	HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION NEW YORK SCHOOL		
	AUTHOR: SYDNEY B. MINTZ		
	TITLE: An Analysis of the felationships between G-M Sisters and Concubines in the Genesis Navratives and Rubbinic Literature.		
	TYPE OF THESIS:		
	RABBINIC (X SSM () D.H.L. ()		
	D.MIN. () M.A.R.E. () M.A.J.S. ()		
	1. May be used without my written permission.		
	2. () My written permission is required for use during the next years.		
	Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses for a period of no more than ten years.		
	I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.		
	3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. $\frac{\checkmark}{yes}$ $\frac{\checkmark}{no}$		
	3/6/97 Signature of Author		
	LIBRARY RECORD		
. 1 2	Microfilmed: Date		
	Signature of Library Staff Member		
	THE KLAU LIBRA HEBREW UNION COL JEWISH INSTITUTION OF ### BROOKDALE CEN 1 WEST 4TH STRI		

Summary of Rabbinic Thesis

An Analysis of the Relationships between Co-Wives, Sisters and Concubines in the Genesis Narratives and Rabbinic Literature

Sydney B. Mintz

- This thesis is divided into 6 Chapters
- •This thesis attempts to analyze the relationships portrayed by the Rabbis of co-wives, sisters, and concubines in the Genesis narratives. It contains Biblical, Ancient Near Eastern and Rabbinic Sources.
- The goal of the thesis is to shed light on the Rabbinic portrayal of these womens' relationships and explore the changing status of women in the Genesis narratives as the generations progressed.
- •This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first is Biblical. The second describes the interconnectedness of the four generations of matriarchs and patriarchs. The third describes the merit of the matriarchs. The fourth involves the implications of barrenness. The fifth reveals the imperfections of the matriarchs. The sixth points out the exclusion and inclusion by the Rabbis of co-wives, sisters and concubines in the Abrahamic lineage.
- •The materials that are used in this thesis include:
 - Ancient Near Eastern texts
 - Biblical commentaries and interpretations
 - Modern Biblical scholarship
 - Aramaic Translations (Targum Onkelos and Pseudo Jonathan)
 - Philo and Josephus
 - Talmudic Material
 - Rabbinic Material

An Analysis of the Relationships between Co-Wives, Sisters and Concubines in the Genesis Narratives and Rabbinic Literature

Sydney B. Mintz

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Graduate Rabbinic Program New York, New York

> March 10, 1997 Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather and my namesake Sidney Mintz whose spirit, I am certain, guides me on my way.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements			
,	2		
Introduction			
		-	
Chapter 1			
Chapter 2			
Chapter 3			
	-		
Chapter 4			
Chapter 5			
4			
Chapter 6			
3-			
Conclusion			
Bibliography			

Acknowledgments

This thesis was a great journey for me. I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Norman Cohen who guided me through this process with the wisdom of Solomon and the speed of a gazelle. Without his expertise in the area of Midrash and thesis writing, this project would not have come to fruition. Two professors to whom I am especially indebted are from my years spent at the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College. Dr. Tamara Eskenazi encouraged me to explore the text from a feminist perspective and Dr. Louis Barth gave me my first true taste of Midrash, my advanced grasp of the Aramaic language and a sense of humor when delving into Rabbinic texts. To Karen Newbrun-Einstein, for her editorial genius.

I must also thank my family; Deborah Newbrun and Elijah Dov Newbrun-Mintz for allowing me the time and space for months on end to complete this project, and my parents, Ila Lewis and Arthur and Abby Mintz, who have continually supported me in this fiveyear endeavor called Rabbinic School.

There are many colleagues and friends who allowed me the opportunity for hevruta study and great friendship during these years of intense rabbinic training. You are too many to name, but without you, I wouldn't be here today.



The first story I remember from Jewish tradition is about Rabbi Hillel. The story reveals his dedication to the pursuit of the study of Torah at any cost. He could not afford to pay the tuition to attend the Beit Midrash, the house of study, so he would crawl to the roof of the building and listen to the lessons from an open window. While on the roof, it began to snow and he was buried by the deluge. Students saw his shadow over the window and brought him down to revive him. After this episode, because of his dedication, Rabbi Hillel was granted full access in his pursuit of the study of Torah, and he became...Rabbi Hillel.

As a young student, this visual portrayal of a scholar became imprinted on my memory. The vast majority of stories I studied were about men. Over time, I began to crave exposure to the women in our tradition. Even in high school, my Junior Thesis was an analysis of the emerging characterization of women in Chaim Potok's fiction. As my studies progressed, I worked more intensely in this area during Rabbinic school in the study of Bible with Dr. Tamara Eskenazi at the Los Angeles campus. Through a feminist exploration of the Torah, the matriarchs became a subject of interest for me. This thesis deals specifically with the first and third generations of matriarchs and their relationships with each other and with their handmaids.

The thesis is an exploration of the Rabbis portrayal of womens' relationships in the Genesis narratives. It began with research on the Biblical text contained in Genesis chapters 16, 21, and 29-31. I

¹ Babylonian Talmud. Vilna Edition. 16 vols. Jerusalem, HaMesorah, 1981, Yoma 70a.



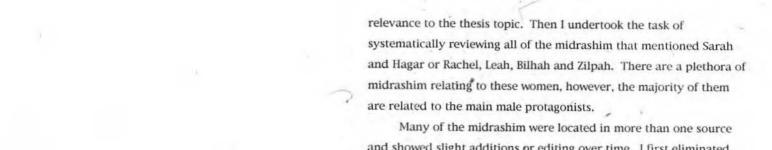
relied heavily on the literary and philological analyses of Alter, Fokkelmann, Cassuto, Von Rad, Speiser, Sarna, Leibowitz and Trible.² After reading modern Biblical commentaries, I wrote the first chapter outlining the Biblical material. I focused on key words and motifs that reoccur in the narratives and in the description of the women in the stories. In this phase of research I also spent time reviewing Pritchard's Ancient Near Eastern Texts³ which gave vital information relating to the standards and legal norms in other Ancient Near Eastern societies. These included the Code of Hammurabi, Nuzi documents, Old Assyrian Marriage contracts, and the Lipit-Ishtar.

The research then progressed to locating the post-Biblical material. I utilized Biblical text indices relying mainly on Aaron Hyman's Torah ha-Ketuvah v'Ha-Mesurah. The process of locating the midrashic material was one which included searching, securing, and sifting through hundreds of midrashim to determine their

² Robert Alter, <u>The Art of Biblical Narrative</u>, New York: Basic Books, 1981; J. P. Fokkelmann, <u>Narrative Art in Genesis</u>, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1975; U. A. Cassuto, <u>A Commentary on the Book of Genesis</u>. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1964; Gerard Von Rad, <u>Genesis</u>, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961; A. E. Speiser, <u>Genesis</u>: <u>Introduction</u>, <u>Translation and Notes</u>. New York: Doubleday, 1964; NahumSarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989; Nehama Leibowitz, <u>Studies in Bereshit</u>, 4th rev ed., Jerusalem, Israel: Alpha Press, 1981, Phyllis Trible, <u>Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives</u>. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

³ James Pritchard, <u>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</u>, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950.

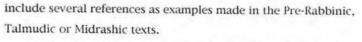
⁴ Aaron Hyman, <u>Torah haKetuvah v'HaMesorah al Torah, Nevi'm</u>, u'Ketuvim, 3 vols. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979.



Many of the midrashim were located in more than one source and showed slight additions or editing over time. I first eliminated any irrelevant material that wasn't central to the topic of my thesis. The next step was to categorize chronologically all of the remaining material. I organized the selections into three main categories: Pre-Rabbinic, Talmudic and Midrashic Material. In Pre-Rabbinic material I included interpretations by Philo, Josephus and the Aramaic Targumim of Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan. The Talmudic category included the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud. The Midrashic material was divided into four categories:

- 1. Classical Amoraic Midrashim of the Early Period (400-640CE)
- 2. The Middle Period (640-1000CE)
- 3. The Late Period (1000-1200CE)
- 4. The Period of the Anthologies (Yalkutim) (1200-1500)

Once this process of gathering and organizing the texts was complete, I organized the texts into thematic categories. What became clear during this process was that many midrashim fit into several categories. Some of the most positive attributes of the matriarchs were later used in the Rabbis' portrayal of the most negative character flaws of these women. To organize the writing of the thesis I created a detailed outline of the major themes, foci and issues related to these texts. Under each thematic category, I would



The thesis is organized into six chapters. The first chapter, "Biblical Reflections of Co-Wives, Sisters and Concubines in Genesis" is an analysis of the Biblical material. It includes Aneient Near Eastern texts as reflections of other cultures' norms related to handmaids and concubines who were elevated to the status of wife in order to bear children for an infertile woman. The texts are utilized to show the precedence of these arrangements during the Biblical era. This chapter gives a detailed account of the family narratives from the Biblical text. Abraham's family and his grandson Jacob's family are highlighted. The focus of the analysis of the Biblical material is on the relationships among wives, sisters, co-wives and handmaids.

Chapter two, "Dor L'Dor: Four Generations of Connectedness," is an overarching view of the thematic connections from Sarah through

Dinah. The four generations are explored through their characteristics, actions, and progeny. The focus in these stories on the matriarchs' is their ability to bear children, specifically sons.

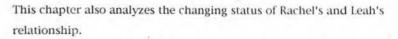
This seems to be key to insuring their status as the mothers of Israel. Another factor that connects the matriarchs was their barren status and the implications that ensued as a result of their inability to bear at different times in their lives. In addition, the seeds of deception are planted in each generation and sown throughout the relationships contained in the Genesis narratives. Finally, the issue of birthright and inheritance is central to these families. This issue is intimately connected to the presence of legitimate or illegitimate sons whose own status is dependent on the status of their mother.

The third chapter, "Merit of the Matriarchs," describes the meritorious character of the matriarchs as portrayed by the Rabbis. The chapter focuses on individual merit of these women through the treatment of their handmaids and husbands, their prayers and their relationship to God. It reveals the Rabbis' ability to portray even a woman's negative traits as shining virtues if they are intent on personifying her as a mother of the people of Israel.

The fourth chapter, "The Implications of Barrenness," introduces the subject with an overview of barrenness in the Bible. The chapter goes onto describe the reasons for and implications of barrenness specifically for the matriarchs and concludes with the ramifications of barrenness for the families of the barren women.

Chapter Five, "The Imperfect Matriarchs," reveals the Rabbis' tendency to disparage the reputation of the matriarchs if it was necessary in order to prove a point. The chapter contains examples of general negative portrayals of women in the Bible and moves more specifically to the women in the Genesis narratives. It also describes the impact of these negative portrayals of the matriarchs on their families.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven, "Exclusivity and Inclusivity of Co-Wives, Sisters, and Concubines," points to the mutability in status of the women in the Genesis narratives. The midrashic texts portray Hagar as wife and slave at different times in the stories. She is therefore considered the legitimate mother of Ishmael, but the illegitimate wife of Abraham. Bilhah and Zilpah are included by the Rabbis as the legitimate wives of Jacob and mother of his children.



The movement from Rabbi Hillel to Bilhah and Zilpah feels like a very long journey. But contained within it is the history of our people through the Rabbis' eyes. I hope that this endeavor will shed light on the importance of the Rabbis' contribution to our understanding of the relationships between these women. It is contained within a Biblical framework, but the Rabbis' gift is the insightful interpretation that we can take with us to illuminate the path of our own journeys today. We can come to an understanding that we are not the first women dealing with issues of fertility and the expansion of the nuclear family. The women in the Genesis' narratives reveal to us that surrogate parenthood, adoption, stepparents and half-siblings are ancient, not modern constructs. From the Bible and the portrayals in the Midrash we can hope to find both questions and answers to the complexity of family dynamics.

Chapter 1 Biblical Reflections of Co-Wives, Sisters and Concubines in Genesis



The issue of relationships between husbands, wives and concubines is addressed in many Ancient Near Eastern texts including the Lipit-Ishtar, Old Assyrian Marriage Contracts, Hammurabi's Code and Nuzi documents. The Lipit-Ishtar composed in the 19th century BCE deals with a case of a harlot who produces children for the husband of a barren wife who becomes his heir.5 The Old Assyrian Marriage contract dating from 19th century BCE stipulates that if a wife doesn't provide offspring for her husband within 2 years, she must purchase a slave woman for that purpose.6 Hammurabi's Code: #146 states that the provision of a concubine slave is assumed in the specific case of a wife who is a priestess and barred from giving birth.7 The Nuzi Text specifies: "If Gilimninu bears children Shnima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shnima a woman from the Lullu country (a slave girl) as concubine. In that case Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring."8

The terms amah, handmaid, shifcha, handmaid or slave, and pilegesh, concubine, are often interchanged in the Bible. From the Ancient Near Eastern legal texts it is clear that a woman would give her own handmaid as a concubine or surrogate wife to her husband. This was the case for Sarai, Leah and Rachel who gave Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah to their husbands. These handmaids were obviously subordinate to the wives in social status, but their identities were not static.

⁵ Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 160,

⁶ Ibid, 543.

⁷ Ibid, 172.

⁸ Ibid, 525.



Although commonplace, we find repeated instances of family disharmony and conflict when these relationships were in effect. The strife between Sarah and Hagar and Rachel and Leah is apparent in both the Biblical texts and in the Midrash. Sarah ordered Hagar away because she did not want Ishmael to inherit with her rightful son Isaac. Hannah was tormented and afflicted by Peninah who is described as Tzaratah or her rival wife (I Samuel 1:6). Leviticus warns against marrying a wife's sister while the wife is still alive because of the potential for rivalry (Leviticus 18:18). Jacob's relationship with his two wives is one example of this (Genesis 31:33). Each wife maintained her own tent and the layers of conflict that arose from that arrangement were plentiful. Solomon not only maintained all his foreign wives, but built them separate altars so that they would be able to sacrifice to their own gods (I Kings 11:7-8)

I wis evident from other literature that this phenomena of wives and concubines rearing children to the same father was a reality. In <u>The Odyssey</u>, Odysseus returns home disguised as an old man and tells his swineherd Eumanios: "I am the son of a rich man, and there were many other sons who were born to him and reared in his palace. These were lawful sons by his wife, but a bought woman, a concubine was my mother, yet I was favored with the legitimate sons....¹⁹

⁹ Homer The Odyssey, 2 vols. A. T. Murray, trans. New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1919, Book 14, lines 200-204.

A. Hagar and Sarah

The narrative involving Abraham, Sarah and Hagar is rife with conflict and attempts at resolution. The story is played out in two chapters, Genesis 16 and 21. The central issues that exist for Sarah and Hagar include social status, barrenness and fertility, ger v'toshav identity (stranger and resident) and polygamous rivalry. Sarah is rich, older, the "rightful" first wife and the resident spouse. She is also barren, which is at the center of the controversy. Hagar is an Egyptian slave, a ger, younger, poor, the second wife or concubine, and fertile.

Although God has promised Abram that his seed will be as numerous as the stars in heaven, Sarai acts of her own accord in offering her handmaid Hagar the Egyptian to Abram so that she can be built up through her, ibaneh mimenah. 10 As Speiser points out, this is clearly a play on the word ben, son. 11 As soon as Hagar conceives, her mistress is lowered in her esteem. Sarai is quick to react and places the burden on Abram who has conceived a child with Hagar at Sarai's request. Sarai treats Hagar cruelly and she flees from Sarai's treatment. After returning, she gives birth and raises her son Ishmael in Abram's family. In Chapter 21 Isaac is born and the conflict between Sarai, Hagar and Abraham intensifies. During Isaac's weaning celebration, Sarai grows intensely angry as she sees Ishmael metsahek, play, with Isaac. This word has a variety

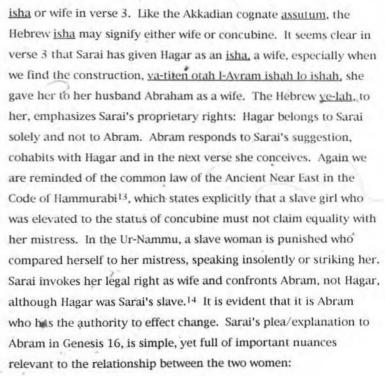
¹⁰ Genesis 16:2.

