



WHO WAS SARAH, THE FIRST JEWISH WOMAN IN HISTORY?

BY DINA COOPERSMITH



In the opening words of the Amidah prayer, we mention Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov. We invoke their merit, we refer to their tests of faith and to the recurring themes in their lives, and in the lives of the Jewish nation. Nachmanides quotes a well-known dictum: "The events of the ancestors are a predestined sign for their descendents."

Assuming, as well, that the events of the Jewish matriarchs are a sign for their descendents, we would like to study the lives of these great Jewish women who enabled, complemented and stood by their husbands in their mission to create a monotheistic nation that would be a light unto others. What strengths and characteristics did they imprint upon our genetic code for generations to come?

Sarah

Let's begin with Sarah, the first matriarch who, along with Avraham, became the primary root of the Jewish people.



The first time Sarah enters onto the stage of history, we hear about Avraham traveling from Haran, his native country, "to the land which I will show you" -- after God's explicit commandment to "Go forth from your country, your birthplace, your father's home" (Genesis 12:1).

It is significant to note the first impression that the Torah gives us of Sarah. Her name (or names) will hint to her essence, as well.

*Avram and Nachor took wives, the name of the wife of Avram was **Sarai** and the name of the wife of Nachor was Milkah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milkah and the father of **Yiskah**. And **Sarai** was barren; she did not have a child. (Genesis 11:29-30)*

Rashi explains:

Yiskah refers to Sarah, since she gazes ("socha") with Divine spirit, and everyone gazes ("sochin") at her beauty. Also, Yiskah means princess ("nesichut"), like Sarah, from the same root as authority ("srara").

Rashi tells us that Sarah appears in our verse by another name as well, Yiskah, and that the three meanings of her name signify her spiritual stature ("Divine spirit"), her physical beauty, and her quality of leadership -- royalty and authority, which is also alluded to in her name, "Sarai."

Later, Sarai's name is changed to Sarah:

And God said to Avraham: "Sarai, your wife -- you will not call her 'Sarai'; rather, 'Sarah' is her name." (Genesis 17:15)

*Rashi: The meaning of "Sarai" is only **my** officer and not for others; "Sarah" means she will rule over everyone.*

As wife of Avram, Sarai appears only as his "officer" and later on, when taking on a greater mission as progenitor of the Jewish nation, Avram's name is changed to Avraham, while Sarai becomes a princess with impact on everyone -- Sarah.

Barrenness and Independence

And Sarai was barren; she did not have a child. (Genesis 11:30)

In the introductory verse quoted above, Sarai seems to stand alone as an individual not connected to her family, although we later realize that she is a sister of Nachor's wife, the daughter of Haran. Also, she is endowed with a unique clarity of vision and insight, with beauty and dignity, even as a daughter of Haran.

In fact, this spiritual level, which preceded her partnership with Avram, was even higher than his in some cases:

"Everything Sarah says to you, listen to her voice." (Genesis 21:12)

Rashi: ...to the voice of Divine insight in her, we learn that Sarah superseded Avraham in prophecy.

Sarai stands alone, separate from parents and siblings. No offspring to tie her down to hearth and home; a perfect candidate for the nomadic life, she was expected to live with her husband, Avram, who had just been commanded:

"Go for yourself from the land, from your birthplace, and from the house of your father, to the land which I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

Leave all those dependencies you may have on your family, friends and society. Become independent. Go out on your own and start anew.

Inner Strength, Trust and Faith

Picture Sarai, a woman with Divine insight, who knows she is to be a part of a unique mission with her husband, to spread monotheism throughout the world, and to eventually start a new nation which will be a light unto the others. And she is barren.

Sarai was barren, she had no child.

[Why the double phrasing?] To teach that she did not even have a place for offspring -- i.e. a womb. (Rashi, citing Talmud – Yevamot 64a)

Sarai has no womb; from the standpoint of nature, she cannot possibly give birth. What did God have in mind making our matriarch, the quintessential mother, childless for most of her life?

