Pastoral Insights into Contemporary Family Relations: A Study of Abraham, His Wives, and His Offspring through the Eyes of *M'farshim* and *Midrash*

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Summary

This thesis is a study of Abraham's family and contemporary families. This thesis draws upon primary Jewish texts about Abraham's family, secondary sources on these texts, and contemporary psychological literature in order to show that in significant ways, the problems and emotional difficulties that may have been present in Abraham's family are similar to those that contemporary divorced and blended families face. Chapter One examines Abraham's family in the Bible and in midrashic imagination. Chapter Two explores how a sampling of Medieval, Hasidic, and Modern commentators viewed the relationship between members of Abraham's family. Chapter Three places interpretations of Abraham's family by the midrashists and commentators in conversation with contemporary psychological research on divorce and blended families. Chapter Four examines current divorce trends, and explores how clergy can reach out to individuals and families in our midst with a uniquely Jewish frame to understand their experiences related to divorce, separation, and living in blended families.

Introduction

As a future rabbi who comes from a blended family, I notice a level of silence around divorce in the Jewish community. From both my personal and professional experiences, I know that many individuals who are impacted by separation and divorce need support and care from their clergy and Jewish communities. Too often they do not receive it. For adults and children alike, divorce and the transitions that come with it can feel like an isolating and lonely experience. After my parents' divorced, my mother was hesitant to attend Shabbat services on weekends that my brother and I were with my father. It was painful for her to sit by herself, but fellow congregants did not reach out to her. Perhaps she would have attended more often if divorce had been on the congregation's radar, and members would have invited her to attend with them. Clergy can help create communities where community members reach out to people like my mother. I received more support from the synagogue than my mother did which enabled my congregation to feel like another home for me. My youth group advisor, who was a HUC-JIR rabbinical student at the time, used to fit pastoral care into our youth group planning calls. He asked me about my home life and my family, and he listened attentively. I felt cared for and supported. Clergy can and must help families know that they are not alone.

As a person with stepparents, half-siblings, and stepsiblings, I identify with Abraham's family. The mother and father of the Jewish people have a family that seems similar to my own. The Bible says very little about the relationships between Abraham's family members. What was the nature of those relationships? What emotions did the members of Abraham's family feel? Might contemporary blended

families resonate with the experiences of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar or Ishmael as I do? This thesis explores these questions and offers ways in which contemporary blended families might relate to Abraham's family.

Chapter One examines what information the biblical account does and does not provide about Abraham's family, and how the *midrashists* understood the relationships between members of Abraham's family. The dialogue in the biblical account is sparse and the detail lacking. Midrash expands upon the biblical text and describes emotions, imagines dialogue between family members, and creates new scenes and stories. These expansions bring out the human emotions that the members of Abraham's family might have experienced as a result of their family situations. These emotional experiences are not unlike those of blended families today.

Chapter Two explores how a sampling of Medieval, Hasidic, and Modern commentators viewed the relationships between Abraham's family members. The commentators built upon the midrash and sometimes created new interpretations. Like the *midrashists*, the *m'farshim* imagined the emotions Abraham's family experienced and what they might have said to one another. Their musings offer us possible connections between contemporary divorced families and blended families today.

Chapter Three analyzes the midrash and commentary in light of contemporary psychological literature. Striking parallels exist between the experiences of Abraham's family and the experience of families today. Despite significant differences between biblical society and contemporary society, certain challenges and human emotions seem timeless. The *midrashists* and *m'farshim* imagine great

tension between members of Abraham's family. Similar tensions arise between members of blended families today. Moreover emotions such as anger, despair, grief and love are present in contemporary families just as they might have been in Abraham's family.

Chapter Four discusses the prevalence of divorce in American society and the ways that broader societal trends are reflected in the Jewish community. The statistics suggest that Jewish communities will engage with many adults and children affected by divorce and the realities of being members of a blended family. This chapter suggests important ways that clergy can respond and help. Introducing members of divorced and blended families to Abraham's family may be one way clergy can normalize congregants' experiences and help them feel that they are not alone.

Abraham's family and blended families have a lot in common. The Jewish community can and should be a place where people can find comfort and discover themselves. Abraham's family enables contemporary families to contextualize their experiences within a Jewish framework and to connect their stories to the stories of our biblical ancestors. This thesis provides readers with the textual background and a summary of central insights from contemporary psychological research to reach out to individuals and families in our midst with a uniquely Jewish frame to understand their experiences related to divorce, separation, and living in blended families.

Chapter One

Abraham's Family In the Bible: What Can We Discover?

Key events of Abraham's family occur in Genesis 16:1-6 and Genesis 21:8-12. As is typical for most of the Bible, the language is terse, and the description minimal. The biblical text says very little about the interactions between Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael. It also does not provide much detail about the feelings or thoughts of these individuals. Yet, the biblical text itself does illuminate some of what goes on in this complicated biblical family. When quoting biblical verses, this thesis follows the 1999 JPS translation but uses gender-neutral language for God.

Sarai, unable to conceive, determines that she should give her maidservant Hagar to Abram. Sarai believes that she will derive some benefit from their union. She shares this idea with Abram, and Abram listens. In this instance, Sarai speaks directly to Abram saying, "Look, the Eternal has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid. Maybe I will have a child through her." [1] Sarai gives Hagar to Abram after they have lived in the land of Canaan for ten years. The text provides no information about Hagar's reaction to this arrangement.

After Hagar conceives, the Torah says, "…and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem." [2] Hagar's pregnancy alters the way she views herself in relationship to Sarai, and Sarai's words to Abram indicate that she is distressed by the change in her relationship with Hagar post-pregnancy. Sarai speaks to Abram, sharing with him her perception of Hagar and blaming him

[1] Genesis 16.1-2. When quoting biblical verses, this thesis follows the 1999 JPS
[2] Genesis 16.4.

for her predicament, despite the fact that she initiated Abram's cohabitation with Hagar. She says, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom, now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Eternal decide between you and me" [3] And so, Abram responds to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right."[4] Abram does not argue with Sarai, rather he gives her permission to do whatever she thinks will rectify the situation, and so the text says, "Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her." [5] The text does not indicate what this harsh treatment consists of, but whatever it is, it causes Hagar to flee. Hagar returns to Abram's house and Ishmael is born. "Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael."[6]

What can we ascertain about the relationships among Sarai, Abram, and Hagar from this episode? Sarai has power in her relationship with Abram, there is tension between Sarai and Hagar and between Sarai and Abram. However, we do not know what transpires between Sarai and Hagar, or how Abram feels when he follows Sarai's wishes. Why does the text indicate that Sarai waited ten years to give Hagar to Abram? Does this suggest that Abram was reluctant to have relations with another woman or that they both remained hopeful that Sarai might conceive? Also, we do not know how Abram and Hagar feel about one another, for they never speak to each other. In fact, Hagar does not speak at all. Furthermore, the text is silent regarding any reaction Abram has about Hagar's flight. After Hagar returns and Ishmael is

[3] Genesis 16.5.
[4] Genesis 16.6.
[5] Genesis 16.6.
[6] Genesis 16.15.

born, Sarai is seemingly absent at the moment of Ishmael's birth. The text gives no information as to her whereabouts at this particular moment.

The drama of this family continues in Genesis 21, after Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac. On the day of Isaac's weaning, Abraham hosts a feast. It is important to note that no such feast is mentioned in relation to Ishmael. Sarah sees "the son of Hagar," *m'şacheq*, often translated as playing. The text gives no details about what Ishmael was actually doing. In response to Ishmael's actions, Sarah speaks directly to Abraham, this time demanding, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." [7] As Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael, she does not refer to either of them by name. Furthermore, she views the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael as a competitive relationship that could ultimately threaten her son Isaac. And, Sarah makes very clear that she does not see Ishmael as a son, for she says, "with *my* son Isaac." Yet, Abraham does see Ishmael as a son, for the text says, "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his." This is the only time in this episode that the text makes explicit mention of emotion. There is no indication that he is distressed about sending Hagar away.

Much like the episode in Chapter 16, there is very little dialogue. Here Sarah is the only member of the family who speaks, thus highlighting Sarah's dominant role in this episode and the power she holds in the family. Through the description of Abraham's emotions, it is clear that he does not want to listen to Sarah. God steps in and says to Abraham, "…whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through

[7]Genesis 21.10.

Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you."[8] Hagar remains silent, and Ishmael and Isaac join her in this silence. This time, the Torah says nothing about Hagar's emotions, nor does it expound upon Isaac and Ishmael's emotions. Likewise, the text provides no information about the interactions between Isaac and Ishmael (other than the cryptic phrase in Genesis 21.8), or Isaac and Hagar, or Isaac and Abraham, or Hagar and Ishmael, or Hagar and Abraham, or Hagar and Sarah. We can only discern that Sarah has power in her relationship with Abraham, that Sarah favors Isaac over Ishmael because she does not see Ishmael as a son, and that Abraham cares for Ishmael because Ishmael is his son.

After Genesis 21, Hagar and Ishmael do not appear again until Genesis 25. Hagar is merely mentioned within the context of the line of Ishmael. Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham, the only other time they appear together in the Torah, but no dialogue is recorded, and the text does not offer up any details about their reunion.

After Sarah dies, Abraham takes another wife whose name is Keturah, and they have six children together. Abraham gives all of his assets to Isaac, and gives gifts to all of the children he has with Keturah. God blesses Isaac after Abraham's death, though it is not clear whether or not Abraham also blesses him before his death.

One can draw very few conclusions about Abraham's family from Genesis 25. The text is silent about Isaac and Ishmael's relationship. Isaac receives the inheritance from Abraham, and presumably Ishmael receives gifts, but the text does not mention any specific interaction between Abraham and these sons. Ishmael and Isaac show

[8] Genesis 21.12.

respect towards Abraham by burying him, but verse nine is devoid of emotional description. Moreover, Hagar is seemingly absent from Abraham's funeral.

In sum, from an analysis of the biblical text, one can identify familial tension, familial bonds, and specific power dynamics. Sarah holds the power in her relationships with Abraham and Hagar. Sarai feels diminished when Hagar conceives, and later becomes fearful for Isaac's position in the family after she gives birth. Abraham listens to Sarah, though he is reluctant at times, and Sarah and Hagar have a strained relationship. Sarah appears to love Isaac and despise Ishmael. Abraham seems to care about both of his sons, though he favors Isaac towards the end of his life. The biblical text omits numerous details about the relationships among these family members, leaving much to the reader's imagination. Midrash offers some of the missing details and provides responses to some of the unanswered questions.

Diverse Depictions of Abraham's Family in Midrash

The rabbis recognized the complexity of Abraham's family. They imagined what might have transpired between members of that family, as well as the specific emotions that family members might have felt. Perhaps the rabbis were disturbed by the troubling events in Abraham's family so they attempted to make sense of them.

Sarah and Hagar

The *midrashists* understand the power dynamic that exists between Sarai and Hagar. They comment on Genesis 16.2, imagining that for Sarai, Hagar is no more than an object. Yet, through their retelling, they lift up Sarai's plight. The rabbis of

Genesis Rabbah[9] 45.2 are struck by the phrase, "*Ulay ibaneh mimenah,*" literally meaning, "Maybe I will be built up through her." The word *ibaneh* comes from the root to build, so the *midrashists* assert that only one who is destroyed must be built up. Sarai is "*herus,*" destroyed by her barrenness. The rabbis suggest that Sarai views Hagar as the remedy for her destruction.

In Genesis Rabbah 45.2 the rabbis imagine Sarai's desperation as they interpret what Genesis 16.3 means when it says, "And Sarai, Abram's wife took her maid Hagar the Egyptian." They contend that it means that Sarai persuaded Hagar by speaking to her directly and saying, "You are happy that you will cleave to this holy body." In this interpretation, Sarai persuades Hagar by telling her how lucky she should feel that she will be given to Abram. From this depiction, it is clear that Sarai is determined to use Hagar to achieve her goal; however, the midrash points to something else significant. The rabbis seem to suggest that Sarai does not have ultimate power over Hagar. Perhaps Sarai coaxes Hagar because it is not a given that she will comply.

The rabbis illustrate a different power dynamic through an imaginative scene in Genesis Rabbah 45.4. Here, they expand upon what happens between Sarai and Hagar after Hagar conceives: [10]

> Ladies used to come to inquire how she was, and she would say to them, "Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman [Hagar]." Hagar would tell them: "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous

[9] Genesis Rabbah is an exegetical midrash on Genesis that includes simple explanations of words and sentences, parables, and haggadic interpretations. The final redaction probably took place in the first half of the 5th century C.E.
[10] H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. I (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 382.

> 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!" Said Sarah: 'Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No; I will argue the matter with her master![11]

There is more than one way in which one might interpret this midrash. The fact that Sarai plans to go to Abram, rather than confront Hagar herself, indicates that she wants Abram to stop Hagar's behavior. Maybe the rabbis wish to suggest that Abram is Hagar's true master, and therefore Sarai should not reprimand Hagar herself. Or perhaps, this scene depicts Sarai as one who sees herself as so superior to Hagar that she will not even engage with her. When asked about Hagar, Sarai refers to Hagar as a poor or wretched woman.

This last possibility points to an important aspect of the way in which the rabbis understood Sarai and Hagar's relationship. They imagine great tension between these two women. In this case, Sarai and Hagar each view themselves as better than the other. Hagar claims that if Sarai were actually righteous she would not be infertile, and Sarai perhaps implies that it is not worth her energy to speak to Hagar directly. The rabbis highlight the fact that neither woman regards the other highly.

Though the rabbis paint both Sarai and Hagar as nasty gossips in Genesis Rabbah 45.4, the *midrashists* also point out that the situation must have been difficult for Sarai. Genesis Rabbah 71.7 imagines the impact of Rachel's infertility on Jacob and Rachel's marital relationship. Jacob asks Rachel if she could do what his grandmother Sarah did when she "*hikhnisa ṣaratah l'tokh beitah,*" "brought *ṣaratah*

[11] Freedman et al., 382.

(her suffering) into her house." The word *ṣaratah* is significant for it means her anguish or her rival wife.[12] This word choice indicates the rabbis' view that a rival wife is a source of suffering. Perhaps this understanding impacts how the rabbis interpret Genesis 16.7, "Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her."

The rabbis imagine that Sarai made Hagar do the work of a slave,[13] work that would have been beneath her given her new status as a wife.[14] In this same midrash they even entertain the possibility that Sarai hit Hagar. Even more striking is the midrashic interpretation of Genesis 16.11. When Hagar meets the angel after fleeing from Sarai, the angel tells Hagar that she is with child and that she will conceive. The rabbis make sense of the redundancy in the following way: "… 'and she went in unto Hagar, and she conceived, why is it further stated, Behold thou will conceive?' This however teaches that an evil eye took possession of her and she miscarried…"[15] Because the angel assures Hagar that she will conceive, the rabbis assert that Hagar lost her first pregnancy. They imagine that Sarai felt so much jealousy and hatred towards Hagar that she caused Hagar to miscarry.

This disdain also appears in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer[16], Chapter 30. It says: "Sarah said to Abraham. Write a bill of divorce, and send this handmaid and her son from me and from Isaac my son, in this world and the world to come." In this later

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[12] Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature; with an Index of Scriptural Quotations* (New York: Choreb, 1926), 1300.
[13] Genesis Rabbah 45.6
[14] Freedman et al., 384.
[15] Ibid., 384.
[16] Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer is a midrash most likely composed by a single author in Palestine around the 8th or 9th century. The work is more accurately explained as "rewritten bible," similar to Arabic biblical narratives.

work of the 8th or 9th century C.E., the rabbis imagine that Sarah wants Abraham to divorce Hagar and Ishmael. How harsh is this demand? One could say that by demanding a bill of divorce for Hagar, Sarah makes certain that Hagar will have a future, that she will not be an *agunah*, a chained woman. However, the phrase, "in this world and the world to come," suggests that this midrash does not strive to paint a benevolent portrait of Sarah. Rather, it illustrates that Sarah wants a permanent solution, a solution in which Hagar will never need to return. Sarah hopes she will never see Hagar again in her lifetime, or even in the afterlife. As this and other midrashic sources previously discussed indicate, the rabbis did not imagine that any positive interactions took place between Sarah and Hagar.

Sarah and Abraham

The *midrashists*' imaginings about Sarah and Abraham are more diverse than those of Sarah and Hagar. They imagine numerous aspects of this spousal relationship, ranging from loyalty and love to anger and frustration. As the biblical text states, Abram lived in the land of Canaan for ten years before he cohabitated with Hagar. Genesis Rabbah 45.3 explains that if a man's wife remains barren for ten years, he must take another wife.[17] The rabbis of this midrash point out that the time spent outside of the Land was not counted therefore suggesting that Abram waited more than ten years. While the rabbis might wish to suggest that Abram believed a miracle would happen in the land of Canaan, perhaps the rabbis suggest that Abram did not want to have relations with anyone but Sarah and that he only did so when he had no other choice.