¹¹ Speiser, Genesis, 117.

of nuances in translation. It seems that Ishmael was taunting or threatening Isaac in some way. This becomes the motivation for Sarah to banish Hagar and Ishmael. She refuses to have Ishmael inherit with her son and again places the burden of the first son and his mother's fate on Abraham. Abraham is distressed at the thought of sending his son away, but God reassures him that it is through Isaac that his name will be made. God also assures Abraham that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. "Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the boy and because of your bondswoman. In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice; for your seed will be though Isaac. And also the son of the bondswoman will I make a nation, for he is also your seed" (Genesis 21:11-12). Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. That is the last time that the two brothers see each other until they bury their father together at the cave of Machpelah in Genesis 25:9.

Although Sarai is called barren, akarah in Genesis 11:31, her infertility is referred to in this chapter as "she had borne him no children," which Sarna assumes "insinuates a note of submerged expectation." Sarai, taking the initiative, offers Hagar to Abram, saying: "Perhaps I will be built up through her" (Genesis 16:2). Sarai's intention's seem to be reflective of the Ancient Near Eastern codes for behavior in cases of barren wives and the acquisition of concubines. The question as to the status of Hagar is clear from the beginning of the chapter, but becomes progressively more complicated after she bears Ishmael. In the first mention of her status in Genesis she is called Shifchah or maidservant in verse 2 and

¹² Sarna, Genesis, 122.



5a. This wrong done to me is your fault.

5b. I myself gave my maidservant to your breast.

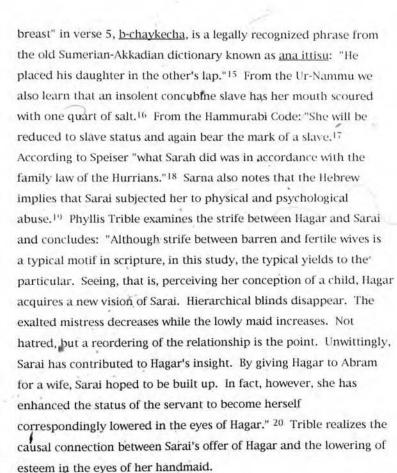
5c. Now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her eyes.

5d. Let Yahweh judge between you and me.

Sarai asks God to intervene, to judge between the two of them, but proceeds on the human level by punishing Hagar for her insolence and causing her flight. The term "your lap" or "your

¹³ Pritchard, ANET, 172.

¹⁴ Ibid.



¹⁵ Speiser, Genesis, 118.

¹⁶ Pritchard, ANET, 172.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Speiser, Genesis, 117.

¹⁹ Sarna, Genesis, 122

⁽²⁰ Trible, <u>Texts of Terror</u>, 12.



Genesis Chapter 21 opens with Isaac's weaning celebrationmishteh gadol. Verse 9 draws attention to the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac. The word metsahek is problematic due to its many meanings. This word is found in Genesis Chapter 21:9 when Isaac is described as metsahek, in Exodus 23:6 in the story of the golden calf as describing idol worship, in Genesis 39:17 in the story of Potiphar's wife in reference to immoral conduct, and in II Samuel 15:14 as signifying murder. It is unclear whether Sarah viewed any relationship between the two boys as threatening, however, this specific interaction kindled her anger. Ishmael is identified in Chapter 21:9 as "the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham". This verse brings our attention to Hagar's status as the foreigner, the Egyptian, Ishmael as Hagar's son, (ben Hagar), and to the fact that Ishmael was Abraham's son. Sarah commands Abraham to, "Drive out this servant woman. The son of this servant woman will not inherit with my son" (Genesis 21:10). In this verse Hagar is called amah although in the previous story she had attained the status of isha as we found in verse 3. Sarai there had given Hagar to Abraham specifically as a wife, isha. Abraham recognized Ishmael as his legitimate son in Genesis 16:15 and 17:23 which is affirmed here in verse 11: "This troubled Abraham because of his son", and again in Genesis 25:9. Kenneth Louis Gros depicts the difference in Abraham's reactions between chapters 16 and 21 when he states: "Earlier Abraham had given Sarah free reign, 'do with her as you please', he had said, but this time it is: 'on account of his son'. Because of his feelings for Ishmael he is displeased when Sarah



wants to drive Hagar and her son away.21 According to the laws of Hammurabi (Paragraph 170f) and the earlier Lipit-Ishtar (paragraph 25), inheritance rights are a legal consequence of the father's acceptance of the child as his legitimate son. Based on this, it is obvious that Ishmael was entitled to inherit a portion of Abraham's estate. Sarah's demand, however, also has legal precedence. In the Lipit-Ishtar, there is a stipulation that the father may grant freedom to the slavewoman and the child in which case they must forfeit their share of paternal property.²² The progression of events is different in this chapter as the action takes place at the request of Sarah, but'it is Abraham who sends Hagar and Ishmael away. God also intervenes again to explain to Abraham that "Your descendants will be called after Isaac" (21:12), but that "I will make the son of your maidservant into a great people because he is a descendent of yours" (21:13). Hagar's status fluctuates between legitimate wife and slave in the two chapters. Trible points to the difference between the two stories in chapters 16 and 21. "For Hagar, the plot of the first story is circular, moving from bondage to flight to bondage, while the action of the second is linear, proceeding from bondage to expulsion to homelessness."23

²¹ Kenneth Louis Gros, ed. <u>Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives</u>. New York: Abingdon Press: 1974. 79.

²² Pritchard, ANET, 172,

²³ Trible, Texts of Terror, 10.



B. Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah

The family narrative of Rachel and Leah takes place in three chapters in the Book of Genesis: Chapters 29-31. Unlike the Sarah and Hagar narrative which is broken into two parts in chapters 16 and 21, the story of Jacob's family is contiguous. Jacob's variety of marriage has been termed erubu24 marriage. It is used to describe a' type of marriage in which the wife does not leave the home of her family to enter the home of the bridegroom. Instead the bridegroom leaves his home and enters the household of his father-in-law or mother-in-law. This has great bearing on the narrative and the flow of the story from Jacob's entry into Laban's family to his ultimate departure. Although Jacob first encounters Rachel at the well, Rachel and Leah are formally introduced in Genesis 29:16 through their relationship as daughters of Laban: "Now Laban had two daughters, the name of the older one, ha-gedolah was Leah, and the younger one, ha-ketanah was Rachel." These terms remind the reader of the relationship between Esau and Jacob who are referred to as older, ray and younger, tza-ir in Genesis 25:23. Jacob agrees to serve his uncle Laban for seven years for the right to acquire Rachel as his bride. Jacob receives his wife after seven years and after the wedding feast consummates his marriage. It is only the next morning that he realizes that he has been deceived and has married Leah, ha-gedolah, and challenges Laban. Laban responds to

²⁴ C. H. Gordon, "Erubu Marriage", in <u>Studies on the Civilization and culture of Nuzi and Hurrians in Honor of Ernest R. Lecheman.</u> M.A Morrison and D.I Owen, eds. Indiana: Eisenbrauns Publishing, 1981.



Jacob's challenge by explaining: "It is not the practice to marry off the younger before the older" (Genesis 29:26). Although Laban and Jacob had established a contract, it was not binding when weighed against the custom of the land in Laban's eyes. After he marries Leah, Jacob contracts to work another seven years in return for Laban's second daughter, Rachel. The account in 29:30-30:24 of Jacob's wives bearing children is central to the story. The number of children borne to each woman and their birth order are prominent factors in the relationship between the sisters, their concubines and their husband.

The narrative begins with Jacob encountering Rachel at the well. Rachel is described as <u>yefat toar v'yefat mareh</u>, (29:17). Their meeting is described in intensely emotional terminology: Jacob kissed, <u>va-yishak</u> Rachel, raised his voice, <u>va-yisa et kolo</u> and wept, <u>yayevch</u>. It is obvious by this description that he is affected by her presence. When Jacob first encounters Laban, the issue of "serving" is mentioned immediately in verse 15 and seems to be a reflection from the greater Genesis family narrative of a central issue. The same term conveyed the blessing that Jacob fought for in his own family in chapter 27. After all, God told Rebecca that the older would serve the younger.²⁵ Isaac said to Esau, "I have given him all brothers for servants" and "You shall serve your brother." It is in his relationship with Laban that Jacob finally serves. When the sisters are introduced in Chapter 29:16, the text tells us that: "Leah's

²⁵ Genesis 25:23.

²⁶ Genesis 27:37.

²⁷ Genesis 27:40.



eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful and lovely." Although Sarna's opinion is that Rachel is mentioned here again to introduce Leah and explain the birth order, it seems that the repetition of her name and her beauty is deliberate and re-emphasizes the reason for Jacob's love.²⁸ Jacob's service of seven years lasts only one verse (29:20) and he then demands "his wife" in verse 21. Although this might seems perplexing, a betrothed wife had the status of wife both in the Hammurabi's Code (Paragraphs 130 and 160), in Deuteronomy (20:7, 22:23-24).

In verse 23 after a great feast, Laban brings Leah to Jacob and he "went into her." Jacob didn't know that he was with Leah all night as it is stated in verse 25: "In the morning, behold it was Leah." How could Jacob have been with Leah and not known it? The answers are rich in both context and content. Aggording to many commentators, a key verse is missing or has been omitted in the order of Jacob's wedding day. The Ancient Near Eastern wedding rituals presumed that the bride-to-be wore a veil.29 In Genesis 24:65 there is evidence of Isaac veiling Rebecca during their wedding ceremony. In Akkadian the bride is called katalu katumtu, veiled bride, and pussumtu, the veiled one.30 Assyrian laws make the raising of a concubine to the status of wife contingent upon her being veiled in the presence of a court.31 The choice of night for the wedding feast seems to play into the deception that took place in

²⁸ Sarna, Genesis, 204.

²⁹ Ibid, 170.

³⁰ Ibid, 170.

³¹ Ibid, 170.



darkness. After the marriages, Laban gives each of his daughters a handmaid which is widely attested to as a custom in Mesopotamia.

The narrative moves into the material of childbearing immediately after noting that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (29:30). The birth of Jacob's sons is arranged according to maternal origin. The narrative is divided into three parts with four sons born in each section. Leah (29:31-35), Bilhah and Zilpah (30: 1-13) and the four of Rachel and Leah (31:14-24). The relationship between Rachel and Leah reaches a climax in their efforts to bear children for Jacob and insure their dignity. The text emphasizes the relationship between the two sisters by building on the initial contract from their introduction as ha-gedolah, the older and ha-ketanah, the younger: 29:16: The name of the older was Leah/the name of the younger was Rachel;

29:17: And Leah's eyes were weak/Rachel was beautiful and well formed:

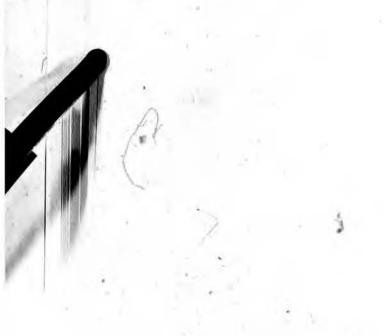
29:18: Jacob loved Rachel/Leah was unloved;

29:31: And God opened her womb (Leah's)/but Rachel was barren;

30:17: God heeded Leah and she conceived/God has denied you fruit of the womb.

Rachel is loved, yet barren; Leah is unloved, yet bears.

Although Sarai and Hagar never directly interact with each other in the Genesis 16 and 21 narrative, Rachel and Leah as sisters and equals do interact with each other directly. "When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister" (30:1). (But the same intention is present as in Gen 21:9, when Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had borne to



Abraham...", jealousy and rivalry ensues) Leah, who has children, but not her husband's love, says: "Is it not enough that you have taken my husband?" (Genesis 30:15) In verse 29:31 the word senuah, hated, is used to describe Leah. In Deuteronomy 25:15 senu-ah, hated, and ahoovah, loved, are paired in a similar context of a relationship of a husband and his co-wives. According to Sarna, there it expresses not hated and beloved, but rather a relative degree of preference on the part of the husband.³²

The relationship between the sisters is played out in the birth of their respective children. It is Leah who bears the first four sons. Their names are obviously reflections of Leah's situation as unloved wife: Reuben, "The Lord has seen my affliction, surely now my husband will love me" (29:32); Simon, "Because the Lord heard that I was hated, he has given me this son also" (29:33); Levi, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me because I have borne him three sons" (29:34); and Judah, "This time I will praise the Lord" (29:35). There is no reason given for Leah ceasing to bear children, however Genesis 30:14 suggests that Jacob ceased to perform his conjugal duty to beer.

Like Sarah, Rachel is compelled by circumstances to offer her handmaid as a concubine to her hasband. She tells him, "Here is my maid Bilhah, go into her that she may bear upon my knees and even I may have children through her" (30:4). The key to this verse is in the symbolic gesture attested to widely in Ancient Near Eastern sources, especially Hittite.³³ The placing or reception of a child on

³² Ibid, 119

³³ Ibid, 208.



the knees of another signifies legitimization whether in acknowledgment of biological parenthood or adoption. It is referred to in Genesis 48:12, 50:23 and Job 3:12. The symbolism of the knee as the center of generative power is the Akkadian birku, knee, which is a euphemism for genitals.34 Although this act is usually performed by the father (the child is borne upon his knees), here "it is of the primary interest of the adoptive mother who is intent on establishing her legal right to the child."35 In this verse we find the repetition from Genesis 16:2 of the word ibaneh which is used to refer to the wives being "built up" by the concubines' children. In verse 4, Bilhah is called isha (wife) as compared to 35:22 where she is called pilegesh (concubine). Zilpah is called "wife" in verse 9. Sarna sees the effacement of social status over time as a result of the difference between the two disappearing. The original difference was that no bride price was paid for a concubine. Dan and Naphtali are born from Bilhah and it is Rachel who names both sons: Dan, "God has judged me and has also heard my voice and given me a son" (30:6) and Naphtali; "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed" (30:8).

Leah counters and echoes Rachel's actions by giving her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob. Leah's children through Zilpah also reflect her emotions: Gad, "Good Fortune" (30:10), and Asher, "Happy am I for the women will call me happy" (30:13). It is interesting to compare the naming of Bilhah's and Zilpah's children with Hagar's. Although the angel of God tells Hagar that her son's name will be

³⁴ Ibid, 119.

³⁵ Speiser, Genesis, 230.



Ishmael, literally "God hears" in Genesis 16:11, it is Abraham in Genesis 16:15 who names the child.

The relationship between Rachel, Leah and Jacob continues to revolve around the issue of fertility in verses 14-24. The episode involving the mandrakes in this chapter needs consideration. Once Leah stopped bearing, she like her sister, gave her handmaid to Jacob to bear children for her. However, when her son Reuven brought mandrakes to her from the field, she uses them as a bartering tool to again bear children with Jacob. Leah gives the mandrakes to Rachel in exchange for the ability to cohabit with her husband. The "Duda'im in verse 14 are identified as mandragora officinarum, a small yellow tomato-like fruit that had widespread medical use in antiquity. In Song of Songs the connection is made between dodi and duda-im: my beloved and the mandrake.36 "The strange root plays a great role in the superstition of many ages and peoples as a magical fruit. Its fruit, which smells strongly and looks like a tiny apple, was also known at times as an aphrodisiac. Rachel, loved by Jacob but still childless, desires it because it can increase desire. For this wonderful fruit she will relinquish a night with Jacob in favor of Leah, and the result of this transaction between the rival women is Issachar's conception."37 Although it is Rachel who barters the mandrakes from Leah, she remains barren for another three years. This is contradictory to the aphrodisiacal association with the mandrake. In connection with this transaction of barrenness and fertility, it does not seem coincidental that God is mentioned seven

³⁶ Song of Songs 7:14.

³⁷ Speiser, Genesis, 280.