Perhaps, this is one way in which He insured that Avram and Sarai would be free to work on spreading their message to the world and be partners in that mission.

The souls that they made in Charan -- they brought them under the wings of the Shechinah (Divine Presence). Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women. (Rashi, Genesis 12:5)

How did this affect Sarah herself?

Why were the matriarchs barren? For God desires their prayers and looks forward to their conversations... He said: They are beautiful, they are rich; if they have children, when will I hear from them? (Midrash – Breishit Rabba 45:4)

God gives us lackings and “needs” in order that we turn to the Source of all blessings and develop a relationship with Him by our requesting.

If our needs are fulfilled directly and presently, we see with clarity and gratitude how God runs the world and provides for His creatures. If, however, fulfillment of those needs is delayed, and a situation of lack continues for years, our challenge is to accept with fortitude that our situation is for our best, that God loves us -- and to continue trusting and praying that someday our requests will be heeded.

Sarah must have developed a very strong sense of inner belief and trust in God, in order to accept a situation whereby she was going to embark on a wandering, sterile lifestyle with Avraham -- while believing that somehow, out there in the future, would be children, a nation, prosperity and blessing.

Avraham himself had been directly promised these three blessings when God commanded him to go forth into the unknown:

And I will make you a great nation. (Genesis 12:2)

Rashi: Normally, travels lessen three things: fertility, reputation and economic status. I therefore promise you all these blessings.

Sarah had never actually received these promises. She had to believe Avraham and trust that it would be so.

Sarai's Infertility

And Sarai said to Avram: "Behold, God has prevented me from giving birth. Please come to my handmaid, perhaps I will be built up through her." (Genesis 16:2)

After 10 years in the land of Canaan, waiting for her hopes to be fulfilled and for the longed-for child, Sarai realizes there is another option; perhaps this solution is not the most pleasant, nor an option for the typical woman. But for a woman such as Sarai, possessed with such inner strength, acceptance of God's plan, and a clear determination to do what's right no matter how uncomfortable, this seems like a possibility. Perhaps Avram must marry another woman, Hagar the Egyptian, who can bear children. She could be taught and trained by Sarai to be the wife of Avram and also, if there were to be a child, Sarai would be its godmother so that he would be worthy of starting the nation that is meant to emanate from Avram.

How much courage, humility, acceptance and inner strength are necessary for such a suggestion! Imagine the years of struggle and challenge, of partnership with Avram, of working at his side, attempting to educate the masses and spread monotheism throughout Canaan, without the support of family or friends -- and then relinquishing her position as biological matriarch of the Jewish nation and giving it over to a handmaid! Sarai embraces this idea simply because this is what needs to be done right now. Ego doesn't matter; "I" don't matter. It's about doing the right thing, with strict justice. This is the essence of the Jewish trait of *Gevura* -- introspection, strength and inner consciousness.

Sarai, Hagar and Yishmael

As well-intentioned as Sarai was, things didn't turn out as wonderful as initially planned. As soon as Hagar married Avraham, she conceived, and as a result started demeaning Sarah:

[Hagar] would say (about Sarah): "This woman -- she looks righteous but she must not be. How many years is she married to Avraham and has not conceived. Whereas I have conceived in one night." (Midrash – Breishit Rabba 45:4)

At this point, the long-suffering, patient, humble Sarah blows up!

And Sarai said to Avram: "My wrath is upon you! I have given you my handmaid and she sees she has conceived and now she condescends me? God must judge between you and me!" (Genesis 16:5)

What happened to her acceptance, strength and ability to stand calmly in the face of any adversity? Why is Sarah blaming Avraham anyway? It was her plan; she suggested it. Okay, maybe she made a mistake. Hagar is obviously not a nice woman, unworthy of being the matriarch of the Jewish people. But why this uncharacteristic, almost childlike blaming of Avraham for the pain which is being caused by Hagar? Why the outburst of resentment for being looked down upon by Hagar?