[17] This law appears in Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 64a.

However, even if the rabbis portray Abram as loyal to Sarai, they infer from the biblical text that Sarai does not view Abram as loyal. Genesis Rabbah 45.5 wonders what Sarai means when she says to Abram, "*Hamasi alecha*," "The wrong done me is your fault…"[18] The midrash says, "R. Judan explained this in R. Judah's name: Thou wrongest me with words, since thou hearest me insulted yet are silent."[19] The Soncino translation offers a footnote explaing, " '*Hamasi'* really means, 'what is stolen from me'. Sarah complained that Abraham robbed her of the words that he ought to speak on her behalf."[20] In this interpretation of the verse, Sarai seems to feel both angry and hurt that Abram did not stand up for her. Later in the midrash, the rabbis interpret the word *hamasi* differently but come to the same conclusion. R. Menachem [Nehemia] said in R. Abin's name: She scratched his face."[21] Soncino clarifies, "By a play on words *hamasi* is derived from *himmes,* to scratch, and rendered: my scratch be upon thee." Once again, the midrash depicts an angry Sarai who expresses her emotions physically.

In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 30, Sarah's anger is replaced by suspicion and distrust. In this midrash, Sarah knows that Abraham goes to visit Ishmael in the desert after Ishmael and Hagar's expulsion. Sarah makes Abraham promise that when he visits he will not go down from his camel. Perhaps the rabbis imagine that Sarah fears that Abraham will leave her. Abraham does indeed go down from the camel, but promises Sarah that he will not. Though Abraham deceives her, perhaps this interpretation suggests that Abraham wants to protect her. This seems even more

[18] Genesis 16.5.
[19]Freedman et al., 382.
[20] ibid., 382.
[21] ibid., 382.

likely given the ending of the midrash which says, "After the death of Sarah, Abraham again took (Hagar) his divorced (wife)…" Abraham does what is best for Sarah and waits to reunite with Hagar until after Sarah's death. Earlier in the midrash, Abraham follows Sarah's request, writes a bill of divorce for Hagar and Ishmael, and sends them away even though it pains him greatly. Though one could suggest that through this interpretation the rabbis assert that Sarah held the power in the relationship, more likely, if they saw Abraham as powerless, he would not have gone to visit Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham strove to do right by Sarah while still maintaining a connection and even caring for his other family.

Abraham and Hagar

The *midrashim* fill in gaps and expand upon the relationship between Abraham and Hagar just as they do for the relationships between Abraham and Sarah. Some *midrashists* imagine that they care for one another, while others seem to suggest that they do not. However, the rabbis do not imagine any tension between Abraham and Hagar as they do between Abraham and Sarah.

The biblical text makes clear that Abraham's relationship with Hagar is Sarah's idea, and the midrash emphasizes this detail. As noted earlier, Genesis Rabbah 45.3 imagines that Sarah speaks to Hagar and attempts to persuade her to go to Abram. While this interpretation highlights Sarah's desperation, it also points to something else. Perhaps Hagar does not want to have relations with Abram and only does so because she holds an inferior position as slave.

The rabbis imagine that after Hagar has sexual relations with Abram, Abram cares for Hagar and considers her wellbeing. Though Abram tells Sarai to do what

she thinks is best after tension between the two women arises, the rabbis elaborate on the conversation. Abram says, " 'I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm...after we have vexed her, can we now enslave her again…after we have made her a mistress, shall we make her a bondwoman again?'" [22] While Abram does not stand up for Hagar or intend to intervene, once Sarai decides on a course of action, he worries about lowering Hagar's status and expresses this to Sarai. This exchange also highlights the different perceptions Abram and Sarai have regarding Hagar's status after she becomes a surrogate.

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30, takes the idea that Abraham cared for Hagar even further. Though the midrash does not suggest that Abraham was distressed about sending Hagar away, it does assert that Hagar and Abraham reunite later in their life. According to this midrash, Keturah, whom Abraham marries after Sarah's death, is Hagar. This midrash teaches that Hagar was his wife before Abraham sent her out, and when they rejoin she becomes his wife again. Though not stated explicitly, the rabbis seem to suggest that Abraham returned to Hagar as soon as he was able, that he did not want to be apart from her any longer.

Abraham's Relationship with His Sons

Though this midrash implicitly states that Abraham cared about Hagar, and perhaps even missed and loved her, the rabbis are much more explicit about Abraham and Ishmael's relationship. The rabbis of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer expand upon the distress Abraham feels after Sarah asks him to expel Hagar and Ishmael. The midrash teaches, "More than all the misfortunes which overtook Abraham, this matter

[22] Freedman et al., 384.

was exceedingly evil in his eyes." Out of all the hardships Abraham faced, including the Binding of Isaac, expelling Ishmael was the most difficult.

The midrash further expands the biblical text, continuing on where the text leaves off. According to Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Abraham ties a cloth around Hagar's waist that will drag in the sand so that once Ishmael and Hagar leave he will know the direction of their journey. The first time Abraham attempts to see Ishmael, Ishmael is not home. When Abraham asks for food and water, Ishmael's wife says she has none. (Ishmael is already married in this interpretation suggesting that some time elapsed before Abraham travels to see Ishmael. This does not appear to concern the author). Abraham tells Ishmael's wife to give Ishmael a cryptic message. Ishmael understands that Abraham wants him to find a new wife, and he listens. Ishmael is away the second time that Abraham goes to visit him. This time, when Abraham asks for food and water, his wife Fatimah provides for him immediately. Abraham prays and Ishmael's house fills with blessings. The midrash says, "When Ishmael came (home) his wife told him what had happened, and Ishmael knew that his father's love was still extended to him…" Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer presents an on-going relationship between Abraham and Ishmael. Abraham cannot bear to give up this relationship, even though he knows that Sarah prefers he not do so. When he visits, he comes down from the camel and enters Ishmael's home despite his promise to Sarah. Abraham wants to be Ishmael's father, and Ishmael can sense that. He listens to his father's advice and acquires a new wife, and Abraham provides for his son, because he loves him. This midrash implies that Abraham provides for both of his sons.

Genesis Rabbah 61.6 also imagines what Abraham did for his sons, interpreting Genesis 25.5, “Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac.” The midrash points to disagreement regarding how to understand this verse. Rabbi Judah said Abraham gave Isaac the birthright. Rabbi Nehemiah said that Abraham gave Isaac the blessing. And the Rabbis taught that Abraham gave Isaac a spot in the family burial plot. Each of these interpretations suggests that Abraham provided things for Isaac that he did not provide for Ishmael. Yet, the midrash continues with a lesson from Rabbi Hamah that Abraham did not bless Isaac, because if he blessed Isaac then he would also bless Ishmael’s sons and Keturah’s sons. According to Rabbi Hama, Abraham does not favor Isaac over his other children. Ishmael and his descendants are just as important.

Exodus Rabbah 1.1 imagines a much less harmonious relationship between Abraham and Ishmael, one in which Abraham ultimately sends Ishmael away with nothing. Ishmael rebels against his father by worshipping idols. The midrash teaches that one who fails to discipline a child causes the eventual downfall of the relationship, thereby asserting that Abraham failed to punish Ishmael properly. “This is what we find with Ishmael who was rebelling against his father. Abraham did not punish him so he hated him and expelled him from his house empty handed.” The midrash goes on to interpret Genesis 21.11, “The matter distressed Abraham….” teaching that Abraham was distressed by Ishmael’s disturbing behavior, not because of the loss of his son. Exodus Rabbah 1.1 depicts a rebellious child and an angry, disappointed parent. Here it is significant that the midrash faults Abraham too. In

other *midrashim*, the rabbis often blame Ishmael for all that occurs, especially when they interpret the interactions between Ishmael and Isaac.

Ishmael and Isaac

Ishmael and Isaac are half brothers who share their father Abraham. As noted earlier, the biblical text says very little about the relationship between Abraham's family members, and this holds true for Ishmael and Isaac. The only time the biblical text is definitive about Isaac and Ishmael interacting or doing anything together is in Genesis 25.9, when the brothers bury Abraham together. In an earlier part of the narrative, Genesis 21.9 says, "Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham *m'şakheq*," often translated as playing or making sport. With whom or with what did Ishmael *m'şacheq*? What exactly did Sarah see? The text does not say, but later interpretations propose that something occurred between Ishmael and Isaac. The rabbis raise several possibilities, some that involve Isaac, and some that do not.

Genesis Rabbah 53.11 cites different rabbis' interpretations. Rabbi Akiba asserted that *m'şacheq* refers to sexual impropriety. Rabbi Ishmael taught that *m'şacheq* indicates idol worship. And, Rabbi Eleazar proposed that *m'şacheq* means murder. In this imagining, Ishmael lures Isaac to a field and shoots arrows at him, pretending that he is playing. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 30 provides a similar interpretation, but adds that Sarah reports Ishmael's specific actions to Abraham. She follows her report by telling Abraham to will everything to Isaac). Genesis Rabbah 53.11 states that *m'şacheq* refers to Ishmael scoffing about the inheritance at the time of Isaac's birth, as he points out that as the firstborn he will receive a double inheritance. This interpretation suggests that Ishmael believes he is superior to Isaac.

According to this midrash, Ishmael is blameworthy on all accounts either because he demonstrates poor character in general, or because he abuses Isaac and competes with him for the inheritance. This implies that Sarah's actions are justifiable.

When Isaac and Ishmael reunite at Abraham's burial, the rabbis imagine that Ishmael accepts his inferior status by honoring Isaac.[23] How does he show his honor, and how does Isaac respond? The midrash does not say. In fact, Isaac is silent in both Genesis Rabbah 53.11 and in Genesis Rabbah 62.3 Nevertheless, the inequality between and Isaac and Ishmael is clear.

Sarah and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac

The biblical text makes clear that Sarah loves and favors Isaac, as she simultaneously shuns Ishmael by demanding he be cast out. As discussed earlier, in Genesis Rabbah 53.13, Sarah sends the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy. Not only does this indicate Sarah's hatred towards Hagar, but it shows her disdain for Hagar's future offspring, including Ishmael. Likewise, the rabbis expand on Sarah's relationship with Ishmael and Isaac, emphasizing her love for Isaac and her hatred towards Ishmael.

Sarah does not see Ishmael as a son, or even as part of her family. In the biblical account Sarah says, "…for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."[24] Genesis Rabbah 53.11 expands Sarah's words in Genesis 21.10 when she says, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Genesis Rabbah adds that Sarah says more than what appears in the biblical text continuing on after the

[23] Genesis Rabbah 62.3.
[24] Genesis 21.10.

phrase "with my son." "With my son, even if he were not Isaac; or with Isaac, even if he were not my son; how much the more, With my son, with Isaac!"[25] Here, the rabbis imagine that Sarah despises Ishmael so much that even if Isaac were not her son, she would still not want him to share the inheritance with anyone because he deserves nothing. Yet, Isaac is her son so, all the more so, must she make certain that Isaac does not receive anything.

The rabbis raise up Sarah's desire to protect Isaac in Exodus Rabbah 1.1. As noted earlier, this midrash teaches that Ishmael partook in idol worship. Sarah, disturbed by Ishmael's behavior, demands that Abraham expel Ishmael, before Isaac learns from Ishmael. Here, Sarah does whatever she deems necessary to protect Isaac.

Genesis Rabbah 53.13 imagines that Sarah expels Ishmael for reasons other than protecting Isaac. Sarah is overcome by hatred so much so that expulsion is not even enough. The rabbis calculate that Ishmael was 27 years old, and therefore wonder why Abraham places Ishmael on Hagar's shoulders. [26] According to midrash, "This, however, teaches that Sarah cast an evil eye on him, whereupon he was seized by feverish pains."[27] In this interpretation, it seems that the expulsion of Ishmael has just as much to do with her disdain towards him as it does with protecting her own son.

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 30 also highlights how the expulsion reflects Sarah's antipathy. As mentioned earlier, Sarah demands that Abraham divorce Hagar and Ishmael, a word not used in earlier *midrashim*. Just as Sarah wants a permanent,

[25] Genesis Rabbah 53.11.
[26] Genesis Rabbah 21.14.
[27] Freedman et al., 472.

legal separation from Hagar, she also wants this from Ishmael. While Abraham's distress is clear both in midrash and in the Biblical account, perhaps Isaac feels distress too, but does not speak up. Midrash Tanhuma[28] 9 raises some interesting possibilities regarding Isaac's relationships with Sarah, as well as his relationship with Hagar.

Genesis Rabbah 60.14 and a later midrash, Tanhuma 9, create a scene in which Isaac goes to *B'er Lachai Roi* just after the death of Sarah (the place to which Hagar flees and perhaps dwells after the expulsion). Why does he go there? He goes there to find Hagar. Genesis Rabbah does not say why Isaac waits until after Sarah's death, or what happens when Hagar and Isaac reunite. However, midrash Tanhuma expands the interpretation teaching that Isaac finds Hagar in order to bring her back to Abraham. Perhaps Isaac waits to find Hagar until after Sarah dies out of respect for Sarah, or because the relationship between Isaac and Hagar could create tension between Isaac and Sarah. Perhaps Isaac's actions indicate that, since Isaac's birth, Isaac and Hagar cared for one another, and that he missed her for all of the years that they were separated. Whatever the reason, Isaac has a relationship with Hagar after his mother's death, and sees himself as a player in the relationship between Abraham and Hagar.

Conclusions

The *midrashim* discussed in this section provide great insight into what might have occurred between the members of Abraham's family, and how the events may have impacted these individuals. Both the biblical author and the rabbis cited in the

[28] Tanhuma refers to a 9th century collection of homiletic midrashim most likely composed in Palestine.

midrashim seem to recognize the suffering that accompanies infertility, as well as the impact barrenness had on a woman's worth in her family and in society. Furthermore, the *midrashists* elaborate on the relationships between members of Abraham's family, adding depth and complexity to them. The midrash brings out a serious rivalry between Sarah and Hagar and differing power dynamics between the two women, including one that might even be abusive. When it comes to marital relationships, some *midrashim* present Abraham as a protective partner for both Sarah and Hagar, while others portray him as a self-absorbed husband who does not even pray for his wife Sarah. Yet, some of the *midrashists* depict a man who remains loyal to Sarah but still has love in his heart for Hagar, remarrying her after Sarah dies.

The rabbis of the *midrashim* also explore the relationships between parents and children. They elaborate on Abram's love for Ishmael, Sarah's love for Isaac, and Sarah's disdain towards her stepson Ishmael. Interestingly, the *midrashim* say very little about Abraham's relationship with Isaac, and even less about Hagar and Isaac. According to the midrash, Ishmael is a taunting, competitive older brother. The *midrashists* assert that Ishmael experiences Isaac as a rival, but they never make clear whether Isaac reciprocates this rivalry. In this way, the rabbis paint a picture of a family that contains a bully. Through midrashic interpretation, Abraham's family becomes a complicated family that experiences favoritism, competition, bullying, abuse, rejection, deception, secrecy, anger, love, hatred, and lots of pain. The rabbis, through these *midrashim,*demonstrate their understanding of the depth of human emotion and experience that accompany divorce and blended family life. By

inserting them into their interpretations of Abraham's family, they made these stories timeless.

Chapter Two

Viewing Abraham's Family Through The Eyes of *M'farshim*

Throughout many centuries, commentators have provided insight and interpretations about Abraham's multifaceted family. Like the *midrashists,* they were intrigued by the events of Abraham's family. Often times, the commentators explicated the earlier *midrashim,* building upon them or consciously leaving certain details out. Later commentators elaborated on what earlier commentators said, sometimes comparing their own interpretations to those of their predecessors or adding their own ideas to the interpretive possibilities.

Sarah and Hagar

Like the *midrashists,* commentators recognize the way in which social status influences the nature of Sarah and Hagar's relationship. Because Hagar is Sarah's slave, it is no surprise that Sarai offers Hagar to Abram, and that Hagar appears to be no more than an object to benefit Sarai. According to Radak,[29] Sarai believes Hagar's child will fulfill God's promise to Abram, become her own child, and ultimately alleviate her diminished feelings of self-worth. Radak imagines Sarai's thought process, "…I am old, and the son that he will have will be from another woman that he will have. It is good for me to give my slave to him as a wife. Maybe I will be built up through her, and it will be for me like my son, and it will be good for me that he will have a son through another woman." Here, Sarai suggests that Hagar will enable her to be a mother while also fulfilling the promise that Abram will have

[29] Radak was born in Narbonne and died there in 1235. He was a grammarian, a lexicographer, an exegete, and a philosopher.

offspring. [30] Sforno[31] also interprets Sarai's supposition that she will be built up through Hagar, but his interpretation is radically different from Radak's. He writes, "Perhaps my jealousy of her will stimulate (my) potential powers of reproduction into functioning and I will be able to have offspring."[32] In other words, Hagar's pregnancy will reverse Sarai's infertility. In his work *Nahalat Hamisha*,[33] Rabbi Haim Yaakov Blum proposes a more mystical explanation teaching that the *gematria*[34] of Hagar is equivalent to the *gematria* of Isaac. Somehow, because of this, Hagar will enable Sarai to give birth to Isaac later. Radak, Sforno, and the Nahalat Hamisha highlight the fact that Sarai gave Hagar to Abram for her own benefit, not because she wanted to bring Hagar into her family.