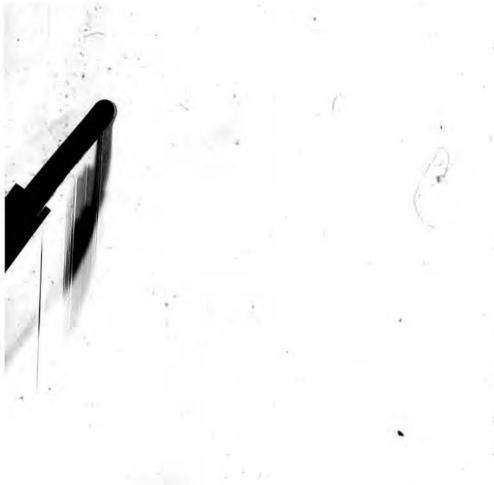


times between verses 14-24. In verse 15 and 16 Leah and Rachel enact a barter agreement: the mandrakes for a night with Jacob. Rachel directly asks Leah for some of her son's mandrakes in verse 14. Leah responds, "You have taken away my husband, will you take away my son's mandrakes as well?" Rachel offers Jacob in return for the mandrakes and the deal is done. Fokkelmann describes the relationship between the sisters and the use of the mandrakes: "...both wives have a serious deficiency-Leah in love and recognition. Rachel in children-which they plan to eliminate for each other by a creative compromise. Yes, "help", but what sorrow and jealousy are piled up behind the short, very direct dialogue of verse 14b and 15! They exchange two things which would seem incompatible, but both have something to do with sexual intercourse with Jacob and conceiving."38 Sarna points out that the verb sh-k-y underlines the barter agreement. In Genesis this root never connotes relationships of marital love, rather one used in unsavory circumstances.39 In verse 16 Sarna, Von Rad and other commentators link the Hebrew s-k-r to the folk etymology for Issachar who issues from this union.40 Leah uses the words: sachor secharticha, I have hired you, in verse 16 as she tells Jacob of the agreement she made with Rachel, although she fails to mention the landlady with whom she bartered. It is clear that Jacob becomes the bartered object in the deal between his two wives. In verse 18 she names her son Issachar because God had given her secharti (my hire). It is here that we also learn that

³⁸ Fokkelman, Genesis, 137.

³⁹ Sarna, Genesis, 119.

⁴⁰ Sarna, Genesis, 210 and Von Rad, Genesis, 290.



she regards this gift from God a result of her gift of Zilpah to Jacob: "God has given me my hire because I gaye my maid to my husband" (Genesis 30:18). Leah's sixth son is born and she names him Zebulun because "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." Finally, she bears a daughter, Dinah, whose name unlike that of her brothers, is not explained. After all of these children, the text quickly refers back to Rachel, who is remembered by God and finally gives birth saying in verses 23-34, "God has taken away my reproach" and she called her child Joseph saying: "May the Lord add to me another son."

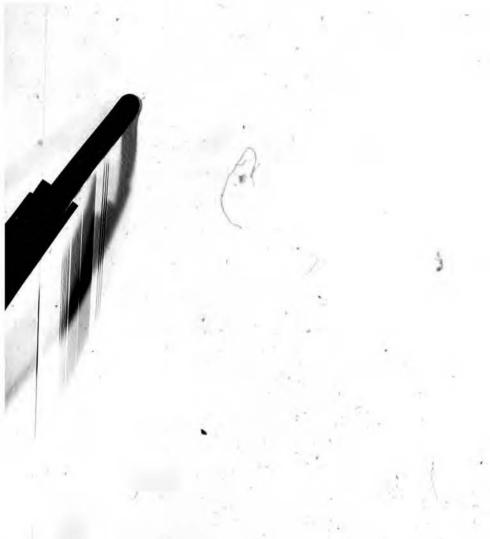
The narrative continues in Chapter 31 as Jacob takes his family and flees from Laban's home in Chapter 31. When Jacob consults with Rachel and Leah, he speaks to them as equals, together. "As you know..." 31:5. Jacob speaks to the sisters in the plural form: Lahen, to them, and Avihen, your father. He does not allude to their inequalities or previous rivalries. In 31:14, Rachel and Leah answer Jacob together, with one unified decision. Because Laban has treated his daughters as outsiders, Rachel and Leah are united against their father. All the wealth that God had taken from Laban and which Jacob regarded as his just inheritance, the sisters regarded as belonging to "us and our children." Leah and Rachel are obviously referring to themselves, but it is unclear whether or not Jacob is included in this new pact.



C. Conclusion

There are a plethora of stories in the Genesis narratives that reflect the complexity of the relationships between co-wives, sisters, and concubines. The Abrahamic line begins with the birth of two sons from two different wives. The relationship between Hagar and Sarah reflects the difficulty that rose from this arrangement. Their sons Isaac and Ishmael inherited the mantle of their parents' conflicts and are separated early in life. Although Sarah's grandchildren follow in her and Abraham's footsteps, Jacob and his wives move more easily in some ways through this complex arrangement. Jacob's children also inherit some of the family disharmony, however, the relationships between his wives and their concubines is much improved compared to that of Sarah and Hagar. Jacob experiences difficulty not only as a result of taking Bilhah and Zilpah as wives, but as the result of the rivalrous relationship between Rachel and Leah.

Chapter 2 <u>Dor L'Dor</u>: Four Generations of Interconnectedness



The book of Genesis depicts four generations of a family connected through their characteristics, actions and progeny. These stories revolve around the birth of a succession of sons who take over the mantle of the Patriarchy. It is very clear in the Genesis narratives that the motivation for so much of the conflict between both the women and the men is the potential for progeny. The womens' conflicts originate in the reality that bearing sons insures matriarchal status, love and favor in both their husband's and God's eves. In addition, the future of the Israelite people depended on the ability in each generation of these women to bear sons. Rachel's famous cry to her husband, "Give me children or I shall die" (Genesis 30:1) echoes the resounding cry of all the matriarchs who live with this knowledge. Sarah's barrenness and the resulting relationship with Hagar becomes a model for relationships between women for subsequent generations. Jacob's deception of Esau becomes a subtheme that is played out between parents and children as well as brothers and sisters. Due to the complexity of relationships between multiple wives and multiple children, the issue of birthright and inheritance is an important thread that runs through each generation, ultimately binding them together.

A. Sons Define Status

The first generation of Abraham and Sarah establishes the model of sons determining matriarchal status. It was not enough



that a woman be married to a Patriarch, she was expected to bear a son to carry on the mantle of leadership. A woman who did not bear a son was left with the potential reality of exclusion from the matriarchy. The birth of a son was reason not only for celebration, as in the case of Isaac's mishteh gadol (Genesis 21:8), his weaning ceremony, but also for a sigh of relief on the part of the matriarch made evident in Rachel's exclamation: "God has taken away my shame" (Genesis 30:23). By the time that Sarah offers her handmaid Hagar to Abraham, she has been married for more than the requisite ten years necessary before a husband can divorce a barren wife and is ninety years old. Sarah offered Hagar to Abraham, as was customary for a wife who hadn't born a child, with the firm belief that Hagar's child would be accounted as her own progeny. The term ibaneh mimenah (Genesis 16:2), literally, "I will be built up from her." has been interpreted by many commentators as a pun on the word ben, or son.41 One of Sarah's primary motivations for offering her handmaid is to secure her own status as a mother of Israel.

It is not Hagar's offspring, however, who serves this purpose; it is Isaac who becomes the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make his descendants as plentiful as the stars in the heavens. 42 The conflict that results from Sarah and Hagar's status is played out through their children, and it is this relationship between Isaac and Ishmael that sets the stage for further conflicts over birthright, inheritance and legitimacy. Isaac becomes the father of Israel, while

⁴¹ Speiser, 117.

⁴² Genesis 15:5.



in the words of Pseudo-Jonathan, 43 Ishmael becomes the father of a band of robbers. The intended outcome of the initial transaction between Sarah, Hagar and Abraham is unfulfilled. Fortunately, the disturbing end to their triangulated relationship with Hagar's banishment is not the fate of all handmaids in Genesis who are elevated to the status of patriarch's wife. Although, in the next generation Rebecca is transformed from barren to fertile, it occurs without the use of a handmaid or other intermediary. Rachel and Leah are strongly influenced by the ability and/or inability to bear sons. In addition, because of their unique situation as co-wives and sisters, they are rivals for their husband's love. The way to procure Jacob's love both from the women's and God's perspective is clearly through childbearing. It is Rachel's cry, "Give me children or I shall die" (Genesis 30:1) that gives such force to the impact of childbearing on a woman's status in the Bible. The power of this cry is recognized in the midrashim in which Rachel's reputation as mother of all Israel is given credence through her son and grandson:

Israel is called by her name, as it says: 'Rachel weeping for her children' (Jeremiah 31:15); and not only by her name, but by her son's name: 'It may be that the Lord of Hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph' (Amos 5:15); and not only by her son's name, but also by the name of her grandson, as it says, 'Is Ephraim a darling to me?' (Jeremiah 31:20)." (Genesis Rabbah 71:2)

In Midrash Tanhuma Buber, God understands that Leah's hated status is due to her childlessness and therefore gives her children

⁴³ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis Chapter 21:13.



which insures Jacob's love.44 Rachel pleads with Jacob to give her children, naming both Abraham and Isaac as models of husbands whose efforts helped unburden their wives of barrenness.

She said to him: Did your father, Isaac, do this to your mother, Rebecca? Did not the two of them stand and pray for each other? It is stated (Genesis 25:21): 'Then Isaac entreated the Lord on behalf of his wife.' You should also pray to the Lord for me? Did not your grandfather Abraham do for Sarah? He said to her: 'Sarah brought a rival wife into her house. She said to him' (Genesis 30:3) If this is so, Here is my maid Bilhah; go into her. He did not do so, but when she had actually given him her bondswoman, she immediately conceived and gave birth. Then Rachel said: "God has judged me". He judged me and found me guilty, He judged me and found me innocent. He has found me guilty by not giving me a son, He has found me innocent by giving my handmaid a son...so she called his name Dan." (Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7)

Jacob urges Rachel to look back to his own grandmother Sarah who brought her rival into her home to insure that she would be accorded a son. The consequences of Rachel's and Leah's treatment of their handmaids is very different than what occurred with Sarah and Hagar. The sisters' relationship is alternately tinged with jealousy and compassion, all centering around the state of barrenness or fertility at any given moment. Leah's compassion is portrayed in Genesis Rabbah as she prayed to change the embryo in her womb to a girl and prayed for Rachel to bear a son to elevate her status as a matriarch.45

⁴⁴ Midrash Tanhuma Buber <u>Vayetsei</u> 7. 45 Genesis Rabbah 72:6, Midrash Tanhuma Buber <u>Vayetsei</u> 7, and BT Berachot 9b.



Bilhah and Zilpah, unlike Hagar, achieve prominent status in three important categories. They are considered Jacob's wives, they are viewed by the tradition as two of the six matriarchs and they are connected to Rachel and Leah as their half-sisters. In order for the twelve sons of Jacob to be considered equal in any way, their lineage had to be connected. As a result, the midrashim portray a deep interconnectedness between the four women. Although conflict surrounds Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, they merit elevated status due to their sons. The relative equality that the midrashim portray among the mothers helps to insure a degree of relative equality among their sons.

B. Barrenness

Although initially the idea of a barren matriarch seems to be an oxymoron, implicit in each barren woman's circumstances is the inevitability of a son.⁴⁷ It is essential to note here that a matriarch's barrenness is a prelude to the importance of the sons that she will bear. Sarah eventually gives birth to the son who will become the second patriarch and Rachel gives birth to Joseph who is accorded the birthright even though he is technically not Jacob's firstborn son. These women suffer barrenness only to have it transformed as a sign

47 Barrenness will be examined more closely in chapter/5, pp. 54-61.

⁴⁶ Pesikta d'Rav Kahana: pisqa 1:7. This midrash also appears in different forms in Genesis Rabbah 74:13, Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer Chapter 36 and in Targum Yerushalmi to Genesis 30:13

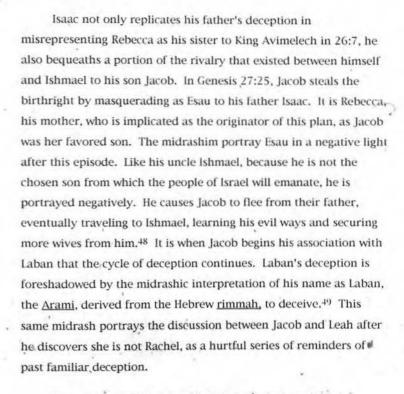


of chosenness when they eventually bear sons whose destiny is tied to the leadership of the future of Israel.

Through prayer, pleas to their husbands, offering their handmaids and exchanging mandrakes for husbands, the Biblical matriarchs consistently fight for their right to bear a son. This is due to the reality that the title of matriarch is inextricably tied to the gender of their progeny. All three matriarchs overcome some form of barrenness which, according to the Rabbis, resulted from their individual and collective merit. The inclusion and exclusion of Bilhah, Zilpah and Hagar in their respective family units and the larger Abrahamic lineage seems retrospectively to be entirely dependent on the role of their sons in the future of the people of Israel.

C. Deception

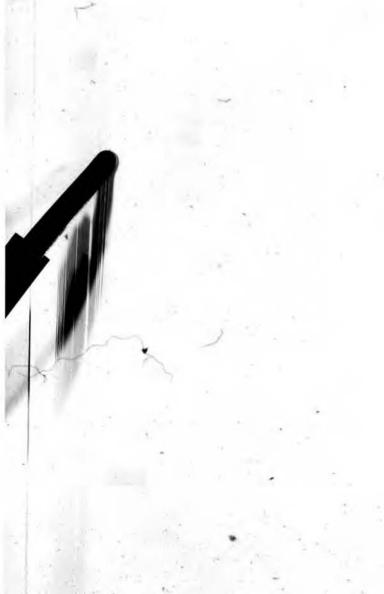
Striving for sons and for favored positions as wives put many women, as well as their husbands, into compromising positions in Genesis. The theme of deception begins even before an heir is born in the first generation. Abraham begins the cycle of deception by twice implicating Sarah in schemes that force her to represent herself as his sister, not his wife (Genesis 12:12 and 20:2). Although not directly related to the deception that occurs in subsequent generations, it is important to note that Abraham represents her as his sister, and the deception between family members later in the Genesis narratives is in fact most pronounced between siblings.



The entire night he called her Rachel and she answered him. In the morning, however, 'Behold it was Leah.' He said to her: You are a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver. Is there a teacher without pupils? She answered, 'Didn't your father call you Esau and you answered him? So you called me and I answered you. (Genesis Rabbah 70:19)

⁴⁸ Exodus Rabbah 25:28. Ishmael's reputation is also severely tarnished midrashically. See Pesikta Rabbati 1:1, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 21:9, Aggadat Bereshit 61:1, Exodus Rabbah Chapter1:1, and Genesis Rabbah 21:9 in this regard.

49 Genesis Rabbah 70:19.



Not only is Leah the deceiver, but Rachel also deceives Jacob through her silence and facilitates Leah's entry into her own bed.⁵⁰ Rachel gives Leah the secret signs that Jacob had originally shared with her to insure that Laban didn't deceive him. ⁵¹

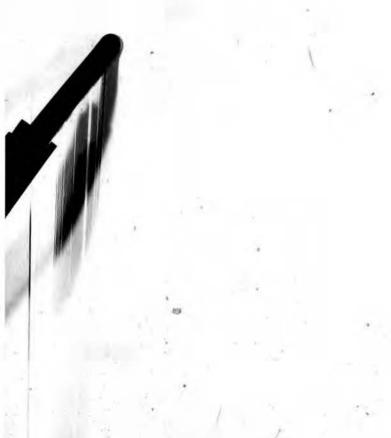
Deception is a theme within the generations of the matriarchs and patriarchs that is pervasive and continues into the fourth generation with Joseph and his brothers. Fathers deceive sons-in-laws, both brothers and sisters deceive each other and wives deceive husbands in these schemes. As each generation comes of age, the legacy of deception is renewed as they are forced to deal with the complexities that the ties of kinship bring. One area that is suffused with examples of deception is the conflict over status as the first born son.

D. Illegitimate or Legitimate Sons: The Birthright and Inheritance

The distinction between illegitimate and legitimate sons is tied to the issues of birthright and inheritance. Once children are born, the matriarchs struggle in their efforts to secure legitimacy and subsequently the birthright for them. In each generation, the birth of a son creates tensions as a result of the desire for birthright and

⁵⁰ Yalkut Shimoni Vol. 1, remez 130.

⁵¹ According to Azulai Hesed le-Abraham II, they consisted of Rachel touching Jacob's right toe, right thumb and right ear lobe.