This is the flipside to Sarah's equanimity. As long as she knew she was doing God's will, nothing was too difficult to handle. But here, it seemed that she had made a mistake, and this was confirmed by Hagar's mocking. If these were Hagar's true colors, then in fact, this option of taking her as a surrogate mother for the Jewish people was based on false judgment. This made Sarah reanalyze the situation and realize that the solution to their predicament may have lain elsewhere.

*"...The justice due to me should be looked for with you ... if you had asked God (with the words:) 'And **we** are childless,' just like He gave you a son, He would have given me a son. Now you've said, 'And **I** am childless,' God granted you and not to me'." (Midrash – Breishit Rabba 45:5)*

When Sarah realized that it was impossible for Hagar to have conceived on her own merit, she started asking Avraham if there was a piece of the puzzle she may be missing -- i.e. any information God may have given him of which she was unaware. Sarah found out that Avraham had in fact had an interchange with God in Genesis 15: 1-14:

After these things the word of God was brought to Avram in a vision and said, "Don't fear, Avram, your reward is very great."

*And Avram said, "What can you give **me**, the person who keeps my house is Eliezer... To **me** you have not given seed and my housekeeper will inherit **me**."*

And God said, "This one will not inherit you; rather, the one who comes from your loins will inherit you."

That was it! Sarah, in her clear insight and wisdom, figured out that the reason Hagar conceived right away was due to Avraham's righteousness and his prayers to have a child. Of course, Avraham assumed it would be with Sarah, but he had neglected to specifically include his wife! Had Sarah known about this omission, she would have given Avraham a lesson about the power of prayer, have sent him back to re-ask, and the whole gut-wrenching Hagar episode could have been avoided. Sarah prophesized this would have far-reaching horrific effects for the Jewish people; Yishmael became the forbearer of the Arab nation that in the future would violently compete for the Land of Israel. No wonder Sarah was angry.

* * *

In any case, at this point it was too late. What was done was done. Yishmael was born. He was still Avraham's son, educated and loved by Avraham.

Years later, Avraham and Sarah eventually did give birth to their son, Yitzhak. He grows up in the same environment as Yishmael, who at this point is involved in dangerous and immoral behavior. Sarah again approaches Avraham:

And Sarah said to Avraham: "Send out this handmaid and her son, because her son will not inherit with my son, with Yitzhak." And this thing was very bad in the eyes of Avraham about his son. And God said, "Everything Sarah says to you -- listen to her voice. For by Yitzhak your seed shall be called." (Genesis 21:10-12)

Lest one think that Sarah was acting out of personal vindictiveness, God validated her determination to remove Yishmael's influence from her home. The Sages give us an appreciation of the differences of opinion that came up in the conversation:

Yishmael was building altars and offering sacrifices for idol worship. Sarah said, "What if Yitzhak, our son, learns from him? There will be a great desecration of God's Name!"

Avraham said, "Now that we have brought Hagar in and made her a lady, how can we drive her out? What will people say of us? There will be a desecration of God's Name!"

Sarah said, "In that case, if we're both talking about a desecration of God's Name, He must decide between your words and mine."

And God said, "Everything Sarah says to you, listen to her voice." (Tosefta – Sotah 5:7)

The point of contention between Avraham and Sarah was about the ramifications of driving out Hagar and Yishmael. Avraham, the pillar of kindness, openness and acceptance, saw the immediate impression that this expulsion would create upon the neighbors and followers they had influenced.

Sarah was able to see beyond the immediate, to the more far-reaching effects of Yishmael remaining in the home of the forefather of the Jewish people. If Yitzhak would be influenced by this person, the Jewish nation's genetic make-up would be in danger! This is a far more devastating desecration of God's Name. Sarah, with clear-sighted vision and a discerning ability to analyze and prioritize, was able to establish the foundations of her home and nation with determination and strength.

