these progeny:

Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.³⁹

It seems that even in his last years, Abraham still had a tendency to part with his sons.

The beauty of the description of Abraham's death is surpassed only by that of Moses and Elijah.

This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife.⁴⁰

Even in death Abraham was not separated from his wife Sarah.

"The field which Abraham purchased, etc." (Gen. 25:10) R. Tanhuma observed: Surely thirty-eight years elapsed from Sarah's funeral until Abraham's, yet you say, "There was Abraham buried and Sarah his wife (*ib.*)!" This, however, comes to teach you that all who paid honour to Sarah [by attending her funeral] were privileged to pay the like honour to Abraham. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Shem and Eber walked before her bier and saw which cave was vacant for the Patriarch Abraham, and they thereupon buried her in his compartment.⁴¹

Abraham and Sarah's life story has become one of social, historical and religious significance because of the way they tried to cope with their problems. Their life motif was summed up in the very first command that God spoke to Abraham--to go to a new land, to become the father of a new nation, and to be a blessing.⁴² Abraham and Sarah together were able to fulfill this command.

Notes. Chapter V.

1. Gen. 12:1. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"
2. Gen. 22:1, 2.
3. Wellisch, Isaac and Oedipus, p. 75.
4. Ibid., p. 20.
5. Reik, Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies, p. 73.
6. Ibid., p. 74.
7. Ibid., pp. 75, 76.
8. This midrash is from Tanhuma Va-Yera 22. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 71; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 99; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 22:3.
9. Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera pp. 71, 72. Tanhuma Va-Yera 22 has the major elements of this midrash though it does not elaborate as fully.
10. Zeligs, The Role of the Mother, pp. 304, 305.
11. This midrash is from Pesikta Rabbati 40:6. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 56:4; Tanhuma Va-Yera 22.
12. Tanhuma Va-Yera 22.
13. Wellisch, Isaac and Oedipus, p. 76.
14. This midrash is from Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera pp. 74, 75. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Va-Yera 23; Midrash Va-Yosha in Beit Hamidrash volume I, p. 37; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 101.
15. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 56:4. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Va-Yera 22; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 22; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 99.
16. Gen. 22:10-13.
17. Wellisch, Isaac and Oedipus, p. 76.
18. Ibid., p. 95.

Notes. Chapter V. (Continued)

19. Ibid., p. 87.
20. Ibid., pp. 92, 93.
21. This midrash is from Pirkê De Rabbi Eliezer 32. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Gen. Rabbah 58:5; Midrash Va-Yosha in Beit Hamidrash volume I, p. 36; Midrash Aggada Va-Yera 22, Hayyei Sarah 23; Yalkut Shimoni I Hayyei Sarah 102; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 22:13.
22. This midrash is from Eccles. Rabbah 9:7:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta De Rav Kahana 26:3; Tanhuma Buber Aharei Mot 3; Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 101.
23. Sefer Hayashar Va-Yera p. 76.
24. Ibid.
25. Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:2. Translation: "Alas my sister, alas the woman of my house!"
26. This midrash is from Tanhuma Buber Hayyei Sarah 3. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Tanhuma Hayyei Sarah 4; Aggadat Bereshit 34:1; Yalkut Shimoni II Prov. 31 964.
27. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbah 53:1. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Yalkut Shimoni II Ps. 37 730; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:1; Ibn Shuaib Hayyei Sarah 9. Midrash Aggada Hayyei Sarah adds that: וַיְהִי חַיִּי שְׁלֹשָׁה וַיְהִי לִיחָדָי in the verse (Gen. 23:1) indicates through the use of gematria that only her last thirty-seven years (i.e., since the birth of Isaac) could be considered living. Prior to Isaac's birth, there was no reason for life.
28. Yalkut Shimoni I Va-Yera 82.
29. Bava Bathra 58a.
30. Gen. 24:1.
31. Tanhuma Hayyei Sarah 4.
32. Gen. Rabbah 58:9. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Midrash Hagadol Gen. 24:1.
33. Aggadat Bereshit 34:1.
34. This midrash is from Tanhuma Aharei Mot 2. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pesikta De Rav Kahana 26:3; Yalkut Shimoni II Ps. 75 811; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 23:2.

Notes. Chapter V. (Continued)

35. Gen. 24:67.
36. This midrash is from Gen. Rabbath 60:16. Parallel midrashim with minor variations are found in: Pirḳê De Rabbi Eliezer 16; Midrash Aggada Ḥayyei Sarah 24; Yalkut Shimoni I Ḥayyei Sarah 109; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 62:67.
37. Gen. Rabbah 60:16. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Yalkut Shimoni I Ḥayyei Sarah 109.
38. Gen. Rabbah 61:4; Midrash Hagadol Gen. 25:1.
39. Gen. 25:5, 6.
40. Gen. 25:7-10.
41. Gen. Rabbah 62:3. A parallel midrash with minor variations is found in Yalkut Shimoni I Ḥayyei Sarah 110.
42. Zeligs, The Role of the Mother, p. 308.

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