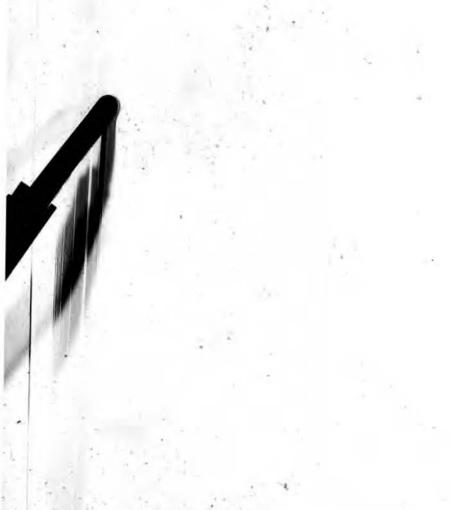
the inheritance. When Sarah assumes her barrenness will prevent the fulfillment of God's promise of a great nation to Abraham, she gives him Hagar. Not only did Sarah assume that she would be built up through Hagar's child, but according to Josephus, "she cherished him with an affection no less than if it had been her own son, seeing that he was being trained as heir to the chieftancy." It is only after she gives birth to Isaac that this changes. Sarah demands the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael because of the threat that Ishmael posed to Isaac's ascendancy to patriarchal status and her own title of matriarch. Once Sarah witnesses Ishmael's metsahek, playing in Isaac's presence, she says to Abraham:

...Now arise and write a will in favor of Isaac, giving him all that the Holy One has sworn to give you and your seed. The son of this bondswoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac, as it is said: 'And she said unto Abraham, cast out this bondswoman and her son' (Genesis 21:20). (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30)

According to the Biblical text, Abraham is assured by God of Ishmael's future: "...Also of the son of the bondswoman I will make a nation, because he is your seed" (Genesis 21:13). According to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's translation of this passage, God tells Abraham, "I will make a band of robbers of the son of the maidservant also, because he is your son." The issue of birthright and inheritance is central to the relationship between Sarah and Hagar and Abraham. Because this conflict is only between two sons,

⁵² Josephus, Jewish Antiquities I: 214-218.

⁵³ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 21:13.



one legitimate and one illegitimate, the end result is black and white: Ishmael is banished and Isaac, the legitimate heir, carries the birthright and inheritance of the mantle of the patriarchy with him.

It is Isaac who unwittingly gives the blessing of the firstborn to the wrong son when he is deceived by Jacob. Jacob's own wives and sons are the inheritors of his treacherous behavior when he masquerades as Esau.⁵⁴ Although the issues are similar to Isaac and Ishmael's conflict, this family scenario is more complex due to the number and status of wives and children. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 contains the resolution of the conflict between Jacob's firstborn sons of his respective wives:

If a man has two wives, one beloved and another hated and if they have borne him children, both the beloved and the hated, and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated; then it shall be that when he makes his sons to inherit that which he has, that he may not give the preference to the son of the beloved wife over the son of the hated wife, who is the firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated as the firstborn-by giving him a double portion of all that he has. For he is the beginning of his strength, the right of the firstborn is his (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

Leah, who is <u>senuah</u>, hated, is the rightful mother of Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben. However, it is Rachel's firstborn son who is given this honor as firstborn: "These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph..." (Genesis 37:2) The conflict between Reuben and Joseph involves more than firstborn status. It includes both issues of nationhood-the dilemma of Northern Judah and Southern Israel as the eventual

⁵⁴ Genesis 27:24.



inheritors of Israel's future-and forbidden relationships: Reuben sleeps with Bilhah, his step-mother in Genesis Chapter 35:22. The birthright is given, then removed from Rueben. In addition, Jacob's shame at his own deception of his father is apparent as he gives the blessing to Reuben: "Unstable as water you shall no longer excel...for you went up to your own father's bed and defiled it."55 In the Babylonian Talmud Leah compares her son Reuben to her father-in-law's son Esau. Esau voluntarily sold his birthright and hated his brother, while Reuben who suffered the same fate as his uncle, was not jealous of Joseph. About Reuben, it was written, "But as much as he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph." 56 The assumption that the twelve tribes emanated from the sons of Rachel is also made clear by the Rabbis:

And so you find in the case of Benjamin, when his mother said to him in Genesis 30:24: 'May God add another son for me', the Holy One also added for her ten tribes from him and two tribes from Joseph. R. Samuel bar Nahman said: The Holy One raised up twelve tribes from Rachel, ten from Benjamin and two from Joseph. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7)

Finally, the issue of inheritance and legitimacy among the sons of Rachel and Leah and their handmaids is much less pronounced than in previous generations. When Rachel doesn't conceive, she, like Sarah, gives Bilhah to Jacob so that she will be <u>ibaneh mimenah</u>, built up from her (Genesis 30:3). However, unlike Sarah and Hagar, here there is no question as to the legitimacy of the action or that

⁵⁵ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7.

⁵⁶ B.T. Berachot 7a.

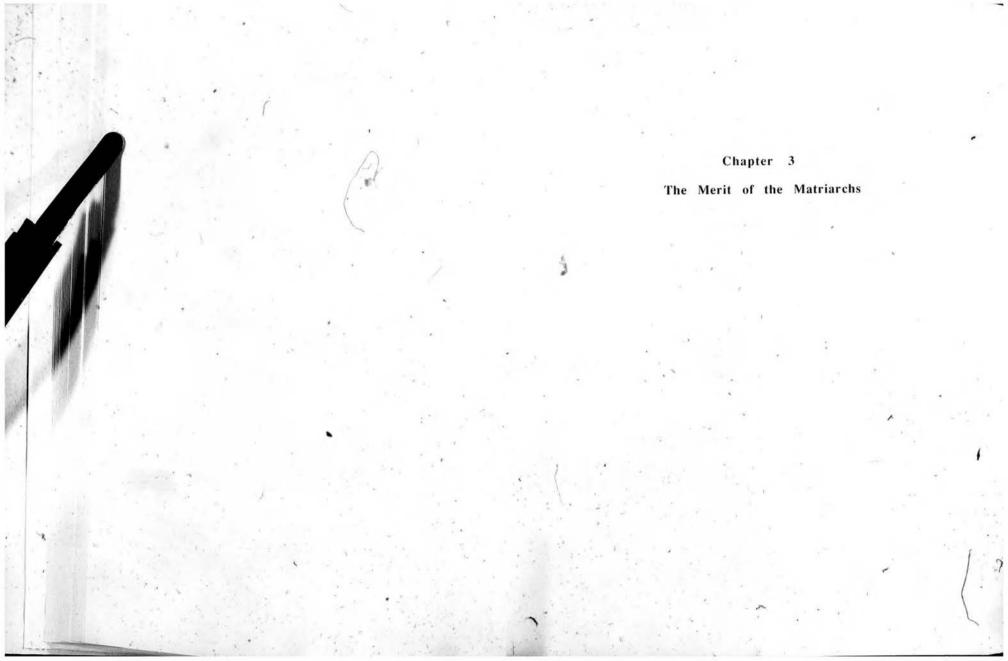


Bilhah's sons would be accounted to Rachel. Although the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are mentioned separately at times in the Biblical texts⁵⁷, all twelve sons obtain equal status through their adoption by Rachel and Leah. Targum Onkelos translates Genesis 30:3 in the following manner: "She will bear children that I will bring up (literally: on my knees)" which signifies the adoption by Rachel of Bilhah's offspring.

E. Conclusion

The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate sons paves the way for the conflict over birthright and inheritance. Although the issue of inheritance becomes more complex as the generations progress, the issues associated with it, including multiple wives and handmaids, become less complex. The midrashim make the ties of kinship stronger thereby diffusing some of the issues that create the original tension. The midrashic tendency toward inclusiveness in the area of kinship, especially between Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, are good examples of this. Although the specific issues are different for the generations of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau and Reuben and Joseph, the conflict over the status of firstborn son is an enduring legacy for all of these brothers.

⁵⁷ In Genesis 33:1-2, the distinction is made between Jacob's wives and children when he approaches Esau for the first time since their separation. Out of fear for their safety, he places the handmaids and their children in front, Leah and her children in the middle, and finally Rachel and Joseph in the back.





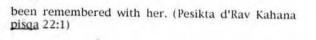
Due to their many attributes, the matriarchs are portrayed as deserving great merit. These four women are described in various ways throughout the midrashim, but the prevalence is to portray them as shining beacons of righteousness. Even potentially negative characteristics are transformed into positive attributes when the Rabbis desired to show them in a positive light. Their actions, treatment of others, selflessness, prayers, modesty, barrenness and their constant investment in the future of the people of Israel are emphasized throughout the texts.

A. Individual Merit

Everything from the hidden meaning of a women's name to the interpretation of her hidden thoughts is utilized in the portrayal of the matriarchs as meritorious. For example, Philo describes Sarah's name as "virtue or wisdom described as sovereign or ruling." Not only is Sarah's barrenness transformed, but when God remembered Sarah, all barren women were simultaneously remembered with her.

'Sarah said: Everyone that hears will laugh with joy with me' (Genesis 21:6). The verse teaches, that when our mother Sarah gave birth to Isaac, at the same time all barren women were remembered by God, all the deaf were given hearing, all the blind were given sight, all the mute were given speech, all madmen restored to soundness of mind. And so all who were otherwise afflicted said: 'Would that Sarah had been remembered a second time so that we, too, could have

⁵⁸ Philo, Index of Names;, "Sarah." 413.



Although Sarah's desire to bear children was focused on her eventual status as a matriarch, she is greatly invested in the continuity of Abraham's lineage. According to Philo, Sarah is the personification of selflessness, in her giving of Hagar to Abraham:

The excessiveness of her wifely love is indicated, for since she seemed to be barren, she did not think it right to let her husband's household suffer from childlessness, and she valued his gain more than her own standing." (Philo, Ouestions and Answers to Genesis, Book III: 20)

If Sarah is selfless, Rachel is personified by both her modesty and her selflessness, especially in dealing with Leah and Jacob. As Leah's enabler, the Rabbis deem Rachel especially meritorious. She is credited not only with silence during Jacob's deception, but because of her modesty, God restored the honor of the firstborn to her:

R. Eleazar said: What is the meaning of the verse: "He withdraws his eyes not from the righteous?" (Job 36:7) In reward for the modesty shown by Rachel, through Saul she was granted a number among her descendants; and in reward for the modesty shown by Saul, he was granted a number among his descendant Esther. What was the modesty displayed by Rachel? As it is written: "And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother." Now was he her father's brother? Was he not the son of her father's sister? What it means is this: He said to her: Will you marry me? She replied: Yes, but my father is a trickster and he will outwit you. He relied: I am his brother in trickery. She said to him: Is it permitted the righteous to indulge in trickery? Yes. With the pure



you show yourself pure and with the crooked you show yourself crooked. (Sam 22:27) He said to her: What is his trickery? She replied: I have a sister older than I am, and he will not let me marry before her. So he gave her certain tokens. When night came, she said to herself, Now my sister will be put 'to shame. So, she handed over the tokens to her. So it is written: 'And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah.' Are we to infer that up to now she was not Leah? What it means is that on account of the tokens that Rachel gave Leah, he did not know until then. Therefore she was rewarded by having Saul among her descendants. (B.T. <u>Baba Bathra</u> 123a)⁵⁹

In her efforts to shield and protect her sister from humiliation and shame, Rachel gives up her status as first wife. The Rabbis reveal her selflessness in this passage:

When Leah saw that she had borne six, she said: 'The Holy One made this agreement with Jacob to raise up 12 tribes. Now here I have borne six sons, and the two bondsmaids, four. That makes ten.' Then Leah conceived again. Our masters have said: she conceived a male. Leah said: 'Here I have conceived, but my sister Rachel has not given birth.' What did Leah do? She began to pray for mercy on her sister Rachel. She said. Let whatever should be within her belly become female, and let not my sister Rachel be prevented from giving birth to a son.' The Holy One said to her: 'By your life, you have had mercy upon your sister. See I am making that which is in her belly female, and I am remembering her in this regard.' Then afterwards she bore a daughter and called her Dinah. What is the meaning of Dinah? That she argued against giving birth to a son on condition that Rachel bear a son; for thus it is written below (Gen 30:22-3)

⁵⁹ Parallel are also found in Yalkut Shimoni Vol.1; <u>remez</u> 125 and B.T. <u>Megillah</u> 13a-b.



"Then God remembered Rachel...and she conceived and bore a son," The verse likens her giving birth to her conception. Just as her conception was painless, so was her giving birth painless. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7)60

Rachel embodies the selflessness that the Rabbis attributed to Sarah; she is more interested in the future of the people of Israel than her own status as wife or matriarch. Because she acts justly, her daughter is named, Dinah, reflecting this justice. The midrashim also portray Rachel as the "foundation of the world": "No one maintains Israel in the world but the children of Rachel" and Israel is called not only by her name, but by her son Joseph's name and her grandson Ephraim's name. Because Joseph ultimately inherits the leadership of Israel, the Rabbis' give Rachel the title of "foundation of the world." In addition, Rachel is given precedence over Leah when she is mentioned later in the history of the Jewish people as cited in the midrash below:

Where is it shown that she is the chief of the house? Where Leah's children admit it (Ruth Rabbah 7:13). A Boaz and all his court were from the tribe of Judah, from the sons of the sons of Leah. And what is written in Ruth 4:11? Then all the people who were in the gate and the elders said: 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman coming out of your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel.' Hence, Rachel is the chief of the house since it is stated in Gen 29:31, 'but Rachel was akarah', barren. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7)

⁶⁰ Another version is found in Genesis Rabbah 71:8.

⁶¹ Genesis Rabbah 71:2.



In this midrash, according to the Rabbis, even the children of Leah admit that Rachel is the chief. It is interesting to note that although Rachel is favored by Jacob, Leah is characterized as possessing a merit of greater depth than her sister. The fact that Leah was hated does not impede the Rabbis' attempts to make her hated status become an asset to her. In the following midrashim, her eyes are characterized as weak, but this quality is transformed into a positive and meritorious attribute:

Why was Leah hated? Not because she was more ugly than Rachel. In fact, she was as beautiful as Rachel, as stated "Laban had two daughters" (Gen 29:16) They were equal in beauty, stature, and loveliness. "And Leah's eyes were weak": When Rebecca bore Esau and Jacob, there were born to Laban two daughters, Leah and Rachel. They sent letters to each other and agreed among themselves that Esau would take Leah and Jacob would take Rachel. Now, Leah would ask about the conduct of Esau and would hear that his conduct was bad. So she would cry all the time and say: "Thus my lot has fallen to this wicked man.' And for this reason her eyes became weak. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7)

This midrash explains that she wasn't hated; she was equal to Rachel in many areas. It then goes on to characterize her weak eyes as a result of her tears over her fate to become Esau's intended wife. Even her physical attributes are turned into glowing tributes to her merit. Leah's eyes are <u>rakkot</u>, which is commonly translated as "weak." However, <u>rakkot</u> is transformed into <u>arukhot</u> or lengthy. The length of her gifts are depicted: the kingship, the priesthood and



anointing oil,⁶² and it is said that her bounties were extensive,⁶³ According to such midrashim,⁶⁴ Rachel was to marry Jacob, and Leah was to marry Esau. Because of her tears God transforms Leah's fate and she marries Jacob and bears his first child.

The fruit of Leah's labors are also portrayed by the Rabbis in comparison to her sister Rachel. The matriarchs and patriarchs are symbolized in the midrash as parts of the fruit of the Hadar Tree. Leah is described in the same glowing terms that describe Jacob: "Boughs of thick trees symbolizes Leah (Jacob): just as the myrtle was crowded with leaves, so was Leah (Jacob) crowded with children." In comparison to Rachel, Leah is described as hagedolah, the great one: great is her gifts; the priesthood for all time through Judah and royalty for all time through Levi. Finally, it is Leah, not Rachel who merits the privilege of ultimately being buried with Jacob. Finally.

In order for these matriarchs to appear as positive role models of virtue, the Rabbis easily transform their negative qualities into positive ones. Although the Rabbis use these same characteristics occasionally to portray the matriarchs as lacking in merit, here it is clear that they are upstanding women who merited the honored status of Mothers of the people Israel.

⁶² Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7.

⁶³ B.T. Baba Bathra 123a.

⁶⁴ Genesis Rabbah 70:16, Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7.

⁶⁵ Leviticus Rabbah 30:9.

⁶⁶ Genesis Rabbah 70:15.

⁶⁷ Genesis Rabbah 70:12.



B. Treatment of Handmaids and Husbands

The matriarchs did not live in a vacuum. They interacted with each other, their husbands, their handmaids and their children. In these relationships, the Rabbis portray them as deeply compassionate and invested in the future of Israel. Throughout the challenges that these women face, the Rabbis lift them up and allow them to be outstanding models of friends, wives, mistresses and sisters.