The News about Yitzhak -- Laughter

In Genesis chapter 17, Avram is commanded to change his and Sarai's names, and with that, a change of luck and essence will take place. At the same time, God promises Avraham a child from Sarah:

"Your name will not be called Avram, but rather Avraham. Your wife, Sarai, do not call her name Sarai, rather Sarah is her name. And I will bless her and also give you from her a son..." And Avraham fell on his face and laughed and he said in his heart, "'Can a person of 100 years have a child, and Sarah, can a 90-year-old woman give birth?'" (Genesis 17:5, 16-17)

Avraham's response to the news of a child from Sarah is laughter, and Rashi interprets this as a reaction of joy and happiness. Sarah also laughs when she hears the news later on, through the three messenger/angels that come to visit Avraham's tent, but her laughter is criticized.

The words of the angel are met with a response by Sarah:

"I will return on this day next year and your wife, Sarah, will have a son."

Sarah laughed in her heart and said, "After I have aged, could I become young and my husband is old?!" (Genesis 18: 10, 12)

Rashi interprets:

This laughter is mocking. We learn that Avraham believed and was happy, and Sarah didn't believe and mocked, and therefore God criticized Sarah and didn't criticize Avraham.

And God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Could I give birth after I am old?' Is anything too difficult for God? On this day next year I will come back and Sarah will have a son. And Sarah denied and said, "I did not laugh," because she feared, and he [Avraham] said, "No, you laughed." (Genesis 18: 12-16)

Two types of laughter greeted the news about the birth of a son -- to be named Yitzhak (lit. "will laugh"). Avraham's was joy. Sarah's was mocking, perhaps cynical. How could this be the case with Sarah, who took God's Will on faith and accepted every situation with equanimity? Why did she not believe this wondrous thing would happen? And why did she deny having laughed?

Sarah overheard an angel, whom she mistakenly identified as an Arab stranger wandering into their tent, issue a blessing to Avraham. She certainly didn't assume this was a prophetic announcement, nor was she forewarned and blessed as Avraham had been by God Himself. And yet, at her level of righteousness and trust in God, she is still held accountable for not taking that blessing as an encouraging sign of hope, but rather mocking to herself.

When she is confronted by Avraham about the laughter and realizes this was a message from God, she is at first thrown into turmoil and denies the laughter. Perhaps she doesn't realize that Avraham knows about the laughter from God (and assumes it is her face to which he's reacting), and begs to deny the laughter since it also included an insult of Avraham, "And my husband is old." But when he insists: "No, you laughed," she has no choice but to be silent and accept the rebuke.

It could be that Sarah, the expert at inner strength, justice and acceptance of God's Will, has a vision of God as a Just but Strict God, and as such, finds it difficult to accept wholeheartedly that God can also do wondrous, wonderful kindnesses and miracles. Avraham is more naturally inclined to take God's goodness at face value and react with joy and thankfulness. God's rebuke of Sarah and the awkwardness of "getting caught in a lie" are meant to teach Sarah that to fully know and relate to God, one must learn to accept the good and the love, just as easily as the struggles and challenges.

Eventually Sarah learns and experiences this goodness and love of God when, despite all odds, she gives birth to a son:

And Sarah said, "A laughter (a joke) God did for me; anyone who hears will laugh about me." And she said, "Who would believe... that Sarah

nurses children? I have given birth to a child in his old age!" (Genesis 21:6-7)

There is a form of repentance and gratefulness in these words of Sarah. *That's what I get for laughing -- now everyone will laugh at me -- doubting that such a thing could happen.* Now her experience of laughter is finally a source of joy and overwhelming blessing:

At the time that Sarah gave birth, many barren women conceived, many deaf people started hearing, many blind people started seeing, many insane people became sane. (Midrash – Breishit Rabba 53:8)

Binding of Yitzhak, Death of Sarah

The end of Sarah's life is shrouded in mystery. From the text we learn only that Avraham came from somewhere to mourn the death of Sarah:

*And the years of the life of Sarah were one hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of the life of Sarah... And Avraham **came** to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her. (Genesis 23:1)*

Where was Avraham when Sarah died? Why did he have to "come" in order to mourn her?