Yet, the commentators recognize that once Hagar has sexual relations with Abram and becomes pregnant, the lines between slave and master become blurry. Sarai, as user and Hagar as object are no longer givens. Ramban,[35] imagines that the shift in status goes quite smoothly. In his interpretation of the phrase, "*lo l'isha*," Ramban teaches that Sarai gives Hagar to Abram as a wife, and has no qualms about

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[30] Radak on 16.1.
[31] Obadaiah ben Jacob Sforno lived in Italy from 1475-1550. He was a rabbi commentator, doctor, and philosopher.
[32] Raphael Pelcovitz, *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah* (Brooklyn (N.Y.): Mesorah Publ, 1997), 76.
[33] Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, עיטורי תורה vol. I (Tel Aviv: Y. Orenstein "Yavneh" Publishing House, 1996), 112.
[34] An Assyro-Babylonian-Greek system, later used by Jewish culture, that assigns numerical value to words or phrases.
[35] Rabbi Moses ben Nahman of Garondi, also known as Ramban and Nahmanides, lived from 1194-1270. He was a renowned Talmudist, a commentator, and a physician.

raising Hagar's status.[36] This, according to Ramban, demonstrates Sarai's merit. Yet, other commentators imagine transitions, planned or not, to be quite tense.

HaRav Yisrael Lovtshenski, explains in his work *Hokhmei Hamusar*,[37] that Sarai trained Hagar to be a handmaiden, and that for Hagar the training was worthwhile. However, after Hagar becomes pregnant tension arises between the two women. Hagar seems to hold Sarai in less esteem, and Sarai's training begins to feel oppressive. Both women feel afflicted as their master-slave relationship begins to shift. According to this commentator, both women played a role in the demise of their relationship as the boundaries of their relationship changed.

Other commentators blame Hagar for the downfall of the relationship. Rashi[38], brings in Genesis Rabbah 45.4, discussed in the previous section, which imagines that both Sarai and Hagar refer to or speak about one another using nasty words. Sarai refers to Hagar as wretched and Hagar says that Sarai must not be righteous since she cannot conceive. Yet, Rashi omits Sarai's insulting words from his comment and only includes Hagar's.. According to Rashi, Hagar talks about Sarai disrespectfully. Radak also emphasizes Hagar's new self-image, explaining that once Hagar conceived, she thought she would no longer heed Sarai's demands, for she assumed that she would become the superior woman.

Commentators also focus on how Sarai treats Hagar, and the way in which she expresses her intolerance for Hagar. Rashi, referring to Genesis Rabbah 45.5, teaches

[36] Ramban on Genesis 16.3.
[37] Greenberg, עיטורי תורה, 112.
[38] Rashi, also known as Rabbi Soloman bar Isaac is one of the most famous Jewish commentators. He was born in Troyes in 1040 and died there in 1105. He was a prolific commentator on Bible and Talmud.

that Sarai sends the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy, and Hagar miscarries. Radak cites Rashi, but asserts that even though Sarai sends the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy, Hagar does not lose the pregnancy because the angel intervenes. Radak also comments on Sarai's affliction of Hagar, teaching that Sarai makes her work too strenuously, and possibly hits her and curses at her. Rabbi Yehezkel of Kumir[39], notices that when the angel asks Hagar where she is going after she flees from Sarai, she does not answer the question. He asserts that Hagar is so desperate to escape from Sarai, that she does not care where she is going.[40] These various interpretations portray Sarai as abuser, and Hagar as abused.

According to Sforno, Sarah is not just abusive, but also suspicious. In his interpretation of Genesis 21.9, Sforno explains that Sarah hears Ishmael, *m'şacheq,* mocking Isaac that he is the son of Abimelech, not Abraham. Sforno continues that Sarah assumes he heard this from his mother, quoting, "The talk of a child in the shuk is that of his mother or his father." [41] Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, writes in his explanatory note, "The son of Hagar the Egyptian-since we are not told that Ishmael mocked, but the son of Hagar, the implication must be that his behavior was influenced by his mother. She, of course, had an ulterior motive in questioning Abraham's paternity of Isaac, for then her son would be the sole heir of Abraham's

[39] Rabbi Yehezkel Taub of Kuzmir, a 19th century Hasidic rabbi, lived from 1755-1856. He founded a Hasidic Dynasty in Kuzmir, a small town in Poland, as well as yeshivot.
[40] Aharon Yaaḳov Greenberg and Shmuel Himelstein, *Torah Gems*, vol. I (Tel Aviv, Israel: Y. Orenstein, Yavneh Pub. House, 1992), 124.
[41] Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 56b.

considerable wealth."[42] Sforno suggests that Sarah did not trust Hagar because she saw herself and her son in competition with Hagar and Ishmael.

HaRav ben Yair[43] illuminates an interesting aspect of Hagar and Sarah's relationship through his interpretation of Genesis 25.1, which he uses to inform how rebbes should choose the next leader of their Hasidic dynasty. "…After the death of the *tzadik* R. Yehudah Tzvi from Stretin, they were hesitant about his son R. Abraham, and said, 'The face of the father is like the face of the sun, the face of the son is like the face of the moon.' One of the *hasidim* answered and said: indeed Hagar was the wife of Abraham before, so why did the text wait to praise her until now, but every time Sarah was alive, the wonderful deeds of Hagar were not seen, however when Sarah died, the deeds of Hagar were seen like wonderful incense. Thus, in that which we are discussing, the strength of the son is beautiful, and we must crown him as the head of the dynasty …" HaRav ben Yair teaches that when Sarah was alive, Hagar was not able to reach her full potential or her goodness went unnoticed. However, after Sarah died, Hagar was able to flourish. This interpretation highlights the power dynamic between Sarah and Hagar. Just as a father is master over his son, Sarah is master over Hagar. It is also worth noting that HaRav ben Yair suggests that Sarah and Hagar have a close familial relationship, similar to that of a parent and child, but not one of peers.

Abraham and Sarah

The commentators express numerous ideas about Sarah and Abraham's relationships, ranging from care and respect, to anger and hostility. The unusual

[42] Pelcovitz, 98.
[43] Greenberg, Torah Gems, 201.

power dynamic between Abraham and Sarah intrigues the *m'farshim* and leads them to interpret the relationship in a variety of ways.

The biblical text makes clear that Sarah often calls the shots, and Abraham defers to her judgment. In his note on Genesis 21.12, Rashi asserts that Sarah was a prophet and that Abraham was second to her in prophecy. Through this comment, Rashi insinuates that this is the reason that Abraham follows Sarah's demands, but does not say anything more about the nature of their relationship with one another. Ibn Ezra,[44] offers a more detailed explanation, also remarking on why Abraham listens to Sarah. Ibn Ezra writes:

> Many are amazed at Abraham's behavior. They ask, how could Abraham chase his son out of his house? How could he send away mother and child empty handed? Where was his kindness? However, I am amazed by those who are amazed at Abraham, for Abraham acted according to God's dictates. Had he acted contrary to God's wishes and given money to Hagar, then he would have transgressed God's command. However, ultimately, after Sarah's death, he gave gifts to Ishmael's children.[45]

According to Ibn Ezra, Abraham only follows Sarah's order because God tells him to do so. Likewise, he waits to provide for Ishmael's children until after Sarah dies. From Ibn Ezra's comment, it is not clear whether or not Abraham waits to give these gifts because of God's commands, or if this points to something specific about the relationship between Abraham and Sarah, that Abraham did not want to upset Sarah.

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[44] Rabbi Abraham ben Meir, also known as Ibn Ezra, lived from 1089-1167 in Spain. He was a commentator, a philosopher, a poet, an astronomer, and a linguist.
[45] H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch* (New York, NY: Menorah Pub., 1988), 218.

Radak makes more explicit mention of Abram's desire to placate Sarai. Like, Abram, these interpretations serve to exonerate Abram for his role in the events of Genesis 16 and 21, but they also shed light on how the *m'farshim* view Sarai and Abram's relationship (and the family dynamics). In his comment on Genesis 16.6, Radak expands on this episode suggesting that Abram tells Sarai to punish Hagar if she does anything inappropriate to her. He elaborates on Abram's words:

> Despite the fact that she lay in my bosom, she is your slave like in the beginning and you have the authority over her to punish her if she does a thing to you that is not appropriate, because she is your slave and her authority is in your hands and she won't receive it from me like she will receive it from you. I am relinquishing to you my honor.

Here, Radak suggests that Sarai's well being is Abram's chief concern. Radak makes a similar statement in his interpretation of Genesis 21.11. There he teaches that though Abraham is distressed about expelling Hagar and Ishmael, he does so for the sake of *shalom bayit*, emphasizing Abraham's commitment to his marriage with Sarah.

Like Radak, Ramban and Ba'al HaTurim,[46] , point out Abraham's concern for Sarah, though they do not mention the concept of *shalom bayit* in their interpretations. Ramban teaches that Abram only married Hagar for Sarai's benefit. He comments on Genesis 16.2 saying:

> Scripture did not say, 'And he did so.' It said rather that [Abram] 'heeded Sarai's voice,' intimating that although Abram had a great desire to have children-he did not [marry Hagar] without Sarai's permission. Furthermore, even now that he did marry Hagar, he did not do so with the intention that *he*

[46] Jacob ben Asher also known as Ba'al HaTurim lived from about 1269-1340 in Spain. He was a prolific rabbi best known for his work on the Tur.

> should become built up through her, and that *he* should have descendants through her; rather his entire intention was to do the will of Sarah, that she should be built up through [Hagar].[47]

According to Ramban, Abram married Hagar for Sarai's sake and for her benefit alone. Ba'al HaTurim provides a similar interpretation and says, "Even now, in fulfilling Sarai's suggestion, he did not do so primarily to satisfy his yearning, but to afford Sarai the satisfaction of being able to raise a child vicariously even though it had been born by her maidservant." [48] In addition, Ba'al HaTurim teaches that Sarai gave Hagar to Abram because she worried about Abram's status. Ba'al HaTurim teaches, "…due to Sarai's generosity in worrying that her husband should father a child, although not hers, she herself would be granted the satisfaction to have a child of her own."[49] Sforno's short remark is similar to those of Ramban and Ba'al HaTurim. In his comment on Genesis 16.2 he writes, "He (Abraham) considered that her suggestion was correct; therefore he complied with her wish, not because he wanted to consort (enjoy) another woman." [50] Sforno's interpretation differs in his suggestion that Abram agrees with Sarai's idea, and that is in part why he listens to her. Furthermore, Sforno's interpretation does not center on Abram's desire for children. Instead he highlights the fact that Abram does not want to have sexual relations with another woman, and that he only does so because it was a practical decision. While Sforno's interpretation paints a positive image of Abram as a loyal

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[47] Yaakov Blinder and Yoseph Kamenetsky, *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary Translated, Annotated and Elucidated* (Brooklyn (N.Y.): Mesorah Publ, 2004), 370.
[48]Eliyahu Munk, *Tur on the Torah: Commentary on the Torah*, vol. I (New York: Lambda Publishers, 2005), 127.
[49] ibid., 128.
[50] Pelcovitz, 76.

husband, perhaps it also serves to teach that Abram and Sarai are satisfied with the intimacy in their relationship.

Other comments by Ramban, and a late 20th century commentator Rabbi Yeshayahu Leibowitz, describe the relationship between Abram and Sarai as one that is quite functional. Ramban zeros in on the beginning of Genesis 16.3 which says, "So Sarai, Abram's wife," and later in the verse says, "and gave her to her husband." Why does the text state here that Sarai is Abram's wife and Abram is Sarai's husband? According to Ramban, this verse serves to indicate that Sarai does not distance herself from Hagar, and that she gives Hagar to Abram as a wife. Sarai does not despair or distance herself from Abram, rather she has confidence in her relationship with him.

Leibowitz goes even further in his interpretation of Abraham and Sarah's relationship. Like rabbis before him, Leibowitz is interested in Genesis 24.1 which says, "Abraham was now old, advanced in years." Of course Abraham is old. Why does it say this only after Sarah's death? Leibowitz says, "…the midrash[51] says something deep from the point of view of psychology. A man does not die except but for his wife, and a wife does not die except for her husband. From the hour that his wife dies old age jumps on him."[52] Leibowitz recognizes the way in which this midrash describes Abraham and Sarah as a the paradigmatic couple. Sarah's death and absence is so traumatic for Abraham, that this is really when his life begins to deteriorate.

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[51] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 22b.
[52] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Notes to the Weekly Torah Readings*(Jerusalem: Hebrew University Students' Printing and Publishing House, 1988), 22.

Nonetheless, other commentators imagine a much less functional and amicable relationship between Sarai and Abram. Rashi, Radak, and Sforno propose that Sarai feels great anger towards Abram. In his comment on Genesis 16.5, "The wrong done me is your fault," Rashi writes,

> With regard to the injustice that which is done to me, upon you I place the punishment. When you prayed to the Holy One, blessed is He, 'What can you give me seeing that I go childless,'[53] you prayed only for yourself, but you should have prayed for both of us, and I, too would have been remembered with you. And furthermore, you unjustly withhold your words from me, for you hear my disgrace, i.e., you hear my being disgraced by Hagar, yet you are silent.[54]

Here, Rashi cites Genesis Rabbah 45.5 in which the rabbis imagine that Sarai confronts Abram about his silence, and continues on with a parable about prisoners. In this parable, one of the prisoners requests his release from prison for only himself. The other prisoner states his frustration that his fellow prisoner did not ask for his release as well. While Rashi omits the parable, the dialogue in his interpretation most certainly comes from this midrashic story. Though this midrash expresses Sarai's anger towards Abram, Rashi expands on this comment and illuminates the source of her anger. Sarai does not feel that she and Abram are on the same team, because he does not think of their joint wellbeing, and, furthermore, he does not protect her from Hagar.

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[53] Genesis 15.2.

[54] Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg et al., *The Torah with Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*, The Sapirstein Edition ed., vol. I (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 156.

Like Rashi, Radak also suggests that Sarai is frustrated by Abram's silence. However, in Radak's interpretation, the anger has nothing to do with self-centered prayer. Radak elaborates on Sarai's words and says, "The affliction I have taken from my family is on you, because I did good for you. I intended to give her to you so that there will descendants for you from her, but now that I am light in her eyes you don't punish her." Here, Sarai is angry that Abram does reprimand Hagar for her behavior towards Sarai. It is also worth noting that Sarai says she has taken affliction from her family, seemingly implying that Sarai views Hagar as family. Sarai expects Abram to take sides and support one family member over another.

Sforno follows Rashi and Radak, but in his interpretation, Sarai's statement is slightly different. According to Sforno, Sarai says, "You should have admonished her, since she is now your wife, when she treated me so lightly once she became pregnant." Here, Sarai makes clear that Hagar is Abram's wife and that he should be responsible for her. Hagar's status as wife means that Abram is now her master. Sarai's handmaid is no longer under her control. Abram's failure to reprimand his wife Hagar angers Sarai greatly.

Hagar and Abraham

Though Rashi, Radak, and Sforno imagine that much of Sarai's anger towards Abram stems from her competition with Hagar for Abram's loyalty, several commentators assert that Abram did not have special feelings towards Hagar. However, Rashi imagines that Hagar has feelings for Abram. Rashi teaches that Keturah is Hagar, and that she does not have relationships with any other men besides

Abraham.[55] (Yeshayahu Leibowitz provides Rashi's interpretation but also includes another interpretation that Abraham has three wives: Sarah, Hagar, Keturah).[56] Nonetheless, in Rashi's comment on Genesis 25.6, (when Abraham marries Keturah) he states that Hagar, later called Keturah, is a concubine not a wife.

Rashi suggests that Hagar is not a wife, and Ibn Ezra implies that Abraham does not feel any special bond with Hagar even though they have a child together. Ibn Ezra teaches that when Abraham sends Hagar away he says, " '…Take your son with you,' and he sent her away.[57]" According to Ibn Ezra, Abraham does not say "take our son with you", and furthermore, he says nothing more to her.

Ramban takes a slightly different approach. While he too proposes that Abraham has no feelings towards Hagar, Ramban goes even further saying that Abraham was only distressed by Sarah's demand in Genesis 21 because of Ishmael,"…the reason for his distress was not longing for his concubine or his desire for her, and if [Sarah] had told him that only the maidservant alone should be driven away-he would have fulfilled Sarah's wish. However, because of his son he became very upset and did not want to listen to her." [58] In other words, if Sarah had told him to expel Hagar, and only Hagar, Abraham would not have minded. This remark makes sense given Ramban's comment on Genesis 16.2, that Abraham only cohabitats with Hagar for Sarah's benefit. As noted earlier, Jacob Ben Asher and Sforno make similar statements.