Although Hagar is ultimately banished, the Rabbis make certain that Sarah is a compassionate mistress when Hagar lives with her. The midrashim por ray Sarah as urging Hagar to lie with Abraham: "She persuaded her with words: 'Happy are You to be united with such a holy man." Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham as a wife, not a concubine. Finally, when Hagar conceives and women come to visit Sarah, she directs them to Hagar to inquire as to her welfare. "Ladies used to come to inquire how she (Sarai) was, and she would say to them, 'Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman Hagar." All of this is attributed to "the excessiveness of her wifely love", as indicated by Philo. Sarah's love of Abraham and sincere concern for his future is supported by her willingness to be called "his sister" to save his life in Genesis 12:12 and 20:2.

Rachel and Leah also offer Bilhah and Zilpah freely, although the midrash suggests that it was Jacob who initiated this

⁶⁸ Genesis Rabbah 45:3.

⁶⁹ Genesis Rabbah 70:3-4.

⁷⁰ Philo, Ouestions and Answers to Genesis, Book III: 20.



arrangement.⁷¹ Rachel is able to view Bilhah's children as her own as is Leah with Zilpah's children. The Aramaic translations assume Rachel adopted Bilhah's children. "She will bear children that I will bring up".72 When Rachel prays to God for a child, she feels that God has found her innocent because her handmaid Bilhah bears her son, Dan. 73 It is because Rachel and Leah include their handmaids in their extended families as legitimate wives of legitimate sons that Jacob's children later are treated as equals in the text. Rachel's understanding of the importance of the line of Jacob is clear when she says: "If I am not worthy of the world being built up through me, let it be built up through my sister." As an extension of this, in the midrash, she adds, "Were not his adventures mine?" 74 She is able to give up her own status to insure that Jacob's line will continue.

C. The Matriarchs' Prayers and God's Answers

Not only do the matriarchs deal with other human beings in a meritorious manner, but their relationship with God is also an indicator of their merit. All three women deal with some state of barrenness that is central in their relationships with God. Sarah is remembered by God not only by being able to bear at such an

⁷¹ Genesis Rabbah 71:7.

⁷² Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 30:3 and Targum Onkelos to Genesis 30:3.

⁷³ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vavetsei 7.

⁷⁴ Genesis Rabbah 71:8.



advanced age, but God also provides her with miraculous abilities in order to prove her merit as this midrash describes:

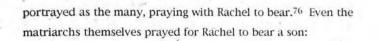
R. Berechiah, citing R Levi, said: You find that when our mother Sarah gave birth, the nations of the world declared-and may we be forgiven for repeating what they said-Sarah didn't give birth to Isaac, it was Hagar, Sarah's handmaid-she gave birth to him. What did the Holy One do? He withered up the 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.' Thereupon our Father Abraham said to Sarah: 'This is no time for modesty. Hallow the Holy One's name. Sit down in the marketplace and give suck to their children.' Hence it says, "Sarah gave children suck" (Gen 21:7). Note that the verse does not say "child", but "children". (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana pisqa 22:1)

Rachel, like Sarah, was remembered by God in her change from barrenness to fertility.

R. Johanan said: There are 4 keys in the hand of the Holy One that He has not delivered to the humans of the world: the key of rain, the key of sustenance, the key of graves, and the key of barren women. Yet, when they were needed, the Holy One delivered them to the righteous. In respect to the key of barren women, "Then God remembered Rachel...and opened her womb." (Midrash Tanhuma Buber <u>Vayetsei</u> 7)75

Rachel is elevated to an status equal to Sarah, and is also considered a beacon for the righteous and for all barren women. In Psalm 55, the phrase "For those with me are many" Jacob and Leah are

⁷⁵ This tradition is also found in Genesis Rabbah 73:4 and Targum Yerushalmi to Genesis 30:22.



Said Rabbi Hanina b. Pazzi: The matriarchs were prophetesses, and Rachel was of the matriarchs. Is it not written, 'The Lord add to me other sons,' but, 'another son': she said, 'He is but destined to beget one more; may it be from me.' Rabbi Hanina said: All the matriarchs assembled and prayed: "We have sufficient males, let her be remembered." (Genesis Rabbah 72:6)

Although she wrestled with her sister, this wrestling is transformed into Rachel's supplication and prayer and her desire to emulate Leah by having children. 77, Rachel's merits are bountiful and she is ultimately remembered not only for her own sake, but for the sake of her sister Leah, for the sake of her husband and for the sake of the other matriarchs.78

Leah's prayers go beyond her own need for children. She prays that the embryo in her womb would be changed to female in order for Rachel to bear a son,79 and she prays for her own fate to be changed as the intended wife of the wicked Esau. The Rabbis say, referring to Rachel, "Great is prayer, it annulled the decree, and she took precedence over her sister." 80 In Midrash Psalms 55:19, this story is reversed so that it is Rachel who was fated to marry the

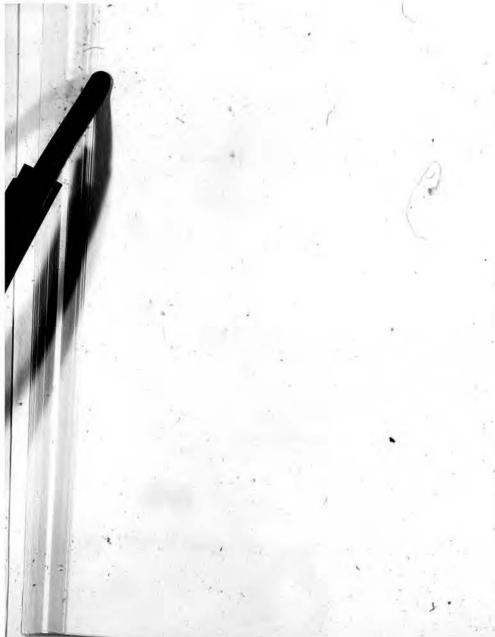
⁷⁶ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vavetsei 7.

⁷⁷ Targum Onkelos to Genesis 30:3.

⁷⁸ Genesis Rabbah 73:3.

⁷⁹ B.T. <u>Berachot</u> 9b, Midrash Tanhuma Buber <u>Vayetsei</u> 7 and Genesis Rabbah 72:6.

⁸⁰ Genesis Rabbah 70:16.



wicked Esau and it is Jacob and Leah together who pray to God to change Rachel's fate:

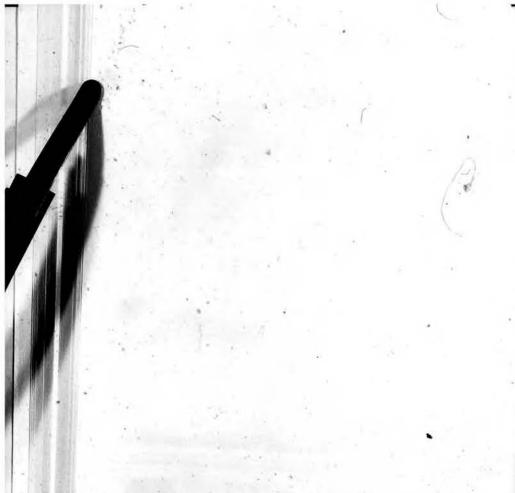
The verse: "In multitudes", alludes to Rachel. Thus the words "so that none came nigh me" (Psalm 55:19) meant that the design of Esau came not nigh to Rachel, though the arrangements were that Jacob was to take Leah and Esau was to take Rachel. And who brought it about that Rachel was delivered from him? Those who 'in multitudes...were with me' (Ibid) by which it meant that Jacob and Leah also put prayers together for Rachel. Thus we read "And God remembered even the person of Rachel" (Gen 30:22): In this verse the name Rachel by itself implies that God remembered her because of her own merit, and the phrase 'the person of Rachel' implies that He remembered her also because of the merit of the patriarchs and matriarchs. (Micrash Psalms 55:19)

Finally, because of Leah's prayers, and because of her hated status God hears her and gives her children to make her dear to her husband.⁸¹

D. Conclusion

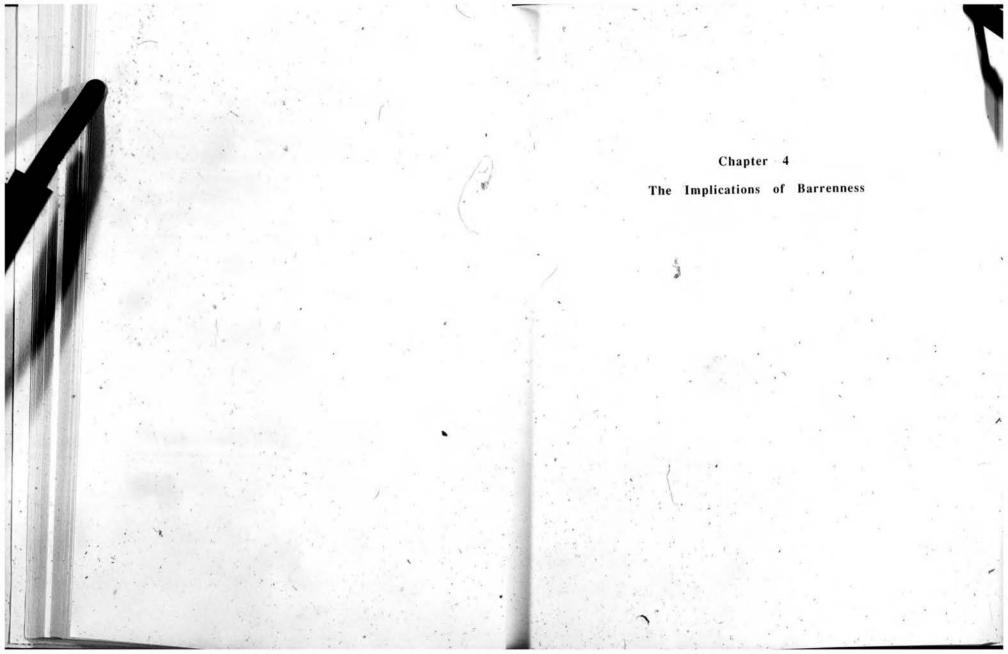
The matriarchs' relationships with God and the implications of their prayers are complex. These women utilize prayer as a way to attain love, marriage, favor, sons, and even avert a tragic fate. God's response to each woman is to give her the gift of sons. For each woman, there were additional gifts after they bore a son. For Sarah,

⁸¹ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7:10.



Hagar and Ishmael are banished, Rachel is given the merit of the firstborn son and Leah receives the love of her husband.

Merit is a very important component in the status of each woman. The Rabbis envisioned each matriarch as a vessel from which the future of the Jewish people poured. Because of this, it was easy for them to find ways to emphasize the meritorious behavior of each woman, even to the extent that they would transform the negative into the positive. Although the Rabbis also portray the negative qualities of these women, it is never when they want to point towards Sarah, Rachel or Leah as mothers of the children of Israel. In all of these cases the women are favored by God, treat each other and their husbands compassionately and are greatly interested in the future of Israel, even to their own detriment.



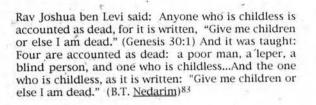


The issue of barrenness is an essential factor in the Genesis narratives. It is linked to other important themes, including love, favor, remembrance by God, the need for handmaids and wives, jealousy between women, and eventually, firstborn status. Sarah, Rachel and Leah all resort to the custom of bearing through their handmaids, "ibaneh mimenah"-I will bear through her, a practice that was common in the Ancient Near East.82 Barrenness not only signifies the important status of the children eventually born to barren women, but also opens the doors for many different types of relationships between men and women in these narratives. Without barrenness, Hagar would have remained a handmaid and the relationship between Abraham, his two wives and their two sons would not have occurred. Similarly, without barrenness, Rachel's and Leah's relationship would have taken on a new level of rivalry. Bilhah and Zilpah like Hagar, would never had been escalated to a status as the wife of a patriarch.

A. An Overview of Barrenness

Barrenness is treated very seriously in our tradition because it prevents the ultimate initial commandment to "go forth and multiply" (Genesis: 1:28). Childlessness is equated with death in more than one place is our texts:

⁸² See Chapter 1, pp. 11-12 for a more in depth analysis of this custom.



In addition to this, barrenness is portrayed as one of the four keys that is not given to human beings, but which God delivers to the righter us when needed.⁸⁴

B. The Barren Matriarchs

In the cases of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, ironically barrenness functions as a sign that they will eventually bear a son who will have great significance in the history of Israel. For both Sarah and Rachel, barrenness is as painful and as real as death. Rachel cries out, "Give me children or I shall die", and according to the Midrash, Sarah is as good as dead and demolished due to her childless status.:

'It will be that I will be built up through her.' (Genesis 16:2) 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 will be built up through her, and only that which is demolished must be built up. (Genesis Rabbah: 16:2)

84 Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7.

⁸³ Also cited in Lamentations Rabbah 3:2, and Yalkut Shimoni: Volume 1:27 and attributed to Rav Shmuel bar Nahman.

According to the Rabbis, the matriarchs were barren for a variety of positive reasons:

Why were the matriarch's barren? R. Levi said in the name of R. Shila and R. Helbo in R. Johanan's name: Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, yearns for their prayers and supplications. Thus it is written: 'O my dove, thou art as the clefts of the rock' (Song Of Songs 2:14) Why did I make you barren? In order that,' Let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice' (Ibid). 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 said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba: So that they might pass the greater part of their life untrammeled. 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 pregnant, she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus the whole ninety years that Sarah did not bear, she was like a bride in her canopy. (Midrash Rabbah 45:4)

In this midrash, the Rabbis portray barrenness as a desirable condition, with the acknowledgment that it was only a temporary state. Although the image of God desiring womens' prayers is beautiful, it seems that the Rabbis perceived barrenness as the most compelling reason a women would have to pray. Pregnancy is portrayed as an undesirable state, one which burdens a woman's life and makes her undesirable to her husband. This is definitely a male perspective on barrenness, in light of the fact that the barren women of Genesis considered pregnancy many times more desirable than the gift of barrenness. Although barrenness is the cause of great distress for many women, it is eventually is a factor integral to their positions of importance in the text. For the matriarchs, barrenness is the key



to their struggles with God, their husbands, their co-wives and their sisters. It is also the key to their ultimate standing as matriarchs.

C. Results of Barrenness

The results of barrenness are different for each matriarch.

Because of Sarah's barrenness, Hagar becomes despised. Sarah

banishes her and causes her to miscarry by casting the evil eye upon
her. The positive effects of her barrenness are made evident when
God enables Sarah to cickle hundreds of children after she gives
birth to Isaac in this midrash:

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 didn't give birth to Isaac, it was Hagar, Sarah's handmaid-she gave birth to him they said. 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. Thereupon our Father Abraham said to Sarah: This is no time for modesty. Hallow the Holy One's name. Sit down in the marketplace and give suck to their children.' Hence it says: "Sarah gave children suck" (Gen 21:7) Note that the verse does not say "child", but "children". (Pesikta D'Rav Kahana: pisqa 22)

Sarah's change in status is not only from barrenness to fertility. In addition to bearing a son, the Rabbis give her fertile status universal



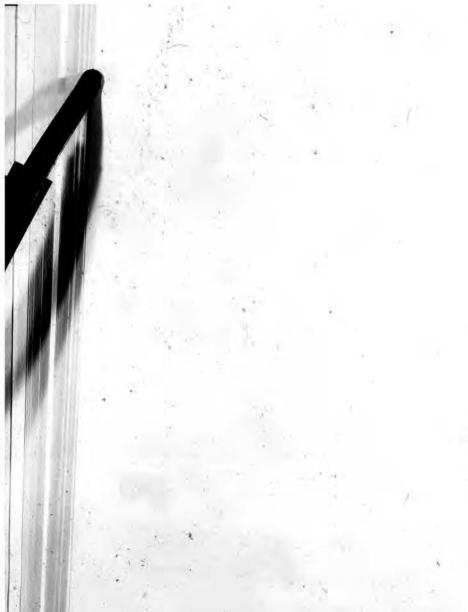
and magnanimous proportions. To prove her fertility, God withers the nipples of the noblewomen. Not only can she suckle Isaac, but she has the capacity to suckle all the children in the region. Sarah's relationship with God seems to have improved since God asked Abraham "Why did Sarah laugh, saying 'Shall I who am old, bear a child?' Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:13)

Like Sarah, Rachel's barrenness brings her closer to God, but increases the enmity between her and Jacob and Leah. Rachel's cry of "Give me children or I shall die" in Genesis 30:2 is answered by Jacob response: "Can I take the place of God who has denied you fruit of the womb?" Rachel is 'earful that Jacob will divorce her and she will be forced to marry Esau as this midrash explains:

When Leah gave birth for Jacob, Rachel was depressed saying: Perhaps Esau will take me since I have not given birth to a child. But when she had given birth to Joseph she said: God has taken away my shame. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber <u>Vayetsei</u> 7)85

She wrestles with Leah and prevails when her handmaid Bilhah bears Naphtali. Her relationship with Leah is not completely damaged by her barrenness; the midrash characterizes Leah's acquiescence to be built up not only through Bilhah but also through Leah.