This death is mentioned directly after the binding of Yitzhak -- "Akeidat Yitzhak" - - that climactic event in Avraham's and Yitzhak's lives which had repercussions for eternity.

There are a few versions in the Midrash of the way in which Sarah died. Most of them tie the cause of her death inextricably with the binding of Yitzhak and "Satan" -- that nagging voice of doubt and confusion meant to frustrate the most righteous intentions.

In one version, Satan appears to Sarah in the guise of a stranger and tells her that Avraham took Yitzhak and sacrificed him on Mount Moriah. She died of shock and sorrow.

In the other version, Sarah is approached by Satan and told that Avraham intended to sacrifice Yitzhak as God commanded. She was shocked and cried out, but said, "God is just; they must do as they were told." She went to look for them, reached Hebron, and then Satan appeared again and told her that Avraham was stopped by an angel and didn't end up killing Yitzhak. So overwhelmed by the thought that Yitzhak almost died, Sarah herself died.

Perhaps we may conclude that Sarah's mission was completed in this world, as Yitzhak had achieved the ultimate level where he was willing to be sacrificed. A climactic ending to a life well lived.

Aviva Zornberg in her book, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, sees the death of Sarah as a tragic consequence of the conflicting aspects of her personality:

The strong, determined matriarch, with the wisdom and insight to direct and influence her family, who was proactive and decisive when necessary, accepting and trusting and faithful when challenged, may have found this last trick of Satan too hard to bear. After all the years of striving for perfection and a true relationship with God, of seeking justice, meaning and absolute truth -- having her ultimate mission come to fruition at the age of 90 with the birth of a child and continuity -- Sarah comes face to face with the realization that the intentionality of her life, the meaning and purpose of everything she had lived to accomplish, could have been for naught. For her, even the restoration of Yitzhak did nothing to neutralize that terror.

The same Sarah who could tell Avraham with such analytical decisiveness, "Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Yitzhak," who obviously had a more lucid vision of reality and a more clear judgment than Avraham (who was more multifaceted), was made all the more vulnerable when structures and certainties came tumbling down.

The clarity of vision and analytical purity which enabled her to disentangle complexities and cut to the quick all her life, left Sarah no ability to deal with paradox and contingencies. She could not confront all the counter-possibilities and disentangle all the complex questions that came to her at that last moment

of her life, and so she could not come through this experience, to discover the understanding and clarity at the end of the tunnel.

Either way, when Avraham and Yitzhak returned home from the intense experience and test which they had passed, they were faced with this last painful aspect of the "Akeida" -- they found that Sarah had died. She was not destined to be a part of the "post-Akeida" family.

* * *

*She screamed six times, corresponding to the six "tekiah" notes of the shofar. She had not **finished** doing this when she died. (Midrash – Vayikra Rabba 20:2)*

In her death, Sarah began a process of "tekiot" -- wails correlating to those which emanate from the shofar which we blow every year on Rosh Hashana.

These tekiot remind us not only of the binding of Isaac, culminating in the sacrifice of a ram instead, and not only of Sarah's crying upon hearing the news of the Akeida, but also of Mount Sinai, when the sounds of the shofar emanated at the national revelation of God and the receiving of the Torah.

Every year, as we hear the shofar blow, the memory of Sarah -- our purposeful, clear-sighted matriarch -- comes to mind, as we continue the process of introspection, of searching for clarity amid confusion and despair, finally reaching the ultimate confirmation of certainty and meaning that is found in God and Torah.