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[55] Rashi on Genesis 25.1.
[56] Leibowitz, Notes to the Weekly Torah Readings, 23.
[57] Strickman, 219.
[58] Blinder, 486.

Radak, highlights Abram's loyalty to Sarai over Hagar. Radak asserts that Abram would have surely disciplined Hagar had he heard Hagar insult Sarai. Radak teaches, "Had he truly known this, he would have chastised her and not accepted it, because far be it from Abraham to remain silent while Sarah his wife is insulted, despite the fact that she (Hagar) was family, and despite the fact that she (Hagar) was married to him as a wife." [59] Not only does Radak show that Abram favors Sarai, but in this comment he also illuminates two important aspects of Abram's relationship with Hagar. First, he has no problem punishing her or reprimanding her, and second, Hagar is a wife, but a less important wife. Moreover, in his interpretation of Genesis 16.6 (when Abram tells Sarai that her maid is in her hands), Radak adds to Abram's statement as noted earlier, "she will not receive it from me like she receives it from you." Radak is not explicit about what this statement indicates. Perhaps it shows that Sarai has more power over Hagar than Abram, either because Abram and Sarai are distant from one another, or because Hagar is also a wife. Or, perhaps Hagar will be less hurt receiving a punishment from Sarai than from Abram. Maybe Radak makes a subtle statement that Abram actually cares for Hagar and this is why he leaves Hagar in Sarai's hands.

This interpretation, that Abraham cared about Hagar, seems plausible given Radak's comments on Genesis 21.12. He proposes that Abraham is not only distressed about sending Ishmael away, but that he is distraught about Hagar too. "He (God) knew that the maidservant was also bad in his eyes (Abraham was distressed about Hagar)…even though it says 'about his son,' it mentions his son because he

[59] Radak on Genesis 16.5.

was central and he would fight with Sarah about him, not about her maidservant, but God knew what was in his heart…" Likewise, Radak teaches that Abraham gives Hagar and Ishmael silver and gold as to not send them away empty-handed, and that he escorts Hagar until she and Ishmael are outside of the city. While this interpretation certainly shines positively on Abraham, it also serves to show that Abraham cares for Hagar and does not want to see her go. Sforno does something similar in his interpretation, emphasizing Abraham's benevolence as he casts them out. He writes, "In his great kindness he accompanied her, similar to, 'while Abraham walked with them to see them off.' (Genesis 18.16).[60] This citation, which occurs in the context of Abraham showing great hospitality to strangers, serves to suggest that Abraham treats Hagar just as respectfully as he treats his guests.

Abraham and His Sons

Just as some of the *m'farshim* imagine that Abraham cares about Hagar, several commentators discuss Abraham's attachment and commitment to Ishmael. As mentioned earlier, Ibn Ezra teaches that Abraham has no choice but to follow Sarah's command in Genesis 21. After Sarah's death, Abraham gives gifts to Ishmael's children, suggesting that he cares about Ishmael all along. However, Ibn Ezra's interpretation is not consistent because as Abraham speaks to Hagar before expelling them, he refers to Ishmael saying, "your son," seemingly distancing himself from Ishmael and minimizing his role in Ishmael's life. Ramban teaches that Abraham is distressed by Sarah's demand because of "his son," highlighting the parental

[60] Pelcovitz, 99.

relationship. Radak expands on the idea of this parental love in his comment on Genesis 21.11:

> Even though Ishmael was the son of a slave-woman, he was his son, and he loved him, because he was his firstborn. He showed mercy to him like the mercy of a father on his children…he taught him the ways of God…and it was terrible in his eyes to expel him from his house…[61]

Through his interpretation Radak brings out incredible emotions. He imagines the kind of love and parent feels for a child, but just not love, mercy as well. Moreover he sheds light on the commitment a parent may feel to teach his child. In a later comment on Genesis 25.1, Radak asserts that Abraham gives gifts to Ishmael and his descendants [62] and that he has a special relationship with Ishmael and Isaac as proven by Genesis 25.9 in which they bury him. "Because they were older and more honored than the others they were beloved to him and therefore they busied themselves with it [the burial] even though Keturah's sons were there, or it is possible that he had sent them away in his lifetime..." [63] Not only does Radak suggest that Abraham's relationship with Ishmael continues after the expulsion, he also suggests that Abraham respects and cares for each of his sons equally.

Not all of the *m'farshim* imagine such harmony between Ishmael and Abraham. Rashi notices that when Abraham expels Ishmael, all he gives him is bread and a skin of water. Rashi states, "Bread and a skin of water, but not silver and gold because [Abraham] hated [Ishmael] for having gone forth to evil behavior." [64]

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[61] Radak on Genesis 21.11.
[62] Radak on Genesis 25.1.
[63] Radak on Genesis 25.9.
[64] Herczeg, 222.

Rashi's comments, based on Genesis Rabbah Exodus 1.1 and Tanhuma Shemot 1, that Abraham is angry at Ishmael because he turned to idodl worship. Rashi imagines how disturbed Abraham must have been to see his son turn to other gods.

Sforno takes a different approach, suggesting that Ishmael is not even Abraham's son. Sforno expands on God's words to Abraham saying, "Do not worry over driving out the son, for you are driving out the son of a slave woman, not your son." [65] Sforno does not think that Abraham should view Ishmael as a son. Other commentators do not focus on whether Ishmael is a true son. Rather, they focus on the fact that Isaac is the favored son.

According to Rashi, Abraham has free reign to bless whomever he wishes, and Abraham chooses Isaac. Rashi says, "…the Holy One blessed be He, had said to Abraham, 'and you shall be a blessing' (Genesis 12.2). The blessings are transferred into your hands to bless whomever you want, and Abraham transferred them to Isaaac." [66] Similarly, Radak teaches that Abraham throws a feast for Isaac because he is so overjoyed about him.[67] Radak does not mention anything about a feast, or a lack there of, for Ishmael. Yet, in a later comment on Genesis 25.5 Radak points out that Abraham gives everything to Isaac because of God's command, therein suggesting that Abraham may not have favored Isaac if God had not demanded he do so.

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[65] Pelcovitz, 99.
[66] "Genesis - Chapter 25 (Parshah Chayei Sarah and Toldot)," - Tanakh Online, section goes here, accessed January 18, 2016, http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8220#showrashi=true.
[67] Radak on Genesis 21.9.

Isaac and Ishmael

Just as the commentators elaborate on the relationship between Abraham and his sons, so too do they discuss Isaac and Ishmael's relationship with one another. By and large, the commentators hold similar views on Isaac and Ishmael's relationship. The *m'farshim* describe Ishmael as the bullying brother. Like Genesis Rabbah 53.11, Rashi spells out three possibilities regarding what happens between Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis 21.9: One, Ishmael turns to idol worship; two, Ishmael acts with sexual impropriety; or three, Ishmael tries to kill Isaac with bows and arrows. It is clear that for Rashi Ishmael is the one to blame either because he attempted to injure Isaac or because he did not adhere to the morals of his family. Like Rashi, Ramban cites various interpretations (explaining why each is incorrect), but he also offers his own interpretation explicitly saying that Sarah sees Ishmael scoff at Isaac at the feast that Abraham makes for Isaac. . Ba'al HaTurim follows the interpretation that Ishmael tries to kill Isaac.

Unlike Rashi and Ramban, Radak does not reiterate the various possible interpretations. Instead, he teaches that Ishmael ridicules Isaac for having old parents. Radak's interpretation highlights the tension that results from their family situation. Radak seems to suggest that their age difference and their different mothers cause friction between the siblings.

The *Hafeş Hayim*[68] identifies Ishmael as the blameworthy sibling in his comments on Genesis 21.10. He asserts that Sarah decides to expel Ishmael because

[68] Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, best known as the *Hafes Hayim*, lived in Russia and Poland from 1839-1933. He was a leading rabbi of the Musar Movement and he concentrated on ethics and halakha. His first and most well known work, *Sefer Hafeş*

she fears that Ishmael will negatively influence Isaac before Isaac has the opportunity to positively influence Ishmael. He writes, "There is no doubt that had Ishmael remained in Abraham's home together with Isaac, he would not have been as wild. On the other hand, Ishmael's presence would have been harmful to Isaac. Thus Sarah…decided that the danger to Isaac was greater…Ishmael would have influenced Isaac to become worse." [69] While the Hafeş Hayim justifies Sarah's action through his comment, he also suggests indirectly that Isaac and Ishmael are close enough to influence on one another. It is also worth noticing that the Hafeş Hayim implies something about parenting in Abraham's family. Sarah can not influence Ishmael's behavior as his stepmother.

Ibn Ezra's interpretation differs from those of Rashi, Radak, Ramban, Ba'al HaTurim, and the Hafetş Hayim by giving Ishmael the benefit of the doubt. He translates the word ***m'şacheq*** as making sport saying, "Ishmael was acting as a boy is wont to act. Sarah was jealous because he was older than her son."[70] According to Ibn Ezra, children play around and Ishmael acts no differently than what is expected of a child his age.

While the commentators speak extensively about what happens between Isaac and Ishmael in Genesis 21, they say much less about what occurrs between Isaac and Ishmael when they bury Abraham together in Genesis 25. Rashi maintains his position that Ishmael is the guilty party. He writes, "Ishmael repented, and let Isaac

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Hayim focuses on Jewish ethics surrounding speech, and has become the authoritative source on this topic.

[69] Greenberg Torah Gems, 167.

[70] Strickman, 218.

walk ahead of him." [71] According to Rashi, Ishmael repents for something he did to Isaac earlier in their lives. Allowing Isaac to walk ahead is a sign of respect. Ramban also follows this interpretation quoting from Genesis Rabbah 62.3 which states that Ishmael showed honor to Isaac.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz takes a different approach to Isaac and Ishmael's reunion. Rather than describe what happens between them, he quotes the Genesis 25.9 and proceeds to say, "And here we stand amazed." He continues his remarks by stating that there were many failures in the "triangle" of Isaac, Ishmael, and Abraham, and that the biblical episode was painful. By using the term triangle, Leibowitz shows that he has a 20th century psychological awareness. He implies that Isaac and Ishmael's reunion is astounding given all that occurred in their families.

Sarah and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac

The strained relationship between Ishmael and Isaac, as imagined in midrash, has a direct connection to how interpreters understand the relationship between Sarah and Ishmael and Sarah and Isaac. As Rashi (and later Radak) teaches, Sarah's disdain for Ishmael begins while Ishmael is still in the womb, when she sends the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy. However, her hatred towards Ishmael grows after the events that occur in Genesis 21. Rashi emphasizes Sarah's disdain in his comment on Genesis 21.14. He follows the midrashic interpretation that in addition to demanding Ishmael's expulsion, Sarah causes Ishmael to come down with a fever when she sends the evil eye on him. Unable to walk, Abraham places Ishmael on Hagar's shoulders.

[71] Rashi on Genesis 25.9.

Ramban asserts that Sarah sees Ishmael mock Isaac and that this leads her to expel him. Ramban points out that Sarah actually goesdd easy on Ishmael. A master can kill a slave who mocks him or her, but she does not go this far. Moreover, Ramban notes that Sarah only expels Hagar with Ishmael because Ishmael can not survive without her. Through his remarks, Ramban makes three interesting points. One, Ishmael, (not Hagar), is the source of Sarah's anger. Two, Sarah's actions are justifiable. And three, Sarah actually has compassion for Ishmael because she does not kill him. Instead she makes sure that he will have his mother with him to care for him.

Radak's interpretation centers on inheritance and sibling status. Sarah believes that Ishmael thinks he is equal to Isaac, and this disturbs her immensely. She believes that her son is superior, that God has promised that to Abraham. In his elaboration of Sarah's words to Abraham when Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael, Radak writes, "…He thinks that he is equal with my son in inheritance because he is your son, therefore he mocked and ridiculed my son…Didn't God say to you I will lift up my covenant with Yitzchak who will be born to Sarah?"[72] According to Radak, Sarah expels Ishmael to make certain that Ishmael and Isaac are not equal, that Ishmael will not receive any inheritance. Sforno's interpretation is similar to Radak's. Sforno emphasizes Sarah's concern about the inheritance, introducing the idea that Ishmael scoffs at Sarah saying that Abimelekh impregnated her. Sarah believes that Ishmael will use this argument to try to take the inheritance from Isaac and she does not want Ishmael to receive even a small portion of the

[72] Radak on Genesis 21.10.

inheritance. She wants Isaac to receive everything. [73] Sforno asserts that Sarah expels Isaac and Hagar out of her desire to protect Isaac and insure his future.

Rabbi Naftali Katz[74], enters his interpretation around inheritance, but takes a different approach. Following earlier midrash and *parshanut* he teaches that Sarah sees Ishmael act immorally by turning to idol worship and acting with sexual impropriety. Therefore, she worries that Ishmael will have a negative influence on Isaac, and cause Isaac to lose the inheritance. Rabbi Naftali Katz teaches that usually brothers who have the same mother but different fathers are suspicious of one another and in competition with each other. However, what Sarah sees between Isaac and Ishmael indicates to her that this is not the case and that Isaac may imitate Ishmael and lose his inheritance, so Sarah expels Ishmael. Though not stated explicitly, Katz highlights the fact that Sarah cannot control Ishmael's behavior because she is not his mother. Ishmael and Isaac are two children who live in the same house with different rules and expectations, and Sarah wants what is best for Isaac even if it comes at Ishmael's expense. [75]

Hagar and Isaac

While much is said about Sarah and Ishmael and Sarah and Isaac, very little is said about Hagar and Isaac. Yeshayahu Leibowitz discusses Midrash Tanhuma, mentioned earlier, noting that Isaac goes to find Hagar and bring her back to Abraham. In his teaching, Leibowitz uses an important word. He describes Hagar as

[73] Sforno on Genesis 21.10.
[74] Rabbi Naftali Katz was Russo-German rabbi who lived from 1649-1718. He wrote commentaris on the Mishnah and on Genesis, and he also revised several prayer books.
[75] Greenberg, Torah Gems, 155.

Isaac's stepmother, suggesting that Isaac and Hagar are bound in some meaningful legal or extra-legal way.

Conclusion

The commentators reiterate much of what appears in the midrash, yet they also offer new interpretations and thereby contribute to each other's ideas. Radak and Ba'al HaTurim raise the idea of *shalom bayit*, which in this case means peace between a husband and wife. Radak even goes as far as to suggest that Abraham's distress results from his affection for Hagar, but he does not argue for the sake of his relationship with Sarah. The commentators imagine a contentious relationship between Ishmael and Isaac, while still others entertain the possibility that they may have been close. Ibn Ezra gives a simple explanation that Ishmael demonstrates typical behavior for a boy his age. The *m'farshim* also recognize the difficult parental relationships that exist in this family. They note the challenge that arises in families when children do not share both of their parents. Discipline becomes difficult and siblings do not always follow the same rules because their parents have different expectations. Leibowitz demonstrates his knowledge of 20th century psychology as he explicates the complexities of this family and refers to Sarah, Hagar and Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Abraham as relationship triangles. Furthermore, he sheds light on the way in which a family member can contribute to overall family tension. In this case, he teaches that Abraham fails to respond to the issues present in his family, thereby causing tensions to worsen. [76] He also speaks to the devastation that a person

[76] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Seven Years of Discourses on the Weekly Torah Reading* (Kol Hazachuniyot Sh'morot, 2000), 59.

may feel after the loss of a spouse. Through striking insights regarding human emotions, and the creation of original dialogue between Abraham's family members, the commentators make the story of Abraham's family relevant to the times in which they lived, continuing the work of their rabbinic predecessors.

Chapter Three

Chapters One and Two examined the relationships between the members of Abraham's family as portrayed in the biblical text, midrash and classic commentaries. This chapter will reflect on the biblical texts, *midrashim*, and commentaries, and put them in conversation with contemporary psychological understandings and challenges surrounding divorce and blended families. In her book entitled *Fragmented Families*, psychologist Ellen B. Sucov explains:

> The elements of family dynamics are universal; they constitute the basic ingredients of family life in every culture and society. The tensions between attachment and separation, power and passivity, loyalty and betrayal, old values and new commitments, all of these competing forces are found in families everywhere. However the meanings that are conferred on them differ from one cultural context to the next. Persons draw on the available cultural resources to define their relationships with significant others.[77]

In particular, this chapter focuses on precipitating factors of divorce and separation, loss, changing family structures, and coping mechanisms to consider how these issues play out in Abraham's family and contemporary families.

Ancient and Contemporary Families

Before diving into the specific issues mentioned above, a brief discussion about ancient and contemporary family structures can be helpful in illuminating certain aspects of Abraham's family while also indicating important differences and similarities between ancient families and contemporary families.