⁸⁵ In accordance with Rashi's interpretation of Genesis 30:22, the word "me" should be amended to "you" so that the midrash reads: "Perhaps Esau will take me (Rachel), not her (Leah)." According to Rashi, Rachel feared that Esau might take her if Jacob divorced her.



With mighty wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister." I had perfumed my bed, I had allowed myself to be persuaded, I exalted my sister above me. R. Johanan interpreted it: I should have been a bride before my sister. Now had I sent a warning to him, Beware you are being deceived, would he not have refrained? But I thought, if I am not worthy that the world should be built up through me, let it be built up through my sister. (Genesis Rabbah 71:8)

This midrashic portrayal shows a marked departure from the results of Sarah's attempt to be built up through Hagar. Not only is Rachel confident in being built up through her handmaid, but through the midrash she transcends her jealousy and rivalry for the sake of Jacob's line. She understands that she will be built up through Leah's children. Ultimately, many of the conflicts involving barrenness are resolved when Rachel's status is changed from loved and barren to loved and fertile. Leah was hated, but fertile according to the text. The cause for her ceasing to bear is unclear. Did Jacob stop cohabiting with Leah or did she become barren for a period of time? Because she is unable to bear, she is motivated to trade the mandrakes that Reuben brought her in Chapter 30:14 for the opportunity to spend a night with Jacob. According to the midrash, both Rachel and Leah gained and lost from this transaction:

Then Rachel said to Leah: Give me, I pray thee of your son's mandrakes, and she said to her: "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband". You would improve my beard with hair from my beard. R. Simeon taught: Because Rachel treated that righteous man Jacob so slightingly, she was not buried together with him. Thus it says, "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight," hinting with you he will lie in death, not with me. R. Eleazar said: Each lost by the transaction,



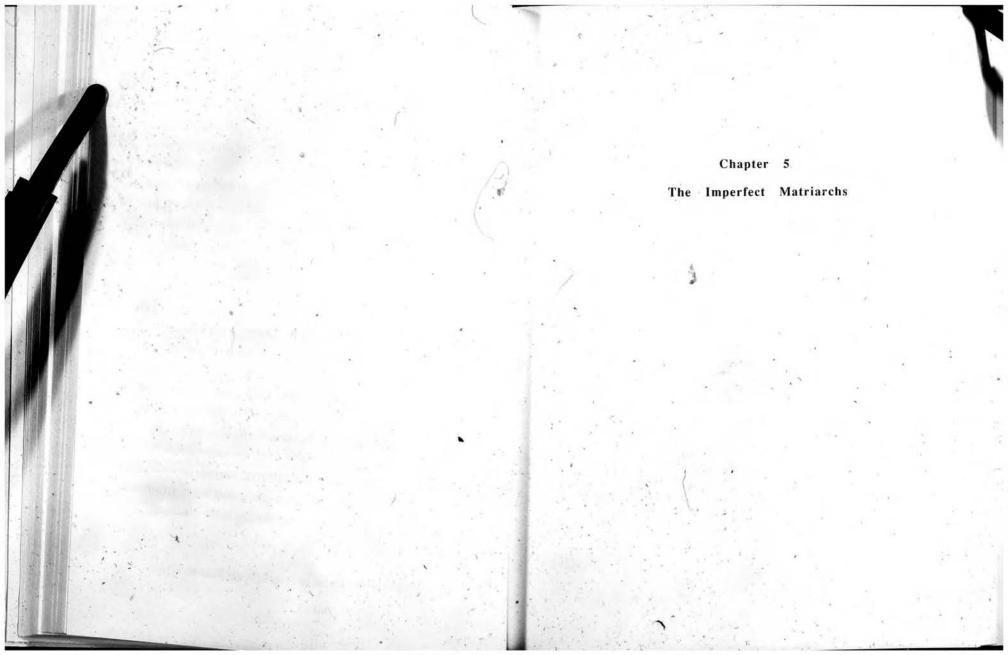
and each gained. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained the tribes (and the birthright), while Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the tribes and the birthright. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: The one lost mandrakes and gained two tribes and the privilege of burial with him, while Rachel gained mandrakes and lost the tribes and burial with him. (Genesis Rabbah 72:3)86

In the context of Rachel and Leah's conflict, this midrash seems appropriate. It is Rachel's barrenness that motivates her to barter for the mandrakes. She doesn't seem to care if Leah benefits from this transaction, she only desires to bear herself. The midrash points out that the transaction and the barrenness that motivated the transaction resulted in both losses and gains for both women.

D. Conclusion

Barrenness is a key to the special status of the matriarchs. Although the pain that they suffer is immense, their barrenness is central to their ultimate status as matriarchs and to the significance of the sons they eventually bear. Both Sarah and Rachel bear sons that take over the mantle of the patriarchy and without whom the stories and the history of the people of Israel could not progress. Without barrenness, the relationships that are played out in the Genesis narratives would have been severely altered. Barrenness is the ultimate motivation in the change of status of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah, and the eventual birth of half siblings in the Abrahamic lineage.

⁸⁶ This tradition is also found in Song of Songs Rabbah 7:14.





As the Mothers of Israel, the matriarchs are portrayed in glowing terms. The Rabbis, however, have no qualms about embellishing their negative traits or even transforming their positive attributes into blemishes when they feel it is justified. Although throughout the Rabbinic period it was considered inappropriate to disparage the matriarchs or the patriarchs, the Rabbis overlooked this prevailing custom if a point needed to be made. If the matriarchs acted as the most powerful role models in the text, why not utilize this power to teach lessons even about the negative aspects of human beings?

One does not have to look far to find examples of the negative character traits that are attributed by the Rabbis to the female species.

R. Levi said: Women possess the four following characteristics: they are greedy, inquisitive, envious and indolent. Whence do we know that they are greedy? From what it is written, "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food" (Genesis 3:6). Whence do we know them to be inquisitive? For it is written, "And Sarah heard them at the door" (Genesis 18:10), that is, she was eavesdropping on the angel. Whence do we know that they are envious? "And Rachel envied her sister". (Genesis 30:1). Whence do we know that they are indolenFor it is written, "Make ready quickly, three measures of fine meal" (Genesis 13:6), The Rabbis add two more characteristics; they are quarrelsome and gossips. Whence do we know that they are quarrelsome? And Sarai said unto Abram: "My wrong be upon you" (Genesis 16:5). And whence do we know that they are gossips? For it is written, "And Miriam spoke" (Deuteronomy 24:9). (Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:11)



In this text the Rabbis use Sarah, Rachel and Miriam to exemplify the four negative character traits that women possess. Although they are clearly important positive role models at other times in the Bible, here the Rabbis have no problem attributing negative characteristics to the Matriarchs.

A. Negative Characterizations of the Women in the Genesis **Narratives**

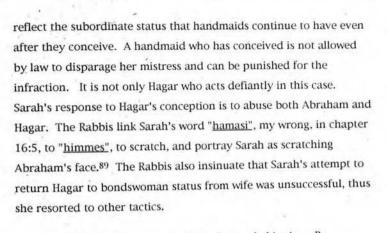
Hagar and Sarah's relationship is one of subordinate and mistress. Hagar is portrayed as a gift given to Sarah by Pharoah as a result of the plagues that God sent on her behalf. The Midrash plays on the word "agar" or gift as related to the name Hagar.87 Sarah offers Hagar to Abraham and, after conceiving, Hagar disparages her mistress in this way:

Hagar would say: '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." (Genesis Rabbah 45:4)

Hagar is treading on thin ice. The Rabbis portray her in direct opposition to the Ancient Near Eastern laws governing handmaids who act as surrogate mothers for their mistresses.88 These laws

⁸⁷ Genesis Rabbah 45:2.

⁸⁸ See Chapter1, p. 13 which refers to the Ur-Nammu Laws.



R. Abba said: She restrained her from cohabitation. R. Berekhiah aid: She slapped her face with a slipper. R. Berekhian said in Rabbi Abba's name: She bade her carry buckets of water and bath towels to the baths. (Genesis Rabbah 45:6)

The midrash adds that Sarah put the evil eye on Hagar and she miscarried. This is repeated when she sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness where the Rabbis portray Sarah as giving the evil eye to Ishmael in order to explain why Hagar had to carry her grown son as they departed. Finally, Sarah's motivation for expelling Hagar and Ishmael are made clear. According to Josephus, a metamorphosis takes place after her own child is born:

Sarah at the first, when Ishmael was born of her servant Hagar, cherished him with an affection no less than if he had been her own son, seeing that he was being trained for the chieftancy. But when she her self

⁸⁹ Genesis Rabbah 45:5.

⁹⁰ Genesis Rabbah 45:5 and 53:13.



gave birth to Isaac, she felt it was wrong that her boy should be brought up with Ishmael, who was the older son and might injure Isaac after their father was dead. (Josephus, <u>Iewish Antiquities</u> I:214-218)

The basis for the negative characterization of Sarah in the midrash is a direct result of her rivalry with and jealousy of Hagar. Once it is apparent that Isaac is to inherit Abraham's mantle as patriarch, Sarah does everything in her power to mistreat both Hagar and Ishmael, and to insure their ultimate banishment.

The rivalry and jealousy that are found in the stories of Jacob's family involves Rachel and Leah and not their handmaids. In fact Bilhah and Zilpah are used to legitimately build up both sisters in their rivalry between one another. In this way, the rivalry that existed between Sarah and Hagar that ultimately prevented Ishmael from obtaining any legitimacy, is resolved in the episodes between Jacob's wives. However, the tension that exists between Rachel and Leah is more complex than it was between Sarah and Lagar. The first indication of rivalry is through the description of Rachel as ahoovah, loved, and Leah as senuah, hated in Genesis Chapter 29: 30 and 31.

The fact that Leah is described as hated in the text has multiple interpretations according to the Midrash. Leah is hated according to the Rabbis because wicked children would eventually come from her,⁹¹ because she scolded Jacob for working the additional seven years for Rachel,⁹² and because she acted like one who was hated.⁹³

⁹¹ Aggadat Bereshit 49.

⁹² Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayetsei 7.

⁹³ Genesis Rabbah 71:2

Another interpretation of her hated status is contained in the following tradition:

All hated her: Sea travelers hated her, land travelers abused her, and even the women behind the beams abused her saying: 'This Leah leads a double life: she pretends to be righteous, yet it is not so, for if she were righteous, would she have deceived her sister? R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Hanan said in the name of R. Shmuel b. R. Isaac: When the patriarch Jacob saw how Leah deceived him by pretending to be her sister, he determined to divorce her. (Genesis Rabbah 71:2)

This midrash portrays Leah as hated by everyone. It is interesting to note the similarity between what is said about Leah and what Hagar says about Sarah in Genesis Rabbah 45:4. Both speeches depict Sarah and Leah living two lives; one outwardly righteous while the other is deceitful. The midrashim ask how these matriarchs could be so righteous if one could not conceive and the other deceived her husband? This highlights the Rabbis' tendency to pick and choose the characteristics or behavior to be emphasized which would enable them to paint a positive or negative portrayal of the matriarchs in the Midrash.

Although it is Rachel who is the favored and loved wife, the Midrash attributes more jealousy to her than to Leah. She does not exhibit jealousy when Leah is married to Jacob, however her jealousy becomes apparent when the focus is on Leah's good deeds:

When she (Rachel) saw her sister brought to her wedding canopy, she was not jealous, and now she was jealous. What caused her jealousy? She was jealous of Leah's good deeds. She said: 'Were it not that she is

more righteous than I, God would not have given her sons before me.' Therefore she was envious. She said to Jacob: "Give me children or I shall die"...Jacob said to her: "My father Isaac had only one wife, therefore he prayed on her behalf, but I have four wives. (Aggadat Bereshit 42)

This view of Rachel is common in the Midrash. Leah possesses the one thing Rachel desires: the ability to bear children. Rachel seemed to acquiesce completely when her sister switched places with her, but when she realizes that she is barren and Leah is not, her jealousy and the ensuing rivalry cannot be contained.

And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister (Genesis 30:1). R. Isaac observed: It is written, 'Let not thy heart envy sinners' (Proverbs 23:17), yet you say, Rachel envied her sister! This, however, teaches that she envied her good deeds, reasoning: Were she not righteous, would she have borne children? (Genesis Rabbah 71:6)

Not only does Leah possess this gift, but she has the honor of bearing Jacob's first born son, Reuben. It is Reuben who finds the mandrakes that are the subject of the haggling that goes on between Rachel and Leah after Leah has given birth to children. The mandrakes are in Leah's possession and Rachel wants them, apparently for their aphrodiasical properties. ⁹⁴ Leah agrees to give them away on the condition that she can lie with Jacob. According to this midrash, Rachel mistreated Jacob and because of this, Leah is buried with Jacob:

⁹⁴ See Chapter 1, p. 23 for an explanation of the power of the mandrakes.

Then Rachel said to Leah: "Give me, I pray thee of your son's mandrakes, and she said to her: "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband". R. Simeon taught: Because Rachel treated that righteous man Jacob so slightingly, she was not buried together with him. Thus it says, "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight," hinting with you he will lie in death, not with me. R. Eleazar said: Each lost by the transaction, and each gained. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained the tribes (and the birthright), while Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the tribes and the birthright. R. Samuel b Nachman said: The one lost mandrakes and gained two tribes and the privilege of burial with him, while Rachel gained mandrakes and lost the tribes and burial with him. (Genesis Rabbah 72:3)

This tradition points out how much was actually determined by Rachel's slighting of Jacob, she loses the privilege of burial and the tribes (Issachar and Zevulun), while only gaining the mandrakes. Although Leah is hated, Rachel is here depicted as treating Jacob in a hateful way. We can hear it here in her words. "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight for your sons mandrakes" (Genesis 30:15).

Rachel has slighted Jacob by using him as a pawn.

For all of their dissent and rivalry, Rachel's and Leah's final words are spoken together, in unison as they answer Jacob in Genesis 31:14, "And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him: "Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? Are we not counted as strangers by him, for he has sold us and quite devoured also our money." As innocuous as this statement seems, the Rabbis are able to turn it into the reason for Rachel's untimely death. This is a good example of the Rabbi's tendency to imbue an innocent



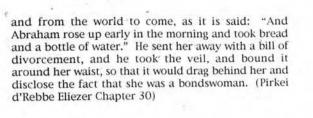
statement with negative connotations. She died, simply because she spoke out of turn, before her elder sister. This is a good example of the Rabbis' ability to exemplify both the positive and negative nuances of a relationship in the text. On one hand, the Rabbis portray the two sisters answering Jacob together as they agree for the first time in the text. On the other hand, this very dialogue is cited as an example for Rachel's untimely death. The Rabbis portray her answering Jacob out of turn, before her older sister.

B. Impact of the Negative Attributes of the Matriarchs on their Family Relationships

The stress of having more than one wife and multiple children from multiple wives is portrayed clearly in the Midrash. Although Abraham ultimately sends Hagar, his second wife, and their son Ishmael into the wilderness at the bidding of Sarah and God, according to the Rabbis', he still is upset and concerned about their ultimate fate. Sarah begs Abraham to divorce Hagar and send her away. Here, Abraham, like Sarah, was indeed concerned with the prospect of Ishmael making trouble in the future and desired to make Hagar's status as a bondswoman public. Note the following midrash in this regard:

Abraham rose early and wrote a bill of divorce and gave it to Hagar, and he sent her and her son away from himself, and from Isaac, his son, from this world

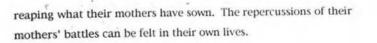
⁹⁵ Genesis Rabbah 74:4.



This midrash also shows that Abraham desired to see where Ishmael and his mother were going. According to the end of this midrash, "Abraham desired to see Ishmael his son, and to see the way that they went." It is obvious how trying the presence of multiple wives was to the family dynamic.

Jacob, too, experiences this same dilemma in regards to Rachel and Leah. When Jacob saw that Leah had deceived him by pretending to be her sister on their wedding night, the midrash reveals that he was determined to divorce her. When Rachel pushes him to pray on her behalf for children, he lashes out at her: Jacob's anger burned against Rachel and he said: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?" (Genesis 30:2) Both Abraham and Jacob experience similar frustration as a result of their circumstances. They face the needs of not only multiple wives, but as patriarchs, the will of God also weighs heavily on their decisions. The children of the co-wives, sisters, and concubines also face turbulence as a result of the feud between their mothers. Isaac and Ishmael and Reuben and Joseph are portrayed as

⁹⁶ Genesis Rabbah 71:2.



C. Conclusion

It is clear that the same qualities which had been the underpinnings of the matriarchs' merit, have been transformed in these midrashim into the affirmation of the blemishes on their character. According to the midrashim, they did not always behave in a way that was befitting a mother of Israel. Instead, they quarrel with each other, mistreat one another, rivalry and jealousy create rifts between them, and their relationships with their husbands and children suffer as a result. Although she is another human being, Sarah mistreats Hagar as her subordinate. Once Hagar is banished by Sarah, she doesn't have to deal with the repercussions in her own nuclear family. Although in the Midrash, Rachel and Leah have no conflicts with their subordinates, Bilhah and Zilpah, they themselves experience severe rivalry and jealousy. The same feelings that Sarah has towards Hagar are also illuminated in the midrashim about Rachel and Leah.

Because Hagar's son Ishmael and Hagar herself are not included in the Abrahamic'line, it is easy to find examples of the Rabbi's negative comments about Hagar's and Ishmael's character. The same is not true for Bilhah and Zilpah, who have emerged unscathed by the Rabbis' portrayal in our tradition. As we will see in Chapter Seven, it is because of their maternal standing as the legitimate



mothers of Jacob's children that they are included in the Abrahamic lineage and not disparaged by the Rabbis.

Chapter 6

Exclusivity and Inclusivity of Co-Wives, Concubines and Handmaids

There is a great deal of change in the portrayal of the relationships between the women in the Genesis narratives. This can be observed in the treatment of co-wives and concubines through the course of the generations. When a matriarch failed to have children of her own, she gave her handmaid to her husband. Sarah was unable to follow through with her initial plan to include Ishmael as her own son once Isaac is born. Hagar is not included in the Abrahamic lineage as a matriarch because it is Isaac, not Ishmael that becomes Abraham's legitimate heir. Contrastingly, Rachel and Leah were able to not only include their handmaids in their families as co-wives and co-mothers, but were able to accept the children of their handmaids as legitimate heirs of Jacob, their husband. The differences between these two families are apparent in both the Biblical and the midrashic material. Not only are Bilhah and Zilpah included in particular midrashim as two of the six matriarchs, but the midrashic tendency to include the sons birthed by the handmaids to the patriarchs in the Abrahamic lineage is expressed in the portrayal of both Abraham and Jacob marrying their handmaidwives after the death of Sarah and Rachel and Leah.

A. Exclusion of Co-wives and Concubines

The mutability of Hagar's status is very clear throughout the midrashim. Although she is identified as the daughter of Pharoah and even the granddaughter of Nimrod, 97 she is referred to as wife

⁹⁷ Targum Pseudo Jonathan and Targum Onkelos to Genesis 16:2.

and concubine even after she has given birth to Ishmael. Yet, Philo depicts Hagar as a temporary fixture in Abraham's life, not his wife. According to Philo, Hagar's name means "sojourning." In this midrash, God speaks to Abraham to clarify the ultimate status of the two women in his life:

Rabbi Jehudah said: In that night the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to him, He said to him: Abraham, do you not know that the Sarah was appointed to you for a wife from her mother's womb? She is your companion and the wife of your covenant; Sarah is not called your handmaid, but your wife; neither is Hagar called your wife, but your handmaid; and all that Sarah has uttered she has spoken truthfully. Let it not be grievous in your eyes, as it is said: "And God said to Abraham, Let it not be grievous in your sight" (Genesis 21:12). (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30)

Portraying Hagar's status as a handmaid throughout the narrative is clearly one of the recurring themes, as the following tradition points out.

"And he said: Hagar, Sarai's handmaid" (Genesis 16:6). So runs the proverb: 'If one man tells you that you have asses' ears, do not believe him; if two tell it to you, order a halter.' Thus Abraham said: 'Behold, thy maid is in your hand; the angel said: Hagar, Sarai's handmaid. Hence, 'And she said: I flee from the face of my mistress, Sarai'. (Genesis Rabbah 45:7)

Here the Rabbis construct the instances when Hagar is called a handmaid by Abraham, by the angel and finally as she refers to herself. This sentiment is echoed in the description of Hagar's wandering in the desert as idolatry. The Rabbis link the root of

⁹⁸ Philo, Index of Names, Hagar.

wandering (tayta) with Jeremiah 10:15 which states: "They are vanity, a work of delusion." (tatu'im)⁹⁹ This reference to idol making in Jeremiah as a work of delusion is compared to Hagar's wandering. Although the major conflict revolving around Hagar involves Sarah, her mistress, Abraham's direct feelings about his second wife and son are also portrayed in the Midrash.

Abraham rose early and wrote a bill of divorce and gave it to Hagar, and he sent her and her son away from himself, and from Isaac, his son, from this world and from the world to come, as it is said: "And Abraham rose up early in the morning and took bread and a bottle of water" (Genesis 21:14). He sent her away with a bill of divorcement, and he took the veil, and bound it around her waist, so that it would drag behind her and discrose the fact that she was a bondswoman. Not only this, but Abraham desired to see Ishmael, his son, and to see the way that they went. (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30)

The duality of Abraham's feelings are represented; he is both sad at the departure and relieved. The tension is clear; Abraham must send Ishmael away although he still loves him and wants to see him. He gives Hagar the bill of divorce which denotes that she had the rights of a wife, but he desires, like Sarah, to make public Hagar's status as a slave in order to protect Isaac's rights of inheritance. Because her son's status as firstborn is usurped by Isaac, she is no longer necessary in the Genesis narratives in terms of the continuity of the people of Israel. According to the Rabbis, this exclusion was necessary to create a definitive boundary between Isaac and Ishmael as legitimate sons. Hagar is considered a ger, a stranger, once Isaac

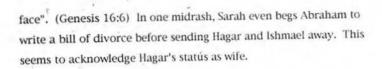
⁹⁹ Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30.

enters the family. Although her status changes in Genesis Chapter 16 as a wife, in Genesis Chapter 21 she returns to handmaid/slave status again.

In comparison, Rachel and Leah had a completely different relationship with their handmaids, so the issue of the exclusion of their handmaids is not relevant to them. The rivalry between Rachel and Leah, however, gave rise to an exclusion of a different kind. The relationship between these two sisters mirrors Sarah and Hagar's relationship in its focus on childbearing. Although they are not technically excluded, they are at different times portrayed as envious, hated and jealous. Rachel and Leah bear children separately, never contemporaneously. When one sister bears, it has deeper implications than fertility alone. She is granted status as a mother of Israel and a matriarch, while at that time, her sister is excluded from the right to motherhood and the matriarchy.

B. Inclusion of Co-Wives and Handmaids

is born, her changing status is evident in the shift of the Rabbis' portrayal of her from slave to free, concubine to wife. They even picture her remarrying Abraham after Sarah's death. Although Hagar is included most often by the Rabbis before Sarah gives birth to Isaac, her status is not completely dependent on Sarah's ability to bear. Even before she gives birth to Ishmael, Hagar is banished by Sarah. "And when Sarah dealt harshly with her, she fled from her



Ben Tema said: Sarah said to Abraham: Write a bill of divorce and send away this handmaid and her son from me and Isaac, my son, in this world and in the world to come. (Pirkei d'Rebbi Eliezer, Chapter 30)

Why would someone give a bill of divorce to a handmaid unless she had been elevated to the status of wife for a period of time? She is elevated to this position according to the midrash, because it would be inappropriate for a handmaid or slave to bear the patriarch's children. 100 Another midrash makes it clear that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to be a wife to him:

And she gave her to Abram, her husband, to be a wife to him, but not to another; to be a wife, but not a concubine. (Genesis Rabbah 45:3)

Not only is Hagar portrayed as his wife by the Rabbis because of her status as the mother of his child, but Abraham's deep feelings for Ishmael and Hagar are revealed in this midrash which was cited above:

He sent her away with a bill of divorcement, and he took the veil, and bound it around her waist, so that it would drag behind her and disclose the fact that she was a bondswoman. Not only this, but Abraham desired to see Ishmael his son, and to see the way that they went. (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer: Chapter 30)

¹⁰⁰ Targum Pseudo Jonathan to Genesis 16:5.

Although this midrash reveals Hagar's status as wife and concubine, Abraham's concern is revealed in his desire to know where Hagar and Ishmael are going. The veil that he ties around her waist is both a symbol of Abraham's need to distance himself from Hagar and Ishmael, as well as a way for him to quietly keep his connection to them. Hagar was his wife; Ishmael was his son. The Biblical text clearly makes this point in Genesis Chapter 21:11: "And the thing was very grievous to Abraham because of his son." This is opposed to Isaac who is called "Sarah's son". Abraham's sadness was due to the departure of his son. Abraham is also very concerned with 'Hagar's treatment as a reflection of God's presence in their lives. When Sarah requests that Hagar be returned to her status as a handmaid, Abraham tells her: "Once we have made her a matron, we cannot go back and enslave her, for to do so would be a desecration of God's name..." 101

The Rabbis' attempt to keep Hagar connected to Abraham is strangely apparent in their depiction of Abraham's marriage to Hagar after Sarah's death. It is made clear in the following passage:

After Sarah's death, Abraham again took Hagar his divorced wife, as it is said: "And Abraham again took his wife and her name was Keturah". (Genesis 25:1) Why does it say "and he again?" Because on the first occasion she was his wife and he again betook himself to her. Her name was Keturah, because she was perfumed with all kinds of scents. (Genesis Rabbah 45:8)

¹⁰¹ Midrash Proverbs, Chapter 26:1.

This is a rare example of the Rabbis' inclusion of Hagar in Abraham's nuclear family for her own sake. The midrash stresses that Abraham married Keturah again, and according to the Biblical text, the only other woman to be his wife besides Sarah, was Hagar. In Chapter 24, it is interesting to note that Isaac was at <u>Be-er Lahoi Roi</u> on his way to procure his wife Rebecca. This is the place that Hagar names in Chapter 16. Immediately after this is the statement that Abraham again was married and his wife's name was Keturah. 102

Hagar is ultimately excluded from the Abrahamic lineage and his nuclear family. Although God does promise both Hagar and Abraham that Ishmael would be the father of a great nation, Hagar's status is mutable throughout the Genesis narrative. Because she is an outsider, the attempt on the part of the Rabbis to include her as a wife, both before and after Sarah' death, is interesting to contemplate.

Rachel and Leah do not share the same difficulties with their handmaids that was true of Sarah and Hagar. In fact, with all of the conflict that was generated between Rachel and Leah, the Rabbis seem to have very little interest in portraying any animosity between the handmaids and their mistresses. Quite the opposite seems to occur.

Because of the enduring legacy of all twelve of Jacob's children, the Rabbis recognize Bilhah's and Zilpah's status as that of the "matriarchs." The highest achievement in the Rabbis' eyes was being designated as a matriarch or patriarch-the mothers and fathers of

¹⁰² Genesis 25:1.

the people of Israel. Amazingly, Bilhah and Zilpah achieve this status as this midrash points out clearly.

And the princes brought their offerings before the Lord, six wagons, (Numbers 7:3) corresponding to the six days of creation, six, according to the six orders of the Mishnah, six, corresponding to the six matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, pisqa 1:7)

In addition Philo gives Bilhah credit in the succession of bearing Jacob's children. He interprets Bilhah's name as "swallowing" and shows that because God desired to continue creating sons with the striving of the body, it was Bilhah who was chosen to bear after Leah, not Rachel.

The filling of the belly is the most essential matter, and the foundation of the other passions. None of them, as we see, can take shape unless it has the belly to support it. When Leah's sons, the good things of the soul, had been born before Jacob's other sons, and had ceased with Judah, who is praise, God, being about to create representatives of the forward striving of the body as well, causes Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, to bear children even before her mistress. Bilhah is 'swallowing'. (Philo, Allegorical Interpretation III, 144-147)

What is even more striking is the Rabbis' attempt in various midrashim to tie Bilhah and Zilpah to the Abrahamic line in different ways. Bilhah and Zilpah are portrayed as two other daughters of Laban who had been borne from his own concubines. 103 Josephus points out that "the two sisters each had a handmaid given them by

¹⁰³ Genesis Rabbah 74:13, Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 36, Targum Yerushalmi on Genesis 29:24.

their father-Leah had Zilpah and Rachel, Bilhah-in no way slaves, but subordinates." 104 According to Josephus, Bilhah and Zilpah were not bondswomen. The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs 105 notes that these two handmaids were the daughters of Rotheus, a brother of Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, a God-fearing man belonging to the family of Abraham. Bilhah and Zilpah are also portrayed as sisters in Jubilees 28:9. Because of the tendency to relate all of the tribes to Abraham, these associations make sense. Bilhah and Zilpah were the legitimate mothers of Jacob's sons.

Finally, the conflict between Rachel and Leah is resolved in different ways throughout the Midrash. Although there are many instances in which the sisters are portrayed in opposition, trying to supersede each other, the Rabbis portray them ultimately as equals. Targum Pseudo Jonathan translates Rachel and Leah answering Jacob, "And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him..." (Genesis 31:14) as: "And Rachel answered with the consent of Leah, and they said to him...,"106 explaining that Leah was in agreement with Rachel. Finally, Rachel and Leah do have children who are important in the scheme of the generations and the ultimate future of the people of Israel. This passage gives a clear picture of this portrayal.

'Now Laban had two daughters' like two beams running from end to the other end of the world. Each produced captains, each produced kings, from each arose slayers of lions, from each arose conquerors of countries, from each arose dividers of countries. The sacrifices brought by the son of each overrode the

¹⁰⁴ Josephus, Jewish Antiquities: I, 302-305.

¹⁰⁵ The Testament of Naphtali 1:9.

¹⁰⁶ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 31:14.

Sabbath. The wars waged by the descendants of both overrode the Sabbath. To each was given two nights, the night of Pharoah and of Sennacherib to Leah, and the night of Gideon and of Mordechai to Rachel, as it says, 'On that night the king could not sleep' (Est 6:1). (Genesis Rabbah 70:15)

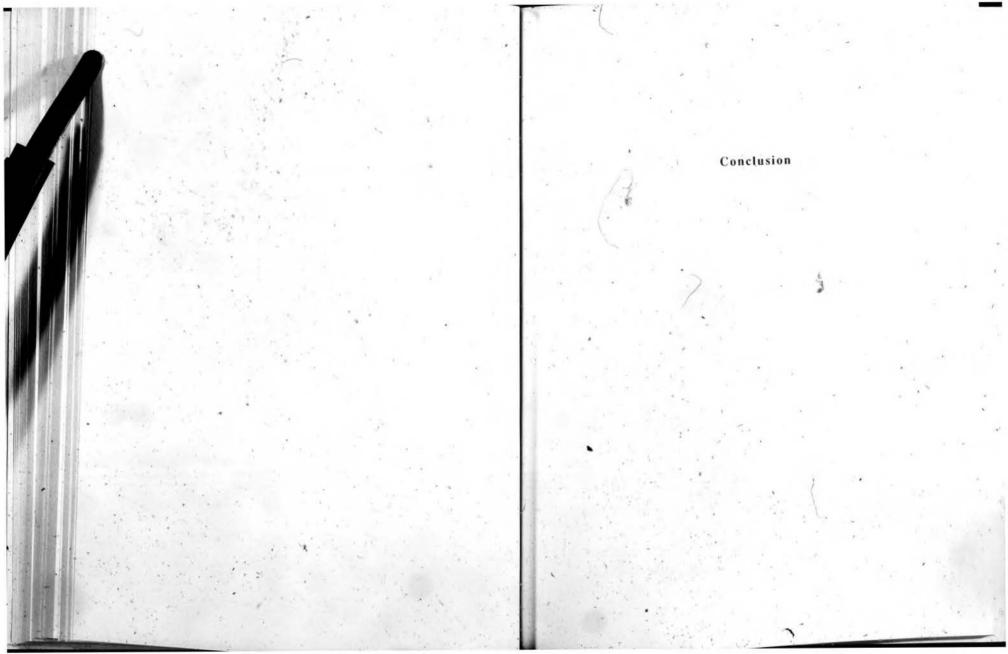
The Rabbis interestingly play on the word <u>banot</u>, daughters, as meaning <u>bonot</u>, builders. In this midrash, Rachel and Leah are given equal status as the mothers who are the builders of Israel.