[77] Sucov, 23

In many ways, ancient families are quite different from contemporary families in matters surrounding authority and marriage. Biblical families were patriarchal, and inheritance and property went from father to son.[78] The *midrashists* and *m'farshim* highlight these issues as a cause of strife in Abraham's family.[79] Furthermore, because the male adult had ultimate authority, he could decide how many wives he would have, and if and when he wished to divorced. The women's desires did not determine the man's behavior. Abraham's family did not follow this model. Sarai makes the decision to allow her slave to cohabitate with Abram, and Sarai demands that Hagar be sent away. Sarai and Abram seem to share decision-making power, a situation that runs contrary to the norm in the biblical period, but one that is similar to many contemporary families.

Though Sarai seems to have more power than expected of women in ancient society, in other ways Sarai's actions are typical of a barren woman in an ancient context. Women were supposed to have children, and infertility was seen as a sign of divine disfavor.[80] Moreover, though a woman did not become part of her husband's lineage, she was an essential part of continuing his family line.[81] In some ancient Near East societies, surrogate motherhood enabled barren women to find a place in society.[82] Some of their documents evince that surrogate motherhood was standard practice. For instance, the Hammurabi Code, a Babylonian law Code from around

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[78] Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009), 6.
[79] Genesis Rabbah 53.11, Pirke de'Rabbi Eliezer 30.
[80] David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, "Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar as a Blended Family," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Winter, 6, no. 2 (2009): 4.
[81] Weisberg, 82.
[82] Zucker, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, 3.

1754 BCE states that if a woman uses a slave as a surrogate, and after conception the slave begins to view herself as a mistress, the owner should mark her as a slave. This code touches on two factors in the Sarah-Hagar story. First, Sarai takes her slave as a surrogate and their interactions following conception can be understood as Hagar perceiving herself as a mistress. Second, Sarai makes certain that Hagar's status as a slave is made clear, most explicitly by the fact that she does not even refer to her by name in Genesis 21. The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar, a Mesopotamian legal code from approximately 1870-1860 BCE, states that if a slave has children with her master and the master frees her, her children lose their inheritance. In his article, "The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael," Pinker writes:

> The Code of Hammurabi also prescribes that in case the woman chosen by a wife and given to her husband becomes arrogant, she would lose her new status and become a slave again. Sarah implies that. Thus Sarah could legally demand that Hagar and her son who are slaves be given their freedom, thereby renouncing all claim to a share of the family estate. The ancient law was on Sarah's side, but family dynamics were stacked against her.[83]

Pinker points out that Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael might not have been out of the ordinary in ancient times but that this did not fix her family situation."

The encounter between Isaac and Ishmael in Genesis 21 may also have been typical of the ancient family. Children played with one another, and this play sometimes included violent games. In his article, "Ishmael at Play," Joshua Schwartz writes,

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[83] Aaron Pinker, "The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Spring, 6, no. 1 (2009): 8.

> Thus, countless children, siblings or otherwise have over the generations played at harming, maiming, or killing one another. In Roman society, for instance, playing soldier or gladiator was common and most parents probably would not have given much thought to pastimes even if "boys will be boys," there might have been the occasional bloody mishap. The pre-Islamic Arabs had a small round shield used on festive occasions and sports and apparently also as a "toy," probably by older children or young adolescents, honing their combat skills through "play." [84]

Perhaps when the rabbis imagine Ishmael shooting arrows at Isaac, they make a typical game out to be something negative and unusual.

Despite these kinds of games, the Bible emphasizes the importance of honoring family members and taking relationships seriously. Honoring one's father and mother is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Bible teaches that a person must go after his brother's killer. According to later rabbinic interpretations, the ideal biblical family is a family in which there is 'peace in the home,' although the phrase *shalom bayit* is a Talmudic concept that does not appear in the Bible. Nevertheless, harmony is not the reality of most biblical families. Sucov writes, "In the Genesis narratives, many of the family relationships appear to be discordant or dysfunctional. Each of the patriarchs experiences the loss or separation from an older brother."[85] In the case of Abraham's family, the separation between brothers occurs as a result of Abraham and Hagar's separation, described as a divorce in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. In her chapter "Divorce, an Unscheduled Family Transition," Constance R. Ahrons writes, "History demonstrates that despite our belief in the newness of divorce, our society evolved ways of dissolving marriages in tandem with ways of making

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[84] Joshua Schwartz, "Ishmael at Play: On Exegesis and Jewish Society," *Hebrew Union College Anual* 66 (1995): 216.
[85] ibid., 65.

marriages. Divorce is as firmly woven into the fabric of society as marriage is."[86] Judaism has always recognized divorce as an option, perhaps even an unavoidable part of life.

In biblical times, the word family did not mean nuclear family, nor does it mean nuclear family in today's culture. "Today divorce and remarriage are common so a person may be including in the word 'family' her stepparents, half-siblings, step-siblings, unmarried partners of family members, former spouses of relative, and so on." [87] Sucov includes many kinds of familial relationships in her definition as well, but adds, "…whether dwelling together or not, respected or rejected, estranged or reconciled." [88] Within a family, many kinds of relationships exist. Sucov describes families explaining, "…every family constellation includes various two-person relationships: two voices that speak and reply, confront and negotiate, love and sometimes detest each other."[89] Sucov suggests that two personalities play off of one another, verbally and non verbally, reflecting their emotional connections whether positive or negative. This is certainly the case for Abraham's family. In Genesis 16, Sarai's words to Abraham suggest emotional tension between them, and the description that Sarai was diminished in Hagar's eyes also suggests negative interactions between the two women. Genesis Rabbah even imagines that they talk about one another with an air of hostility to people they presumably both know.

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[86] Constance R. Ahrons, "Chapter 23: Divorce An Unscheduled Family Transition," in *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, by Elizabeth A. Carter and Monica McGoldrick (New York: Pearson Allyn & Bacon, 2005), 381.
[87] ibid, 47.
[88] Ellen B. Sucov, *Fragmented Families: Patterns of Estrangement and Reconciliation* (Jerusalem: Southern Hills Press, 2006), 4.
[89] Ibid., 9.

Today many families are blended families, "…where after divorce or death, and then through remarriage, at least one parent and one child (children) are not biologically connected."[90] Though blended family is a modern concept, when Sarai gives Hagar to Abram, this is the kind of family she creates. [91] Blended families have complicated relationships. Some family members feel more closely connected than others. Weisberg states, "…some degrees of kinship are stronger than others. A stepchild is treated like a relative in some instances, but the degree of kinship that exists between a stepparent and a stepchild is not equivalent to that of a biological parent and child."[92] One can see the veracity of this statement by looking at Abraham's family. Sarah treats Ishmael much differently than she treats her biological son, and though in the same family, Isaac and Hagar have no biological connection. Except for Tanhuma, which suggests that Isaac knows where Hagar lives and brings her back to Abraham, the separation between Abraham and Hagar seems to sever the relationship between Isaac and Hagar. Weisberg's statement describes ancient families, and this statement applies to contemporary blended families too. Though there are important differences between ancient and contemporary families, there are significant similarities as well.

Precipitating Factors of Divorce and Separation

Divorce is rarely a mutual decision and oftentimes one person has a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction with his or her partner. [93] Through research, Judith

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[90] Zucker, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, 3.
[91] ibid.,3.
[92] Weisberg, 87.
[93] Ahrons, 386.

Wallerstein and Joan Berlin Kelly discovered that some adults divorced because they felt their needs were unacknowledged and unmet for years.[94] While neither the Biblical text itself nor its traditional Jewish interpretations point to a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction present for Abraham or Hagar before the separation, midrash and commentary suggest that this may have been the case for Sarah in regard to her desire to separate from Ishmael. Perhaps the midrashic idea that Sarai sent the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy points to the possibility that Sarai had some nagging feeling, a desire to separate from Ishmael, even before he was born. In addition to the nagging concerns related to Ishmael, the biblical narrative and midrash suggest that Sarah had a nagging feeling that her husband's attention was divided, and that her standing in the household was threatened because of this.

Likewise, leading up to divorce, people often play the "blame game." Sometimes spouses blame one another or the other lover, and they also blame schools, communities, employers, and other relatives. However, parents never blame their children.[95] Sarah most certainly engages in blame. As discussed in the previous chapters, midrash and commentary imagine that Sarah saw Ishmael do something despicable, and there is nothing to indicate in the Biblical text or later interpretations that Sarah saw Ishmael as a son. Perhaps Sarah sees Ishmael as one of Wallerstein's external factors worthy of blame. Sucov points out that conflict often occurs in families when one child is favored over another.[96] This too seems to be a significant

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[94] Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly, *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 14.
[95] ibid., 14.
[96] Sucov, 6.

aspect of the conflict in Abraham's family. Isaac is undeniably favored over Ishmael by Sarah, and even by God.

For some families, interactions between family members are charged with extreme emotions. Sometimes they lead to interactions that occur like an "ominous storm", and other times they can be more like an explosion.[97] Sometimes anger between two people in a family can throw the entire family into chaos, and these conflicts can worsen when a third person tries to help smooth out the conflicts.[98] There are always many people involved in family conflict, and many factors such as gender, age, and sibling positions contribute to the conflict.[99] Sucov writes, "In every story of family conflict, there are main protagonists as well as observers or secondary players…"[100] Interestingly, in Abraham's family, Sarah is the main player. Sarah initiates a cutoff, but she herself will not be cutoff from Abraham and Isaac. Also significant is the fact that like Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham is an unwilling victim, forced to become the banisher. He is a secondary player. Abraham feels distressed about his son, and maybe he also feels that his wife Sarah has left him, seeing that she does not take Abraham's love for Ishmael into account at all.

However, in the rabbinic imagination Abraham is not necessarily the victim forced to banish his son. Exodus Rabbah 1.1 purports that Abraham is distressed over Ishmael's behavior – that Ishmael has rebelled against his father by worshipping idols. In Genesis Rabbah 53.11 Rabbi Akiva suggests that Ishmael's crime is sexual

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[97] ibid., 264.
[98] ibid., 17.
[99] ibid., 4.
[100] ibid., 17.

impropriety. The rabbis view sexual impropriety as something of the non-Jewish world. Schwartz writes, "In the view of the rabbis, the survival of the Jewish community was at stake and this survival depended on the expulsion of Ishmael." [101] These midrashim seem to suggest that Ishmael creates a rift between himself and his family by engaging in outside cultural and religious practices. Sucov proposes that estrangement can occur when one family member strays from the cultural or religious norms of one's family,[102] and indeed, this is one way midrash interprets Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's home.

Interfaith families face particular challenges involving religion and culture, especially after a separation occurs. Even if parents initially agreed to expose their children to only one of the parent's religion, after separation the other partner may change his or her mind and wish to expose the children to a different tradition. Generally, the custodial parent has the right to determine matters of religious upbringing, but sometimes the other parent insists on bringing the children into his or her religion. In rare cases, a judge may ban a parent from exposing his or her child to a religion that spews hate or intolerance as it could be harmful to a child's well being. [103] However, in many cases, children end up "…caught in the middle of parental religious wars."[104] Could Ishmael's supposed religious rebellion against Abraham actually have just been an alliance with his mother's religion? Perhaps like children today, Ishmael was caught between two parents with different religious and cultural

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[101] Schwartz, 217.
[102] Sucov, 12.
[103] David Weinstein, "Child Custody Disputes: The Religion Factor," RJ Magazine 6/01, section goes here, accessed January 12, 2016, http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/Summer%202001/601dw.html.
[104] ibid.,

practices, and in his family it leads to irreparable damage. It is not always "religious wars" that cause children to be torn between parents. In divorced families, it is not uncommon for one parent to suffer more than the other. Oftentimes, the child feels responsible for the suffering parent, blaming the other parent for his or her suffering.[105]

Loss

Regardless of the factors that lead to eventual separation, once the separation occurs, loss becomes a central experience for children and adults alike. For many people, divorce is the loss of dreams a couple or a family have had for their lives together. Just as loss is present in contemporary families, it may have been present in Abraham's family as well. Zucker writes:

> …the dynamics of the interplay between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar…are mindful of the dynamics that one finds in blended families. Since there are now two children, Ishmael and Isaac, dynamics and the partings are even more complicated than they were before. Each character is affected by the presence-and the anticipated absence- of the other, whether directly stated in the Bible or not. Consequently, the possible distress felt is exponentially larger than just between the three characters of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.[106]

For instance, how does Isaac feel about Hagar's departure? Do they maintain a relationship? Are they close? What about Hagar? Midrash Tanhuma 9 imagines that, as an adult, Isaac goes to find Hagar and successfully brings her back to his father. Do Isaac and Hagar miss each other over all of those years? Is it painful for Isaac and Ishmael to separate from one another? Sometimes, when people anticipate a loss, they

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[105] Judith S. Wallerstein, "Growing up in the Divorced Family,"*Clinical Social Work Journal Clin Soc Work J* 33, no. 4 (2005): 408.
[106] Zucker, Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah, 7.

distance themselves from the person they will lose by creating conflict.[107] Though there is no indication in the biblical text or its interpretation that Isaac and Ishmael anticipate losing one another, is it possible that if Ishmael is bullying Isaac in Genesis 21, he does so because he has a feeling that he may lose Isaac? Contemporary psychology recognizes that when divorce causes siblings to split from one another, feelings of loss can be present. [108]

While for some children (and adults) a separation can result in feelings of relief, for others it is a major crisis filled with anxiety and fear, all the more so when separations are sudden. Children need adequate time to process the separation with both parents.[109] In her research, Wallerstein found that "For children and adolescents, the separation and its aftermath was the most stressful period of their lives. The family rupture evoked an acute sense of shock, intense fears, and grieving which the children found overwhelming."[110] After Abraham and Sarah expel Ishmael and Hagar, Ishmael cries. His cries are so loud that God hears him all the way from heaven.[111] Contemporary psychologists recognize the grief children experience when their parents divorce. Wallerstein recalls that one child asked if he would ever see his daddy again. Another sobbed that he would need a new daddy, believing that he did not have one anymore. [112] It is difficult for children to find comfort when the loss occurs. Because the parents are the cause of the stress and sadness, parental comfort

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[107] Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[108] Ibid., 37.
[109] Ahrons, 389.
[110] Wallerstein Surviving ,45.
[111] Genesis 21:16-17.
[112] Wallserstein Surviving ,41.

is not reassuring as it is in other kinds of stressful life events.[113] Even after the initial shock of divorce dissipates, children continue to be affected. Many children experience a persistent anxiety and fear about other family changes or losses. Wallerstein writes, "What is so devastating about this symptom to the individual who lives with it is that the happier she feels, the greater the threat of sudden loss."[114] But it is not just children who suffer as a result of divorce, so too do the parents.

Fathers tend to have a difficult time dealing with the loss of daily contact with their children. Fathers often become distant from their children, and they underestimate the emotional attachment they have to their partners, as well as the guilt they have over leaving their children. [115] Abraham appears to be aware of his guilt and sadness. "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his." [116] Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer imagines that after Sarah's death, Hagar and Abraham reunite and have six children together. Does this suggest that Abraham felt secret distress over the loss of Hagar too?

After adults divorce, many of them experience emotional difficulties. Wallerstein encountered fathers who spoke of years that they did not visit their children because they felt they had nothing to offer them, and they did not feel well emotionally or physically.[117] According to Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Abraham does not

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[113] ibid., 35.
[114] Wallerstein Growing Up, 411.
[115] Elizabeth A. Carter and Monica McGoldrick, "Chapter 22: The Divorce Cycle A Major Variation in the American Family Life Cycle," in *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2005), 374.
[116] Genesis 21.11.
[117] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 406.

visit Ishmael until he is an adult. Conceivably, many years passed between Ishmael's departure and Abraham's first visit. While the midrash suggests that Sarah placed certain parameters on visits, asking that he not go down from his camel, one could surmise that Abraham's emotional state may have played a role. Moreover, even though Abraham does not follow Sarah's visitation guidelines, the parameters likely impact Abraham's time with Ishmael. He does not feel entirely free to do as he pleases. Ned Holstein, of the National Parents Organization, estimates that about twenty percent of divorced families in the Unites States have some form of joint custody. [118]This means that following certain visitation structures and living arrangements is a legal matter. Today, some parents describe the sadness that occurs as a result of losing out on time with children.[119] Wallerstein explains, "What is crucial in all visiting arrangements, whether the father or mother is visiting, is that the relationship between child and parent is structured by the constraints and the pattern of the visits."[120] Rabbi Norman Cohen, PhD, is familiar with this phenomenon and uses it to make a connection between Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer and families today in his book, *Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and Their Healing Insights for Our Lives*. He writes, "We divorced fathers and mothers know Abraham's pain of separation from his child. Many of us regularly journey to see our children who do not live with us and we have experienced both the anticipatory joy and the exhilaration of going to

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[118] Mandy Oaklander, "This Divorce Arrangement Stresses Kids Out the Most," Time, April 27, 2015, section goes here, http://time.com/3836627/divorced-parents-joint-custody/.
[119] Kathleen E. Jenkins, "Rekindling Tradition as Life Partnerships End," *S3KReport*, no. 8 (January 2010): 18, http://synagoguestudies.org/files/S3KDivorceReport.pdf.
[120] Wallerstein Surviving, 12.

see and spend time with our kids, as well as the attendant frustration and sadness of separation."[121]

In some cases, parents become so depressed that they have trouble caring for their children. In their study of divorced families, Wallerstein and Kelly found that 30 percent of the adults that they spoke to were severely depressed after the separation. Wallerstein describes one mother, called Mrs. L., who experienced major depression:

> After her husband announced his intention to terminate the marriage, Mrs. L. became seriously depressed and curtailed all of her activities. She sat for weeks on end in her darkened house, shades drawn. Without extended family and no financial support, Mrs. L. became increasingly withdrawn, unable to get her children to school or to cope with their needs.[122]

Like Mrs. L, Hagar has no extended family, nor does Abraham provide her with any financial support. When Hagar and Ishmael run out of water, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush, and sits away from him saying, " 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears." [123] Perhaps Hagar is depressed following the separation from Abraham, and this depression inhibits her ability to care for her son. In Hagar's case, grief may also be the overwhelming debilitating feeling. In researching for her article, "Rekindling Tradition as Life Partnerships End," sociologist Kathleen E. Jenkins spoke to one individual who said, " 'It is totally a death and it takes a grieving process and it takes support and it affects you like a

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[121] Norman J. Cohen, "Ishmael and Isaac," in *Self, Struggle & Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and Their Healing Insights for Our Lives* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 1995), 74.
[122] Wallerstein, Surviving, 31.
[123] Genesis 21.16.

death…people really need to be treated during the divorce like it's a death. It's a very hard time…You are broken.'"[124]

According to Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss,* some instances of separation and divorce can actually be worse than death. When a separation occurs and there is lack of clarity regarding if or when individuals will ever see each other again, insurmountable grief can be present. The greater the ambiguity of the loss, the worse it is. Those who experience ambiguous loss have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and relationship conflict. [125] The scene depicted in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer is one of ambiguous loss. Abraham's visits to Ishmael are unexpected, for Ishmael is not home either time. Perhaps Abraham times them so that he does not have to see Ishmael but can still leave word that he cares about him. Either way, the complexity of the relationship is clear. For the most part, the midrash is silent about Ishmael's emotions. However, after Abraham's second visit the text says, "When Ishmael came (home) his wife told him what had happened, and Ishmael knew that his father's love was still extended to him…"[126] Children who experience the ambiguous loss of a parent respond in different ways. Wallerstein found that:

> More often children remained disappointed by the frequency of their father's visits. One-half of all youngsters responded to the father's neglect or indifference with keen disappointment, a large number chronically and intensively so. The younger children were steadfast in their loyalty and longing, seemingly capable of waiting indefinitely for the nurturant, loving father. Most often these faithful youngsters did not counter reject their

[124] Jenkins, 2.
[125] Boss, 7.
[126] Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 30.

> errant fathers, but forgave them again and again for disappointing them.[127]

Furthermore, parents who come back after a long absence, but are financially helpful or emotionally supportive, are generally accepted.[128] Based on the interpretation found in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, it seems that despite his adulthood, Ishmael is like a young child willing to wait for his father, still believing his father loves him. Moreover, Abraham blesses him with gifts the second time he comes.

Ambiguous loss can have serious affects on family functioning. "Family members can become so preoccupied with the loss that they withdraw from one another. The family becomes a system with nobody in it." [129] Is this the case for Abraham's family, since Abraham could never be certain that he would be able to see Hagar or Ishmael? When God calls on Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him in Genesis 22, Abraham does not speak to Sarah beforehand. Furthermore, after the Akedah, Sarah dies in Hebron while Abraham lives in Beersheba suggesting that he and Sarah lived apart. Has the loss of Hagar and Ishmael caused Abraham to become so distant from Sarah that he does not even talk to her prior to this life-altering event? After all, Abraham listened to Sarah when she told him to cohabitate with Hagar and later when she demanded that he expel Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps the loss of Ishmael and Hagar negatively impacts Abraham's ability to communicate with Sarah.

Likewise, ambiguous loss can cause people to question what role they play in their families. For example, some parents who have given a child up for adoption

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[127] Wallerstein, Surviving, 237.
[128] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 408.
[129] Boss, 11.

wonder how many children they have. Genesis Rabbah 55.7 imagines that Abraham wrestles with this problem when God tells Abraham to take his son up a mountain to sacrifice him. This midrash suggests that before God specifies which son he should take, Abraham does not know. "Said He to him: 'Take I pray thee – thy son' 'Which son?' he asked. 'Thine Only Son,' replied He. 'But each is the only one of his mother?'- 'Whom thou lovest.' – 'Is there a limit to the affections?'"[130] Here, Abraham views Ishmael as a son even though his son does not live at home. God seems to question whether or not Abraham is really a father to both of them.

Restructuring Family After Divorce

As people face the many losses that come with divorce, they also face the challenge of reorganizing their family structures. "The multidimensional divorce process can be viewed as a series of transitions that mark the family's change from married to divorced status. This process involves disorganizing the nuclear family and reorganizing it into a binuclear family."[131] In many cases, children transition into a joint-custody arrangement that requires them to go back and forth between these two households. Sucov describes a divorcing family as a kaleidoscope, "…the fragments splitting and reforming new shapes and color combinations." [132] In the case of Abraham's family, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac become their own unit, and Hagar and Ishmael remain together alone. Children who grow up in a divorced or remarried family grow up in a culture that is not like that of an intact family. "The divorced

[130] Freedman et al., 486.
[131] Ahrons, 384.
[132] Sucov, 264.

family is a new *kind* of family with an inherently unstable structure and by no means just a truncated version of the traditional family that we know."[133]

Another characteristic that is distinctive of divorced families is that many individuals never fully divorce one another. They often continue to see the ex-partner and sometimes even remain part of the family. Boss writes,

> In a sense, one has to abandon the concept of monogamy in order to make divorce and remarriage work because a first marriage does not simply stop when a second one starts. It is forever part of the fabric of one's life. As with a death certificate, a divorce cannot erase the experience, good or bad; consequently, often more than a memory remains in subsequent relationships. And with divorce, unlike death, the ex-mate is often physically present, especially if there are children to co-parent.[134]

Accepting this new structure is not easy for many families. People struggle to decide who is in or out of the family. [135] As mentioned earlier, Abraham faces the question of whether or not Ishmael is in his family or not. In contemporary situations this challenge often comes to a head at major life events such as weddings. Often times a groom and groom, bride and bride, or groom and bride take separate photos with various constellations of their families. Some people have asked photographers to remove people from photos or put people in years later. [136] In Abraham's families these kinds of questions came to the surface at Isaac's weaning, an important event in Abraham's family.

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[133] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 404.
[134] Boss, 33.
[135] Boss, 65.
[136] ibid., 31.

Separation and the months that follow is one period of major transition. Another major transition period comes if and when remarriage occurs or when new people enter the family. Abraham reacts when he learns that Sarah will become pregnant with Isaac. Upon hearing the news, Abraham immediately prays for Ishmael. The dialogue in Genesis 17 alternates between a focus on Isaac and Ishmael, which seems to indicate that Isaac's impending arrival has shifted the balance. [137] Tension peaks for Sarah when Hagar becomes pregnant and then again at Isaac's weaning. Now her husband has two sons. From the biblical account it seems as though Sarah demands Ishmael's banishment following the weaning ceremony of Isaac. Initially, Sarah afflicts Hagar, perhaps not wanting Ishmael in the picture, even though the son of a surrogate slave could be her son. After birthing Isaac, Sarah does not seem to want a stepson. In contemporary blended families, some stepparents admit that they want the relationship with their partner but not the children that go along with it. [138] Wallerstein interviewed a recently remarried man who shared that his current marital problems resulted from his new wife's feeling that his children were an annoying interruption to their relationship. Parenting in a blended family is not easy. What role should the stepparent play? Should they discipline or not? Sarah does not want to parent Ishmael at all. She refers to Ishmael as the son of the slave-woman. [139] The biblical text and midrash are silent regarding Hagar's interactions with Isaac, so it is not clear whether or not she might have parented Isaac.

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[137] Cohen, 68.
[138] Wallerstein Growing Up, 406.
[139] Genesis 21.10.

Remarriage evokes responses from the children of divorced and blended families as well. Remarriage can be quite difficult for children. They feel fear and sometimes act in a hostile or emotionally distressed manner. [140] Relationships between stepsiblings or half-siblings can be fraught with tension, especially if there are many children close in age. [141] In his book, *Self, Struggle, and Change,* Norman Cohen considers how Ishmael might have felt watching the weaning feast that Abraham threw for Isaac. He writes, "How do our stepchildren feel when they do not get the same love, attention and even privileges as those conceived by us? What goes through the minds and hearts of our own children when they see a stepbrother or sister enjoy a more lavish Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration because their other parent can afford and wants an expensive party? Each one of us knows such moments." [142] While some children are unsure about stepparents or new siblings, others are quite open to the possibility.[143] Young children are often excited about the arrival of a stepparent. Wallerstein discovered that most children were able to enlarge their view of the family and have a relationship with the stepparent and siblings and stepsiblings usually became friends. During the time of Wallerstein's study only four babies were born, but in general older children were happy about the new baby. Maybe Ishmael was happy about Isaac's birth, if one follows the interpretation that Ishmael was playing with Isaac. In some cases, fathers give more attention to the new children and less to the older children, or children feels jealous of a stepparent who lives with their parent all of the time. Nonetheless, oftentimes children become close with their

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[140] Carter, 376.
[141] Wallerstein Surviving, 297.
[142] Cohen, 71.
[143] Wallerstein, Surviving, 289.

stepparents or a parents new partner. Because children welcome new people into the family, when a remarriage ends, it can be devastating for a child because they may lose a relationship with a parental figure who has no legal rights. While for Ishmael and Isaac, the presence of a stepparent is never new, Isaac and Ishmael each lose a relationship with a parental figure who has no legal rights.

Coping with Divorce and Blended Families

Through separation and the many transitions that accompany it, people employ coping mechanisms. Adults tend to express anger. Ahrons explains that anger serves as a way for people to cope with a life that has been thrown into disarray.[144] Wallerstein suggests that for both individuals anger can help people overcome depression. [145] Though a different circumstance, Sarai expresses anger towards Abram in Genesis 16 after Hagar becomes pregnant. One could argue that she fears Abram will leave her now. Perhaps her anger overcomes the depression she feels about her barrenness and the possibility that Abram could leave her. Likewise, even though Sarai encourages Abraham to cohabitate with Hagar, once Hagar becomes pregnant it seems as though her life is spinning out of control. Midrash imagines that Sarai scolds Abram for not praying for her in addition to himself and for not standing up for her when Hagar treats her lightly. Perhaps Sarai feels that Abram has left her in a sense. Perhaps she copes with this by becoming angry.

[144] Ahrons, 388.
[145] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 406.

Wallerstein found that four fifths of men and women said they felt anger and bitterness toward their former partner. [146]

Unfortunately, this coping mechanism can enter into parenting and custody arrangements. Wallerstein found that fathers were resistant to the responsibility of caring for their children because they did not want to feel like the ex-spouse's babysitter, even though this would mean more time with their children. In another case, one mother would take her kids out with her if their father came late to pick them up. This became her way of punishing the father. [147] Though different, Sarah's anger towards Ishmael prevents him from seeing his father.

Like adults, children also employ coping mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, some children form alliances with parents or siblings. Sometimes children align themselves with a particular parent. According to Tanhuma, though Isaac may have an ongoing relationship with Hagar, he does not go and find her until after Sarah dies. In regard to siblings' alliances, Wallerstein writes, "Although children didn't acknowledge the help of siblings, they huddled together with them and conferred frequently"[148] In the case of Abraham's family, Isaac and Ishmael did not have the opportunity to do this.

Even though children of blended families seem to lean on siblings or a particular parent, they also become more mature and independent, in part because they sometimes have to help care for a troubled parent. Wallerstein explains:

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[146] Wallerstein, Surviving, 11.
[147] Wallerstein, Surviving, 25-27.
[148] ibid., 45.

> It is difficult to assess the ultimate effect of such parenting of the adult by the child without following the youngsters into adulthood…It may be that empathy and compassion roused by the emotional need of the parent helps make the child a richer, more empathetic person. It is also possible that the empathy that is catalyzed eventually becomes the basis for a life choice, characterized by a wish for service and a talent that has been honed in compassionate service to the mother." [149]

Here, Wallerstein points to the possibility that the coping strategies employed and the divorce itself may have long-term effects.

Indeed, this seems to be the case in contemporary families as well as in biblical families. Family patterns seem to repeat themselves, and behaviors are sometimes passed down to the next generation. Boss discusses this phenomenon in relation to loss in contemporary society explaining that, "Unless people resolve the ambiguous loss – the incomplete or uncertain loss – that is inherent in uprooting, and bring into some congruence their psychological and physical families, the legacy of frozen grief may affect their offspring for generations to come, compounding itself as more losses inevitably occur."[150] Cohen notes that Abraham had to leave his father's home, and that perhaps Abraham's separation from Ishmael reminds him of his own separation from Lot. Abraham was cutoff from family twice.[151] Perhaps Abraham's inability to argue on Isaac's behalf when asked to slaughter him could have been a result of "frozen grief" about Ishmael.

Zucker and Sucov note repeating family patterns as well. Isaac favored one of his sons just like Abraham, and the tensions of Abraham's family seem to continue as well. Rebecca deceives Isaac, and Jacob and Esau have a tumultuous relationship.

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[149] Wallerstein, Surviving, 116.
[150] Boss, 4.
[151] Cohen, 66.

Similarly, abuse is sometimes passed down in families. [152] Abram forces Sarai to cohabitate with Pharaoh and later Sarai forces Hagar to cohabitate with Abram. Likewise, Sarai afflicts Hagar. What Sarai does to Hagar, a child of Egypt, is later what Egypt does to the children of Sarai. [153]

Modern Midrash

Informed by contemporary psychology, modern rabbis create their own stories about Abraham's family. Through these modern midrashic interpretations, the possible links between contemporary families and Abraham's family come to light. Cohen illuminates the loss that Abraham might have felt as he sent Hagar and Ishmael out of his home:

> "Abraham stood at the opening to his tent for a very long time as he watched Hagar and Ishmael slowly making their way out of the camp. Seeing his son disappear over the next hill as Ishmael and his mother headed into the wilderness of Beersheba and realizing that he probably would never see Ishmael again, Abraham began to shudder. Although the sun already was quite high in the morning sky and the desert heat beat down upon him, Abraham felt chilled as tears rolled down his cheeks. He could not help but think how his son must feel being sent away from his father's house, the house he had lived in for all of his thirteen years. As he recoiled with the pain that he had caused Ishmael, Abraham began to recall his own journey from his father's house, his own feelings of loneliness and isolation"[154]

Here, Cohen imagines the pain that Abraham must have felt as well as Abraham's ability to recognize his childhood situations playing out in his own family. Present in this midrash is the issue of ambiguous loss. Abraham watches Hagar and Ishmael

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[152] Zucker, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, 5.
[153] J. C. Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 2 (2007): 168.
[154] Cohen, 64.

disappear knowing that he might not see them again, but that the separation also may not be permanent. [155] In another interpretation, Cohen points to the complex issues that arise when family structures change:

> Abraham also kept thinking how the years had flown by since Ishmael was born…Sarah never imagined that he would develop any kind of special affection for Hagar's son or for that matter the servant herself. Whatever Sarah's expectations, Abraham came to treat Hagar as a wife and have much affection for her and for his firstborn son, Ishmael. The biblical writer states very plainly that Hagar was given to him "as a wife" (*l'ishah*) and not as a concubine.[156]

Sarah struggles to accept that Abraham has a relationship with another woman, and that he also has a relationship with a child who is not her son. Cohen imagines that Abraham tries to explain his feelings for Ishmael to Sarah, the loss he feels as a result of sending him away. "But now Ishmael was gone and Abraham felt pangs of guilt course through him. 'I never thought it would come to this,' Abraham whispered to Sarah as he lay next to her that night. Summoning his courage, he added, 'You know that I loved Ishmael, too, and now he's gone.'" Sarah reminds Abraham that Isaac is the son of promise, not Ishmael.[157] Sarah responds by reminding Abraham that Ishmael and Isaac are not equal, that in their blended family, the children do not hold the same importance. Cohen imagines that the disparity between Ishmael and Isaac is hard for Abraham:

> Abraham remembered the looks on the faces of Hagar and Ishmael and Hagar's faces as they stood witnessing this great celebration. How were they to feel as 'guests' at this great event knowing that no such feast took place when Ishmael grew up? Would not Ishmael have felt that he was an

[155] Ibid.,
[156] ibid., 67.
[157] ibid., 69.