C. Conclusion

Many lessons are Larned through the Rabbis' treatment of the Genesis narratives. The Rabbis are consistent in their utilization of any character or any situation in the portrayal of the reality that they want the text to reflect. This is evident through the changing status of co-wives, concubines and sisters in their family relationships. A woman can be both included and excluded as a legitimate mother and wife or a slave in one single midrash. In Hagar's case, her status as a wife was necessary because she was the mother of Abraham's child. Yet the Rabbis need to portray her as a ger, a stranger, which becomes more evident after she is no longer an integral component in the continuity of the Abrahamic line. Once Isaac is born, she is for the most part excluded from the picture. There are, however, instances when the Rabbis elevate her role after Sarah's death, as Abraham re-marries Hagar as Keturah. This could possibly be an effort on the part of the Rabbis to portray Abraham's

character in a compassionate and loving way or a later response to Arabs or Moslems.

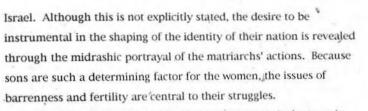
There is a different picture painted through the midrash of Rachel and Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah. Because there are four women instead of two, this picture is more complex. The Rabbis portray Rachel and Leah in opposition to one another in their efforts to ascend to the status of favorite wife and matriarch. Bilhah and Zilpah are not only left out of this controversy, but they are portrayed as half sisters of Rachel and Leah, married to Jacob after the sisters' deaths, and even counted as two of the six matriarchs.



The women in the Genesis narratives are complex human beings. Although it is a difficult task to fully understand them from material preserved in the Biblical text, we have the Rabbis' portrayal to fill in the gaps, flesh out the characters and expand their relationships. These women didn't exist in a vacuum, instead they lived in a world where their worth and standing was very much governed by their ability to bear children, specifically sons. This ability functioned as a way to define nationhood and their matriarchal status. It is also at the root at the complexity of relations between co-wives, sisters, and concubines.

One might think that because these are the matriarchs and the handmaids who bear the patriarchs' children, that they would be portrayed as glowing examples of virtue and role models for the ensuing generations. There are times when this is true. But, there are also many times when the Rabbis paint a conspicuously negative picture of matriarchs and their handmaids. The Biblical text reveals one layer of the real lives of our ancestors. For these families, there are many questions left unanswered in the Bible. The Biblical narrative reflects layers of interconnectedness between the four generations beginning with Sarah and Abraham. It is through the Rabbis' portrayal of these families and their individual relationships that a clearer picture emerges.

What is clear from the very beginning for all of the women in the text is the importance of children, specifically sons. Throughout the four generations, the pressures that faced Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah were based on the need to bear male children in order to attain matriarchal status and be counted among the mothers of



The idea of a barren matriarch is not oxymoronic, because in the Bible, a woman's barrenness is at times a temporary status that can be lifted by God. The impact of barrenness, however, is felt throughout the relationships between the women, their husbands and their children. In fact, barrenness is the single most important factor in the elevation in status of a handmaid to that of wife. Without barrenness, the relationships that were created between the wives and their handmaids would not have happened, and without the handmaids, this would have been a different thesis. Barrenness is also a motivating factor in the strife that exists between legitimate and illegitimate sons and the resulting conflicts over inheritance and birthright. We see this played out in the relationships between Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau and the sons of Jacob, specifically between Reuben and Joseph. The final area that impacts the four generations negatively is the issue of deception. It begins with Abraham deceiving Avimelech about his relationship with Sarah. It continues into the next generation when Isaac is deceived by his own son Jacob, who steals the birthright from Esau, his brother. Jacob is deceived by Laban, his father-in-law, who switches Leah for Rachel on Jacob's wedding night. Finally, Jacob's sons deceive him when they throw Joseph into a pit, telling him that a beast had torn him apart in the wilderness.

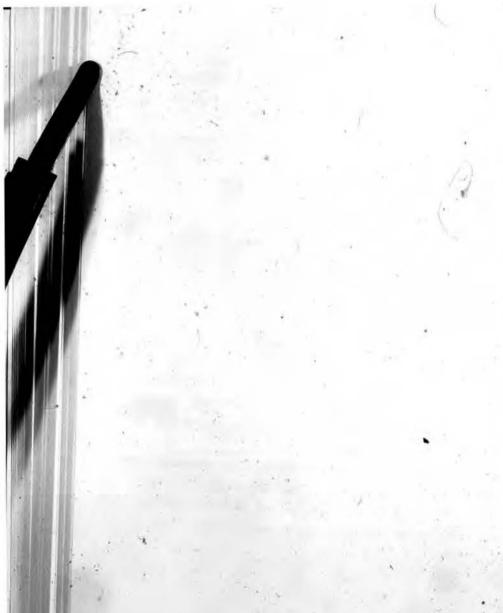
The matriarchs are portrayed in many different ways throughout the midrashim. What is most notable is the Rabbis' ability to explain one behavior or characteristic of a women in both a negative and positive light. Although the overruling guide in the portrayal of our ancestors is never to disparage them or their reputation, this does not necessarily hold true when the Rabbis 'desired to prove a particular point. If the point was strengthened by the use of a matriarch or patriarch being portrayed negatively, the Rabbis did not hesitate to do so. The dichotomy between the portrayal of the merit of the matriarchs, and their flaws and imperfection is real. The Rabbis concretize this in their portrayal of Leah's eyes as weak, a flaw that is turned into an attribute. Not only is rakkot, weak, turned into a merit she was crying because she was destined to marry Esau), but the Raybis explain that rakkot should actually be arukhot, long. Her merits were extensive and bountiful according to one midrash. This is also true in the midrashic depiction of Sarah's and Hagar's relationship. The Rabbis portray Sarah as compassionate towards Hagar during her pregnancy and loving Ishmael as her own son until Ishmael is born. The portrayal then shifts as she demands that Hagar must be divorced, and Hagar and Ishmael be sent into the wilderness. The Rabbis do not hesitate to use the matriarchs to describe the negative qualities of woman. Sarah and Rachel are described as inquisitive, quarrelsome and envious.

The relationships between the women change over time. In order to strengthen Isaac's position as the legitimate son, and Ishmael as the illegitimate son, Sarah banishes Hagar and these

brothers grow up separated from one another. This is not the case for Rachel, Leah and their handmaids. Not only are the children of all four women are given equal status, but Bilhah and Zilpah, amazingly enough, are given the title of matriarch and are included as two of the six matriarchs. What is true about the depiction of these women is that they are consistently inconsistent. When the Rabbis desire the matriarchs to fulfill the role of the mothers of the children of Israel, they are portrayed in glowing terms as beacons of shining merit. However, if the Rabbis desired to portray a woman or women negatively, they had no problem painting another picture using the same woman as an example. Throughout time, the Rabbis are consistent in their portrayals. Scanning the Aramaic Targumim through the Anthologies of the Yalkutim, it is easy to find portrayals that encompass both negative and positive portrayals of these women.

In the process of writing this thesis, there have been forks in the road where I chose one direction and was unable to fully explore another. I know that these paths would have also been challenging and interesting. Three areas that I felt would have been very worth my while to explore include later mystical interpretations of the text, Islamic midrashim and modern comparisons.

The later mystical interpretations of this material added layers to the Rabbinic interpretation. In the Zohar, the period of seven years that Jacob worked for Leah and Rachel is linked to both the "seven supernal years" that reflect the septannate period of the



moon as well as "joining himself with the Sabbatical year." ¹⁰⁷ In the Zohar, the number seven takes on a deeper meaning than just a period of time that passes. The Zohar also portrays the birth of Jacob's children as a reflection of the higher order of the universe. Leah's six sons represented the "Higher World" order as well as the six directions. To get a sense of the difference between the Rabbinic and the mystical portrayals, this passage from the Zohar describes Leah and Rachel as the upper and lower worlds:

The proof that all twelve tribes together effect the full realization of the lower world is to be seen in the fact that immediately Benjamin was born, Rachel died, and this lower world fell into its proper place, and attained through them perfect realization....Rachel thus died there and, and her place was filled by this lower world, which assumed its proper place in a completed House. But as long as Rachel was alive, the lower world could not be made perfected through them. If it is asked why Leah did not die at the same time, the answer is that the House was in the lower world, and from it all were to be brought to full self-realization, but it was not in the upper world. This was the reason that Leah did not die at that time. (The Zohar, Vayetze 158a)

This text goes on to describe all that is associated with Leah and the upper world as veiled and undisclosed and all that is associated with Rachel and the lower world as disclosed and revealed. This example reveals the differences between the Rabbinic and the mystical

¹⁰⁷ The Zohar. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, trans. London: The Soncino Press, 1949, 5 vols. Volume 2: <u>Vayetze</u> 153b.

portrayal of the text. The Zohar's mystical layer encompasses a Kabbalistic world view.

The Islamic portrayal of Hagar reveals another interesting layer. Although Hagar is not mentioned in the Qur'an, she plays a major role in Islamic tradition. According to the Al-Bukhari, an authoritative collection of Islamic traditions, Sarah's jealousy pushed Abraham into traveling with Hagar and Ishmael to Arabia. This paints a much different picture of the dynamic in Abraham's family. Abraham is also an Islamic patriarch. He is the father who sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness to be saved eventually by Allah, not God. The stories of Sarah and Hagar portray the matriarchs of two different religions and their stories can teach us many things about Jewish-Moslem relations.

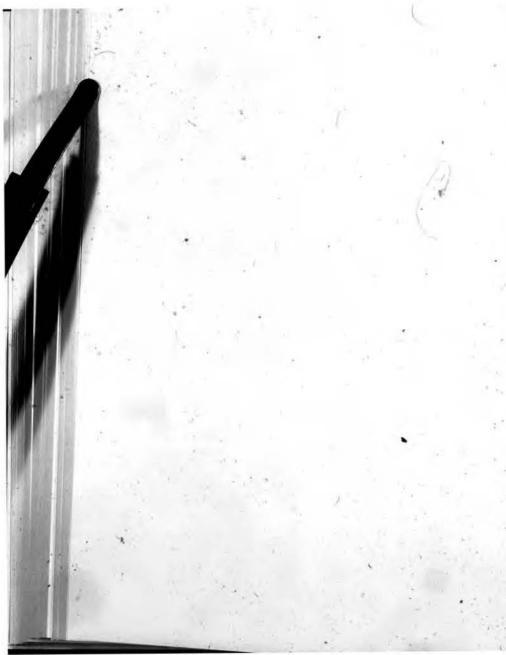
This material teaches us not only about political and ethnic circumstances, but the personal and psychological as well. Although we view the patriarchs and matriarchs as the beacons of monogamous family values, upon inspection, this is misleading. The Biblical world was ancient, not modern, but many of the challenges faced by Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah are shared by women today. Although they are not called surrogate mothers, in a sense the handmaids play this role. Fertility is one of the greatest challenges that a woman can face today, and if we look back into the text, it is evident that the complexity of this issue is addressed. Like families today, the Abrahamic nuclear families would have benefited

¹⁰⁸ M. Th. Houtsma, J. Wensinck, E. Levi-Provencal, H. A. R. Gibb, and W. Heffening, eds., Encyclopedia of Islam: Dictionary of the Geography, Ethnography and Biography of the Muhammadan Peoples, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966. 193.

a great deal from family therapy. However, in the Bible, the families turn to God, not a therapist, to explain the nuances of human behavior to them.

It is interesting to view our own lives through the lives of our ancestors. They, like us, experienced unions and separations, honesty and deceit, rivalry and compassion, and had to relate to step-parents and half-siblings. The feelings and motives that the Rabbis' attribute to our Biblical relatives are easy to relate to because they are very human impulses: love between a father and a son, jealousy between two women who love the same man, the need to protects one's children and sibling conflicts to name a few. The women in this thesis lived a few thousand years ago, but their impact on us through both the Biblical text and the Rabbis is unmistakable. Without their stories, we would not know that the complexity of our lives today are real reflections of the Biblical reality of yesterday.

Bibliography



Primary Sources

- Aggadat Bereshit, Solomon Buber, ed. Krakow: Fischer, 1902.
- <u>Babylonian Talmud.</u> Vilna Edition. Jerusalem: HaMesorah, 1981, 2 vols.
- <u>Babylonian Talmud.</u> Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, trans. London: Soncino Press, 1936.
- The Life and Work of Flavius Josephus. William Whiston, A.M., trans. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1970.
- <u>Lamentations Rabbah.</u> Jacob Neusner, trans. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989.
- The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus, William Whiston, trans. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- Midrash bereshit Rabbati. Chanoch Albeck, ed. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1940.
- Midrash Proverbs, Burton L. Visovsky, trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- The Midrash on Psalms, William Braude, trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- Midrash Rabbah. Vilna: 1878, reprinted in Israel and in New York: E. Grossman's Hebrew Bookstore, 1953, 2 vols.
- Midrash Rabbah. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Marcus Simon, trans. London: Soncino Press, 1977.
- Midrash Tanhuma, Shlomo Buber, ed. Israel: Book export Enterprises, 1913.
- Midrash Tanhuma. John J. Townsend, trans. Hoboken: Ktav Publishing, 1989.
- Midrash Tehillim, S. Buber, ed. Vilna: NP, 1981.

- The Midrash on Psalms, William Braude, trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- Midrash Vayikra Rabbah, Margulies, M, ed. Jerusalem, Dfus Mercaz, 1953-1960, 5 vols.
- <u>The Odyssey</u>, Homer. 2 vols. A. T. Murray, trans. G. P. Putnam and Sons: New York, 1919.
- Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana, William Braude and Israel Kapstein, trans.
 Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975.
- Philo.10 vols. F. H. Colson, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938.
- <u>Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer</u>, Gerald Friedlander, trans. New York: Sefer Herman Press, 1981.
- <u>Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer</u>, D. Luria, ed. Warsaw: 1852, Reprinted in New York: Om Publishing, 1946.
- Rashi's Commentary to the Pentateuch, M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silvermann, trans. Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1930.
- Sefer Ha-Yashar, Joseph Dan, ed. Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute,
- Sefer Ha-Yashar, Kornfeld, Nachum and Walzer, Abraham, trans. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1993.
- Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah. Neusner, Jacob, trans. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Targum Onkelos to Genesis. Aberbach, Moses, and Grossfield, Bernard. Denver: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1982.
- Targum Pseudo-Ionathan to Genesis. Michael Maher, trans. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Yalkut Shimoni, Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984, 2 vols.
- The Zohar, Sperling, Harry and Maurice Simon, trans. London: The Soncino Press, 1949, 5 vols.

Secondary Sources

- Alter, Robert. The Art of Biblical Narrative, New York: Basic Books, 1981.
- Cassuto, U. <u>A Commentary on the Book of Genesis</u>. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1964.
- Encyclopaedia Iudaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1982, 17 vols.
- Fokkelmann, J.P. Narrative Art in Genesis. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1975.
- Ginzberg, Louis. <u>The Legends of the Jews</u>, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967, 7 vols.
- Gordon, C. H., "Erubu Marriage", in <u>Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and Hurrians in Honor of Frnest R. Lecheman.</u>
 Eds. M.A. Morrison and D. I. Owen. Indiana Eisenbrauns Publishing, 1981.
- Gros, Louis Kenneth, ed. <u>Literary Interpretations of Biblical</u>
 <u>Narratives.</u> New York: Abingdon Press, 1974.
- Houtsma, M. T., A.J. Wensinck, E. Levi-Provencal, H. A. R. Gibb, and W. Heffening, eds. <u>Encyclopedia of Islam: A Dictionary of the Geography</u>. <u>Ethnography and Biography of the Muhammadan People</u>. Leiden: E. Brill, 1936.
- Hyman, Aaron. <u>Torah Haketuvah v'Ha-Mesorah al Torah, Nevi'im u'Ketuvim</u>, Tel⁻Aviv: Dyir, 1979, 3 vols.
- Leibowitz, Nehama. <u>Studies in Bereshit</u>, 4th rev. ed., Jerusalem Israel: Alpha Press; 1981.
- Plaut, Gunther. The Torah: A Modern Commentary. New York, UAHC, 1981.
- Pritchard, James. Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950.