> unimportant member of Abraham's family? Thoughts of his father not loving him must have crossed his mind that day. [158]

Cohen goes on to describe just how Hagar and Ishmael might have felt after they are expelled:

> Displaced from their home with their future in doubt, fearing that they might not survive the heat and the aridity of the desert, how could they feel anything but a deep animosity toward Abraham…they were not unlike their descendants, today's Ishmaelites, who feel that they, too, have been driven from their homes by the heirs to Abraham's covenant.[159]

In this contemporary imagining, Hagar and Ishmael respond to the separation, the fear, and the uncertainty with anger, just as some do after separation in contemporary families.

Zucker creates a modern midrash, perhaps less connected to contemporary familial configurations, but fascinating nevertheless. Zucker imagines that Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac concoct a plan to leave Abraham and live in the desert together. Unlike the midrash examined in Chapters One and Two, which I believe describe the relationship between Sarah and Hagar in negative terms, in this interpretation the relationship between Sarah and Hagar is a positive one. Sarah and Hagar bond over the fact that they share a husband who is "prone to strange visions."

> It is in their sisterly self-interest to form a close alliance where they will be able to protect themselves, and their sons, against the possible whims of Abraham. After giving the matter great thought, the two women decide that they want to establish their own encampment somewhere else. After due deliberation, they decide that a perfect solution is for the two mothers and their respective sons to decamp and move to the nearby oasis of Beer Lehai Ro-I to establish themselves there. There they will raise their sons. The two boys have bonded, for they only have

[158] ibid., 70.
[159] ibid., 76.

> each other as close relatives in the next generation. Sarah and Hagar develop a scheme where Hagar and Ishmael will go first to Beer Lehai Ro-I to establish themselves there. Then Sarah will report to Abraham that Isaac misses Ishmael and Hagar. Next, she will make plans to join the two of them, and reunite the two sons and the two mothers. [160]

Besides the unexpected relationship that Zucker creates between Sarah and Hagar, Zucker highlights the relationship that Isaac may have had with Ishmael and Hagar. This possibility seems valid given the psychological literature that suggests that children have the ability to enlarge their view of the family and develop relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings.

Conclusion

Significant differences exist between ancient families and contemporary families. Abraham's family was a patriarchal, polygamous family, typical of those in some ancient Near Eastern societies, but not typical of many families in contemporary times. Though family structures and social context might be different, ancient families and contemporary families are complex systems with complicated issues and relationships. When separation occurs in contemporary families there are often precipitating factors such as nagging feelings of dissatisfaction, blame, extreme emotional tension, and even religious and cultural disagreements. These precipitating factors occur in Abraham's family either in the biblical text itself or in later interpretations.

Once the separation occurs, loss becomes a central experience for the members of a divorcing family. All the more so is this the case when loss is

[160] Zucker, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, 1.

ambiguous, meaning that a parent or child does not know if or when they will see each other again. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer depicts a scene that seems to exemplify ambiguous loss. Ishmael does not know when Abraham will come to visit him, and it seems that a lengthy period of time passes before Abraham and Ishmael see each other at all. According to contemporary psychology, children express distress and worry about the loss of their fathers. Partners experience loss too. It is clear that Hagar is forlorn after Abraham sends her away. Individuals from contemporary families go as far as to say that divorce is like a death.

In the midst of their grief, families have to restructure themselves. Nuclear families become binuclear families. In the case of Abraham's family, Sarah, Abraham, and Isaac become a unit that is separate from Hagar and Ishmael. As families reorganize, questions arise regarding who is in and out of the family. The *midrashists* imagine that Abraham views himself as father to Ishmael even though Ishmael no longer resides with him, yet God seems to question this relationship. Moreover, tensions peak when new people enter the family. Some children have a difficult time adjusting when parents remarry, especially if new siblings become part of the family as well. For Abraham's family, tension peaks after Isaac is born.

As families transition, individuals develop coping mechanisms. Some express anger, perhaps as a way of overcoming their depression. In contemporary families, ex-spouses sometimes express anger towards each other at the expense of their children too. Sarah expresses anger towards Abraham in Genesis 16, and towards Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21. In Genesis 21, Sarah does not seemed concerned about how expelling Ishmael and Hagar will impact Isaac.

Though the emotional exploration in the biblical text and its interpretation can be limited, contemporary midrash expands upon the emotions of the members of Abraham's family, writing about these individuals as if they are living today. Contemporary interpretations highlight grief, sadness, jealousy and longing, and they even go as far to imagine surprising alliances between members of Abraham's family. These contemporary *midrashim* bring Abraham's family to life, illuminating how Abraham's family can be understood in light of what is known about families today.

Chapter Four

Chapter Three explored how modern psychology sheds light on Abraham's family and the experiences of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael. Once one places the two central dramas of Abraham's family in conversation with contemporary understandings of psychology and human relationships, possibilities abound for the ways in which the events of Abraham's family, and the interpretation of those events, may speak to divorced and blended families today. Clergy have a unique opportunity to build supportive communities and comfort adults and children as they experience divorce and the transitions that follow. It is critical that clergy understand divorce and remarriage, and the struggles that come with it, not only so that they can provide pastoral support, but in order that they may be able to help these families find themselves in Judaism's sacred stories.

The Prevalence of Divorce

Because of the frequency of divorce in American society, it is imperative that clergy are prepared to engage with divorced and blended families. Most clergy people will encounter individuals from these kinds of families with regularity. Wallerstein writes, "The study of divorce and children has been and remains a lonely field…Divorcing parents and their children have for some time been a population that is expanding explosively; yet its special needs are insufficiently recognized, little studied, and poorly served."[161] This section provides some of the current information on divorce and the experience of those impacted by it.

[161] Wallerstein Surviving, 5.

In the United States, the divorce rates began to rise after the Civil War and continued to increase for about a century. However, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, the divorce rate increased dramatically from 10.6 divorces per 1,000 marriages to 22.8.[162] By the 1980s, 51 percent of all marriages ended in divorce, and 61 percent of all second marriages. [163] While the divorce rate dropped down to 46 percent in the 1990s,[164] the majority of these divorcing couples had a child age six or under. This is an important statistic because, as Wallerstein explains:

> These youngsters spend the bulk of their growing up years in post-divorce families, trying to cope with a range of changing relationships of one or both parents including cohabitations and remarriages. Their losses will be compounded by their parents' broken love affairs, second or even third divorces, and by several years of diminished parenting that are inevitable as both parents struggle to rebuild their lives…[165]

Carter suggests that if divorce is handled in a satisfactory way, then children will experience few long-term consequences.[166] However, Wallerstein differs in her assessment, asserting that even when parents have a cordial relationship leading to a less tumultuous divorce, children are troubled by anxiety about love and marriage later in their lives. Based on Wallerstein's insights regarding divorce in the 1990s and its potential longer-term consequences[167], it is likely that clergy will encounter people who experienced this type of childhood even if they are not divorced themselves.

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[162]Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., "History and Current Status of Divorce in the United States," *Children and Divorce*, Spring, 4, no. 1 (1994), https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=63&articleid=409§ionid=2787.
[163] Carter, 373.
[164] ibid., 373.
[165] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 403.
[166] Carter, 373.
[167] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 415.

Clergy will officiate weddings for couples in which one or both of the partners had the kind of experience that Wallerstein describes. These couples may experience unique challenges as they begin to prepare for marriage and picture their own lives together. As noted in Chapter Three, children of divorce have fears about love and marriage. Perhaps, some of these couples can see themselves in Ishmael and Isaac who also experienced the break up of their family and witnessed the end of a marital relationship. Maybe Ishmael and Isaac were anxious about love and marriage too. Genesis 21.21 says about Ishmael, "He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt." Hagar's actions were atypical of most biblical women.[168] Like Ishmael, Isaac did not find a wife for himself. Abraham sent Eliezer to find him a wife. Is it possible that both Ishmael and Isaac were hesitant to marry, afraid that like their parents they might end up with dysfunctional relationships and broken families? Clergy can study these biblical passages with pre-marital couples, normalizing their possible fears and anxieties, while also giving them hope that their marriage can be different. After all, the Torah says that Isaac loved Rebecca, the first time the Torah mentions a man's love for a woman.[169]

However, clergy will not just encounter the adult children of divorced families. Today about 50 percent of all first marriages and sixty percent of second marriages end in divorce. [170] Rabbi Edythe Held Mencher reports that the divorce

[168] Tamara Cohn. Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), 100.
[169] Eskenazi et al., 124
[170] Wallerstein, Growing Up, 403.

rate in the Jewish community is the same as that of the general population. [171] In 2000, the US Census reported that 10 percent of adults were currently divorced. The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 found that nine percent of the Jewish population is divorced. [172] This number did not include those who had been divorced, but were currently remarried. Furthermore, the number of adults who have married only once has decreased since 1996. The American Community Survey from March 2015 indicates that only 50 percent of men and 54 percent of women had married only one time. While the majority of recent marriages are people marrying for the first time, 21 percent of marriages include two partners each marrying for at least the second time. [173] Wallerstein reports that four years after divorce, 44 percent of children have a stepparent and or stepsiblings. [174]

One of my Bar Mitzvah students, named John,[175] comes from a complicated blended family. He switches back and forth between his father and stepmother's home and his mother's home. John's mother does not see the benefit of Jewish education and so she does not bring him to group-based B'nai Mitzvah study on the weeks that he is with her. His stepbrother, with whom he will share his Bar Mitzvah, comes more frequently, and is encouraged to practice by his own mother, John's stepmother. John is constantly frustrated because he is behind, and he has trouble

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[171] Edythe Held Mencher and Marsha Elser, "Divorce Etiquette," ReformJudaism.org, http://www.reformjudaism.org/divorce-etiquette.
[172] Jenkins, 1.
[173]Jamie M. Lewis and Rose M. Kreider, "Remarriage in the United States American Community Survey Reports," March 2015, 10, doi:10.1787/888933152463.
[174] Wallerstein, Surviving, 153.
[175] All names used from personal experiences have been changed to respect anonymity.

remembering to bring his study materials back and forth between his two homes. Perhaps synagogues can take action to eliminate some of these stressors. Maybe we can provide two sets of B'nai Mitzvah study materials for children like John, or scan his materials onto a computer or mobile device that he can use at the synagogue. Moreover, maybe synagogues can improve their technology so that we can video conference a child like John into class so that he does not feel completely out of the loop each time he comes. And most importantly, clergy can talk to students like John and give them the space to voice their frustrations and sadness. They can ask them if they have anxieties about family dynamics that might occur on the day of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah or another life cycle event. They can reassure these children that they will be there to support them on the big day and the days after.

When clergy are there for children like John as they grow up, the synagogue can become a safe and comforting place for these children. I know one high school student who frequently drives herself to Shabbat services, using the synagogue as an escape from her stressful home. The rabbi with whom I work notices that this behavior is different from that of her peers. He asks her about her life at home, and she opens up to him about problems with a stepparent and anger at her father. It is clear that the rabbi is a very significant figure in her life.

Furthermore, many congregations have begun to experiment with family education models. At my internship, I have been a part of planning and facilitating family education opportunities. It is important for clergy to recognize that children of divorce will likely attend these programs with only half of their family. I recently helped plan a program in which parents and children were asked to write a covenant

together. In a planning meeting the educators and clergy discussed the importance of calling the covenant a household covenant rather than a family covenant. We knew that some of the children have more than one family.

These stories, and the statistics that back them up, make clear that cantors and rabbis will likely engage with people in various stages of divorce and its aftermath. Some of these people may have grown up in households consumed by divorce. Others may be divorced, or in the process of divorcing, and clergy will have relationships with the divorcing parents as well and their children. And some of these families may be in the process of restructuring their families after remarriage, which will have an impact on all members of the family. Therefore, clergy must be aware of and attentive to these families as various scenarios unfold. If and when this happens, religious institutions can be an important support system for these families. Divorce can bring people closer to religious institutions or cause them to feel more distant from them.

Divorce and Religious Institutions

As mentioned in the previous section, the study of divorce has been a field that lacks proper attention. Similarly, society has not given adequate attention to individuals experiencing the hardships of divorce. Wallerstein discovered that while schools seemed to support children who deal with divorce, "…outside the school, however, few institutions touched these children's lives. Fewer than 5 percent of the children were counseled or sustained by a church congregation or minister…in all, less than 10 percent of the children received adult help from their community or family friends." [176] Sociologist Kathleen E. Jenkins wrote a report for Synagogue

[176] Wallerstein, Surviving, 44.

3000 entitled, “Rekindling Traditions as Life Partnerships End.” For her report, she conducted interviews with congregants and rabbis. When she spoke with rabbis, many described a silence around divorce in their communities, admitting that they often found out that couples were divorcing through synagogue gossip. Some did not even learn of a family’s divorce until the time of B’nai Mitzvah, years after it happened.[177]

However, in some cases this may not be the fault of the clergy or the synagogue. Jenkins spoke to one woman who said she found comfort through synagogue worship but did not want to discuss her divorce with members of the synagogue because she felt it was a private matter. In fact, in her sample, Jenkins found that fifty percent of people said they wanted more privacy around their divorce, while fifty percent reported that they wished their synagogue gave more attention to their situation. [178]

After conducting interviews, Jenkins found that every participant in her study felt that divorce had a negative affect on Jewish home ritual. One woman mentioned the challenge of having teenage children who want to go out with friends on Friday nights and spend half of their Friday nights at their father’s home. [179] As noted earlier, some people turn to the synagogue after divorce, perhaps replacing their home rituals with synagogue rituals, but they do not seek any special attention regarding their divorce. Congregations can hold Shabbat dinners at the synagogue, making it possible for people to perform home rituals at temple with a community. And even

[177] Jenkins, 6.
[178] ibid., 3-4.
[179] ibid., 3.

without mentioning divorce specifically, clergy can encourage members of the community to have Shabbat dinners and invite fellow community members into their homes. Also, congregations can make sure to be inclusive when giving honors. I have noticed that clergy often invite couples and families to perform rituals such as lighting candles, reciting Kiddush, or opening the ark. Congregations should consider creating other groupings for these kinds of honors.

However, for some, this might not be enough. Lack of awareness and attention can actually push people away, even as they seek out religious institutions. One man that Jenkins spoke to said:

> I am actually very dissatisfied with what the Jewish community, at least here, has to offer to single people and also single people who are going through divorce. It is very bad in a number of ways, in the temples, I mean I've gone to their websites and there is diddely-squat for single people…those of us who may be more religious or less but want to be part of the community are like, 'fend for yourself. [180]

One woman spoke about a lack of programming for those who are divorced as well as the discomfort that occurred for her surrounding dues when divorce caused her financial situation to worsen. When clergy reach out to adults going through divorce, they should acknowledge that they know that divorce can cause financial hardships and that it is completely understandable if a person needs to adjust dues. They can also help people find scholarships for camps and Israel trips, so that parents feel confident that their children can continue to have meaningful Jewish experiences. The clergy and the synagogue staff need to reassure these individuals that these conversations are completely confidential. Jenkins talked to one woman who is very

[180] ibid., 5

involved in her synagogue, who admitted that she did not want to talk about it with fellow congregants or even the clergy out of fear of "yentas," who gossip. [181]

As spiritual leaders at religious institutions, clergy have the ability to help shape their communities. While some may choose not to take part in them, rabbis and cantors can promote programs for people going through various stages of the divorce process. Sometimes people need to tell their stories. Boss discusses the benefits of bringing families together to discuss their situations with one another. While most clergy are not qualified to facilitate group therapy, they can consider how they might facilitate the sharing of stories, even if they cannot be the facilitators themselves. Also, clergy can help make certain that institutional websites use language inclusive to all family structures. And most importantly, clergy can model how one can speak to individuals experiencing divorce, lovingly teaching their communities about the pain and isolation that can accompany divorce, and the damage that can ensue as a result of gossip.

Acknowledging Grief, Marking Transition

As discussed in Chapter Three, loss and grief often accompany divorce. Ambiguous loss can be even more devastating than death. Judaism provides rituals and words of comfort for those mourning a loved one who has died. Upon entering a mourners home, many say, "May God comfort you among all of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Similarly, when a person is sick, many say, "*Refuah Shlema*," wishing the ill individual a full recovery. No such phrase exists for those experiencing divorce. Rabbi Perry Netter, author of *Divorce is a Mitzvah,* recalls some of the

[181] ibid., 6

responses he received after making his divorce public: “Have you tried everything?” “You can’t do this!” “I’m sorry to hear about your divorce, but have I got a girl for you!” [182] Rabbi Netter goes on to say that none of these responses were helpful or comforting. Instead he suggests a phrase such as, “May God give you strength.” Perhaps clergy could begin to use phrases like this, modeling appropriate and compassionate responses to children and adults going through separations and transitions.

The lack of a scripted, comforting responses is only part of the problem. Lack of ritual also seems to be a pervasive problem. Boss writes:

> Highly stressed families experiencing ambiguous losses are too often left on their own to find their own way out, because existing rituals and community support only address clear-cut loss such as death. The couple or family struggles alone to confront the reality of what has been lost and what they still have. In the midst of this psychological turmoil they must reconstruct their family or marriage and manage their daily live in a new way. This is a tall order.[183]

Ahrons also points out that there are no socially acceptable rituals to mark the transitions that accompany divorce saying that, “divorce lies in a zone of ritual ambiguity.” [184] Judaism does provide a ritual for giving and receiving a get.[185] However, the early reformers eliminated the get ritual in an effort to modernize and

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[182] Perry Netter, *Divorce is a Mitzvah: A Practical Guide to Finding Wholeness and Holiness When Your Marriage Dies* (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publication, 2002).
[183] Boss, 20.
[184] Ahrons, 390.
[185] A get is a Jewish legal document that a husband presents to his wife at the time of divorce.

remove non-egalitarian practices.[186] Today, the Reform movement offers a ceremony called *Seder Preidah* in which a divorcing couple can come together and read words in which they release each other from marriage. The rabbi's opening and closing remarks include prayers and words from *Gittin* 90b, which teaches that God weeps with a divorcing couple. The separation document used in the ceremony has egalitarian language. Yet, because of the silence around divorce and the lack of ritual awareness, many people find themselves weeping alone like Hagar in the desert after Abraham casts her out.

In her article, "Yizkor for a Marriage," Gail Hosking writes, "I leaned against a…wall, my body rocking like a child who no longer understood the world. I was in mourning…I was sitting shiva, with no one there but myself."[187] As clergy, it is our job to help make certain that during the process of divorce, nobody in our community feels like she or he is sitting shiva alone. We must make people aware that there are contemporary, creative rituals that are available, and we must talk about them from the bima, in classes, in news bulletins and blogs, so that people know that these options exist even before a divorce occurs. As it was with Abraham's family, separation can be jarring and abrupt. Trying a new ritual they have never heard of might be the last thing divorcing individuals want to do during such a stressful time. They may not realize that a ritual could bring healing.

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[186] Sanford Seltzer, "Rabbi, I'm Getting Divorced. Do I Need A Get?," in *When There Is No Other Alternative: A Spiritual Guide for Jewish Couples Contemplating Divorce: Their Families, the Rabbis Who Counsel Them, and the Synagogues That Serve Them*(New York: UAHC Press, 2000), 88.

[187] Gail Hosking, "Yizkor for a Marriage," *Lilith Magazine* 36:3 (2011): 14-15.

Jenkins studied a Jewish healing group, noting that the group adopted the ritual of *kriah*, the tearing of a cloth to symbolize a time of mourning. Yet, the group also recognized that divorce can be a multi-faceted experience, and that some may actually feel relieved after divorce and ready to start a new life. In the group, some used Passover as a way to discuss embarking on a new personal freedom. [188] A group or public ritual might not suit the needs of every person, and for some it might be too painful to face an ex-spouse by participating in a ritual like *Seder Preidah*.

Mayim Chayim and Immerse NYC provide mikveh immersion ceremonies for divorce or the end of a relationship. For example, before entering the water, a person ending a relationship reads, "I stand here having completed the unbinding of a relationship. I stand here as a Jewish man with dignity and with strength. I stand alone, a whole and complete person, no longer bound as a companion and partner." Before leaving the water, one reads, "I emerge from these living waters, open and refreshed, strengthened to move forward. May I have the courage to accept what this journey will bring." Though the ritual itself is done alone, clergy can offer to accompany people to the mikveh, and to be there with them as they mark the transition. Ritualwell makes available several post divorce resources including prayers, egalitarian get rituals, and post-get rituals as well. Clergy can and should draw upon these rituals in their work.

From my research, it appears that most of the rituals that have been created serve adults right around the time that a relationship ends. Perhaps we need various rituals that can accompany other parts of the divorce process. For instance, some

[188] Jenkins, 5.

couples separate without immediately divorcing. Likewise, children can also benefit from rituals during times of transition to help them mark the initial grief they feel knowing that their family is changing forever. Perhaps children should be present at a ceremony like *Seder Preidah*, especially if they are old enough to understand the events that are happening in their family. Parents can read something to their children affirming their love and commitment to them, even though their family will look different than it once did. At the time that a parent moves out, clergy can provide a prayer for peace and wholeness, acknowledging that while the building might be the same, the home now has missing pieces. Similarly, clergy can write a blessing for the childrens' second home. Ritual may be helpful at other stages as well. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some children dream about their parents reuniting after divorce. If a parent remarries, this dream is likely shattered. Clergy can acknowledge the mixed emotions of grief and excitement that may occur as a family shifts and changes, and help mark the change in a meaningful way. Perhaps children can create a collage, one part solely designated for pictures of their family as it used to be. There could be a blank page for the children to add new pictures if and when they feel ready. Children can even draw pictures of Abraham's family throughout the different stages, choosing to illustrate members of the family who speak to them.

Abraham's Family, Our Families

Rituals are one way that clergy can offer pastoral support to divorced and blended families. Yet, even without ritual, clergy can provide pastoral care through presence and textual connections. When clergy teach people how their stories relate

to our sacred stories, they can help normalize the experiences of divorce and separation that may cause people to feel isolated and alone. Sucov writes:

> The struggles of these biblical families are relevant to our own lives. We can recognize our own contentious relationships mirrored on the pages of scripture. One might ask, have I demeaned one son in favor of another? Will my estranged children come together only to bury me? What could I have to heal the rift between them? The texts prod us to ask profound questions have no definitive answers. We will continue to search. [189]

In her analysis of Abraham's family, Sucov describes it as a family of intersecting triangles, one in which Isaac and Ishmael are most negatively impacted as they become "…the vehicles for carrying out the parental agenda." Sucov suggests that this story can help people recognize triangles in their own families, the ways in which children may be burdened by their parents' decisions. Perhaps a teenager may see that he has suffered as a result of his parents' decisions, just like Ishmael and Isaac. Or perhaps a parent may admit to her rabbi or cantor that she feels guilt over the way in which divorce has burdened a child. Her cantor may remind her that life is full of tough decisions, and that the father and mother of the Jewish people made mistakes too. Likewise, sometimes the actions of Abraham and Sarah can serve as a negative example, allowing people to see what they have done right.

As chaplain intern at a hospital, I visited a Jewish man named Bernard who was dying of lung cancer. During one of our last meetings, he said, "Given the seriousness of my situation, there are some things we should discuss." He went on to tell me about his complex family situation resulting from infidelity. And then he said,

[189] Sucov, 75.

"It's like that story, you know the one with Abraham, Sarah, and…" "Hagar," I said gently. "Right. Hagar," he said. "But I didn't do what Abraham did, I took responsibility." I replied, "Sometimes we learn from our ancestors' mistakes and choose not to follow in their footsteps." By comparing himself to Abraham and finding the parallels between the biblical story and his story, Bernard was able to find healing and relief in his final days. Just as Bernard identified with Abraham, individuals may relate to other characters from this story as well. A woman watching her ex-husband remarry may relate to Sarah's jealousy of Hagar. Or, a person marrying someone who already has children may relate to Sarah's frustration that Ishmael lives in her home. A man whose spouse has filed for divorce or chosen another lover may relate to Hagar's pain. A girl who misses her mother's ex-boyfriend may imagine that Isaac was sad just like her when Hagar left Isaac's home.

David Zucker describes a visit with a woman who wanted to discover how her family's story related to Judaism. She spoke to him about challenging family dynamics, and was upset by the problems in her family involving second marriages, differing loyalties, and ambiguity regarding responsibility. She wanted to know what Judaism had to say about her family. Zucker proceeded to tell her the story of Abraham's family and after his explanation he said to her " 'Love, hatred, physical violence, blended families, the other woman, the other man, step-children, jealousy, favoritism, it is quite a narrative!'"[190] Zucker normalized her family's experience by naming similar emotions and relationships in Abraham's family. Zucker pulled these

[190] D. J. Zucker, "Blended Families/Sarah, Hagar, and All That...,"*Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 57, no. 1 (2003): 34.

descriptions from the biblical text itself and its interpretations. Later in the conversation Zucker said to the woman, " 'Sarah, Hagar and Abraham made choices. Some of those choices were good ones. Others, well, at the very least, had consequences they did not expect. All in all, however, we can learn from both their successes and their failures.'"[191] Through Zucker's simple explanation, he made Abraham and Sarah seem like people anyone might know today. Perhaps the woman could even say what Zucker said about Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar about herself and her own children.

These examples demonstrate some of what the biblical account of Abraham's family and its interpretations have to offer. The complicated relationships and strong emotions that may have been present in Abraham's family are present in contemporary families too. The imagined scenarios and emotions presented in the midrash do not seem ancient, but rather they seem like they can describe families today. In the episode, "Cheating Happens," from the podcast, *Death, Sex, and Money*, one woman shares that her boyfriend had sexual relations with another woman during a time of ambiguity in their relationship. She describes what she felt after she learned of the situation.

> …my stomach just dropped to my feet, and the tears just welled up…even when I think about it I don't necessarily think he cheated on me. I see it as more of a betrayal. Cheating doesn't have to carry anything with it…cheating for me is not the physical act that makes infidelity what it is, it's the emotional impact and the mental impact…I was haunted by it for so long and I think I just felt so much more betrayed because now we have a surprise human coming out of it, whose their child. Now I have two people in my life who would not necessarily have been there before. So it's more the imposition

[191] Ibid., 37.

> of what the end result turned into that got me for a very long time. I had the very human reaction after I kind of came to grips with what this whole situation meant for me and for him and for what our relationship would be, I would have these very mean, mean fantasies of just like maybe she'll fall down some stairs, maybe she'll slip and fall on something…because then at least if the babies not here then she's not here. Then I get to have my pretty picture back.[192]

Much of this woman's experience is mirrored in Abraham's family. Midrash imagines that Sarah is angry with Abraham because she feels betrayed by him, devastated that he did not pray for her. And even more striking is the way in which midrash imagines Sarah sending the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy. The fantasies the woman admits to in the podcast parallel Sarah's actions and emotions as interpreted by midrash. Clergy can listen to individual's stories and show them how the themes of their stories have resonance with biblical stories.

Conclusion

Divorce has been and continues to be prevalent in society. Clergy will interact and engage with people at all stages of the divorce process. They are, therefore, in a unique position to support individuals experiencing divorce or the impact of divorce. By speaking about, developing, and facilitating rituals, clergy can help people through the many transitions that accompany divorce. Religious institutions can play a vital role for children and adults alike by providing a stable and caring environment during a time in which people might feel very much alone. Clergy will have the opportunity to make meaningful connections with these individuals, especially if their

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[192] "Cheating Happens.," WNYC, accessed January 23, 2016, http://www.wnyc.org/story/cheating-death-sex-money/.

synagogues are inclusive communities that respect people's need for privacy while still offering support to those who desire it. As clergy make time to listen to people's stories they can help them realize that they are not alone, for not only do they have a community, they descend from ancestors who had similar experiences and emotions. Perhaps if people can recognize their experiences as human experiences that they share with fellow human beings, especially their biblical ancestors, then they can begin to come to terms with their situations, their actions, their pain and their grief, their excitement or relief, and ultimately find healing through all that Judaism has to offer.

Conclusion

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael form a complex family with challenging dynamics. Though Abraham's family exists in a context and society different from our own, in many ways his family seems similar to contemporary families. Abraham's family has stepparents and stepchildren, half-siblings, and two women who have a child with the same man. The *midrashists* and *m'farshim* imagine that Abraham's family is an emotionally charged family that faces particular challenges. Contemporary families face challenges not unlike those of Abraham's family.

The *midrashists* and commentators expand upon the biblical text imagining the emotions and struggles that may have been present in Abraham's family. They describe jealousy and rivalry between Sarah and Hagar and Isaac and Ishmael, as well as resentment and anger between Sarah and Abraham. Yet, the *midrashists* also consider the possibility that Abraham may have cared deeply for one or both of his wives. Likewise, midrash imagines that Abraham's despair is so extreme, and his love for Ishmael so great, that he visits Ishmael in the desert despite his wife Sarah's preference that he not. Sarah does not want her husband to have any relationship with the other woman or the other woman's child. Some midrash suggest that Ishmael's expulsion is his own fault, that he is a rebellious child who distanced himself from his family's cultures and norms. And, the *midrashists* even raise the possibility that Isaac goes to find Hagar many years later.

In many ways, the problems and emotional difficulties that midrash and commentary emphasize are the problems that contemporary families, especially

blended ones, face today. To an extent, blended families must give up the idea of monogamy, and in this way these families become similar to Abraham's polygamous family. Resentment and anger often precede or follow divorce or separation. Many parents feel distress and grief over time lost with children, as dictated by a visitation schedule. The despair and grief is even worse when the loss is ambiguous, when a parent and child do not know when they will see one another again, as is the case for Abraham and Ishmael. As families transition and evolve into new configurations, individuals struggle to accept new realities. Adults sometimes see stepchildren as an imposition, and children are not always happy to have a new parental figure in their home. Yet sometimes, children become close to a non-legal caretaker, and that person's departure can be a devastating event as it may have been for Isaac. Children often blame themselves, though parents rarely blame them. Like the *midrashists*, children may see their diverging from their parents' culture and norms as a reason for tension between their parents.

Contemporary psychology discusses the experiences of children from blended families quite extensively, compared to midrash and *parshanut*. Children feel grief, anger, and immense sadness. When neglected by a parent, as Ishmael is, the grief can be even worse than it is when someone dies. Oftentimes children of blended families grow up in an unstable environment where they take care of their mother or father. These children are forced to grow up quickly. Sometimes they form alliances with their siblings as they go through challenging times. How did Ishmael and Isaac cope with the separation and dysfunction in their family? Midrash and commentaries pay little attention to that question. This makes it difficult to connect Ishmael and Isaac to

the lives of contemporary children, unless we act as the *midrashists* ourselves, as some modern scholars do. Similarly, my research shows that midrash and commentary have a lot to say about the relationships between two women who have lived with and borne children with the same man. While contemporary psychological literature has volumes on children of divorce, there is far less on the relationship of present and past wives or husbands of a single individual. Perhaps the focus on wives in Jewish literature is due to the fact that Hagar and Sarah have more contact with one another than ex-spouses and current spouses do with each other in many contemporary families. Also, polygamy was a reality in many Jewish communities throughout the period that many of the *midrashists* and commentators lived. Sarah dies, so it is unknown what might have transpired between Sarah and Hagar later as their children grew up, as they aged, and as their relationships with Abraham evolved.

Despite the fact that midrash and commentary leave out key voices or certain events and that contemporary psychology does not necessarily speak to every aspect of Abraham's family, contemporary families may relate to Abraham's family in profound ways. They may identify with the experiences and emotions felt by Abraham's family members, which can enable individuals and families to contextualize themselves within a Jewish framework. Helping families make these connections is one way that clergy can provide support to individuals and families, but this alone is not enough.

Clergy must lift the silence that often surrounds separation and divorce in Jewish communities, and do more to create inclusive communities. The separation that occurred in Abraham's family was abrupt and painful. There is not much in the

biblical account itself or in its interpretations to suggest that the members of Abraham's family found healing or peace. Contemporary families can be different from Abraham's family. As clergy, we can do our part to make it so. We can reach out to members of blended families, ask them how they are doing, and let them know that we have time to listen. We can help them find ways to be involved in our congregations, not just so that they feel welcomed, but so that they feel that they are essential members of the community. We can assure parents that we will support their children and help them through complicated situations that may arise. Furthermore, we can find or create rituals for individuals and families, and make more people aware that these rituals exist. Clergy can create new rituals or write prayers or readings that reference the story of Abraham's family.

While this thesis begins to address some of the ways that clergy can support members of divorced and blended families, there are limits to the current study. Contemporary rituals for divorce and blended families can be studied more extensively or examined more thoroughly. Future studies can include personal accounts from individuals who have participated in these rituals and how they feel they affected them. There are other possibilities for further study as well. It would be worthwhile to study other biblical families to see how these families may or may not be similar to contemporary families. Perhaps midrash and commentary on other biblical families include the voices of children in complex families more than they do in Abraham's family. If they do, children may be able to relate to their biblical ancestors in profound ways. Likewise, in Abraham's family, God plays a significant role. God speaks to Abraham and tells him that he must listen to Sarah. This thesis

does not address God's role in the story. Future studies can look more closely at how God impacts the events of Abraham's family and the effect that God's demands have on the relationships amongst the family members.

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