

Chapter three Sarah: The Partner

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Of all the matriarchs, Sarah (Genesis 11:29-12:20, 16:1-18:15, and 20:1-21:13) is perhaps the most accessible to us. Her story is told many times in the biblical narrative, and we come to see her from many a viewpoint. Two aspects of Sarah's story stand out clearly: one is her relationship with Abraham, and the other is her status in his world. She was not only a personality in her own right; but as Abraham's mate, was an important balancing factor in his life. Abraham and Sarah were not just "a married couple" but a team, two people working in harmony.

In the biblical accounts of the other patriarchs and their wives, we find a certain disparity between the men and the women — a disparity that becomes increasingly apparent over the generations, until the woman is to a large extent subordinate to her husband. Even the great women of the Bible, women who did great deeds, were subservient to their menfolk in terms of their role and status in society. Sarah, however, enjoyed a special position — apparently as a function not only of her independent personality but also of legal-formal recognition. Her special position may derive from the fact that Abraham and Sarah were close relatives as well as husband and wife, because according to the sages, Sarah was the daughter of Haran, Abraham's elder brother. Indeed, it is explicitly written in the Bible (Genesis 20:12) that Abraham told Abimelech, King of Gerar, that Sarah was his sister, the daughter of his father, although not the daughter of his mother. Basically, this claim is likely to have been true. Abraham may have been using an imprecise definition of his relationship with Sarah, describing her as his sister, because they were so very close, both in terms of kinship, as well as in other ways. Moreover *sister* was a common term of endearment for a woman in early Eastern cultures: for instance, in the Song of Songs, we find "My sister, my spouse" (5:1) and "My sister, my love" (5:2). The appellation "my sister" not only was an indication of affection but also referred to a woman of a certain status; and sister marriage was common, at least among royalty in many near-Eastern cultures, such as those of the Hittites and the Egyptians. The sister-wife was the chief wife, as opposed to the other, secondary wives who were "outsiders." In the biblical context, Sarah was therefore the sister with a legally binding status.

An important indication of Sarah's status and position as well as of her own forceful character is the fact that, although she was Abraham's wife and worked alongside him, she acted independently of him when circumstances required. We do not have here a man, the focal personality, around whom the action revolved, and the acquiescent or passive woman caught up in his orbit. More than this, it is obvious that, on several occasions, Abraham not only respected Sarah as his wife but also felt the need to turn to her for counsel and guidance or admitted an obligation to obtain her agreement before making a decision. We also see that from time to time Abraham acted not on his own initiative but upon the instructions from Sarah, sometimes of his own volition, and -in one specific, unique instance - at the express command of God: "In all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Genesis 21:12). The unpleasant occasion of this command was the cruel banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's wife and child, to the wilderness.

The sages have made the interesting observation that the patriarchs were to some extent dependent on the superior prophetic powers of the matriarchs. In many biblical texts, it is clear that the women determined their family's fate, at least in relation to children and the family succession. Here the patriarchs were subordinate: it was not they who made the decisions, and it was not they who determined the shape of the great future. In every one of these cases, whether the decisions were made openly, as with Sarah, or deviously, as with Rebecca, the matriarchs acted not only as "help meet" (Genesis 2.:18) but as independent personalities. At such times, it was the matriarchs who dominated, and it was their vision, their foresight, that determined family continuity and the continuity of control over the family. Sarah is even more outstanding in this respect because of her decisiveness and her articulateness.

The passage in the Bible where Abram was called by his new name, Abraham (Genesis 17:5), is both revealing and significant: Sarai, too, underwent a parallel name change and became Sarah (17:15). While we find in the Bible other name changes, as when Jacob became Israel; or Hosea ben Nun, Joshua, only one woman was granted this privilege -and that woman was Sarah. This change of name hints at a change in the whole essence of Abraham and Sarah's being, in their whole way of life. It is a profound transformation which involved them both equally, which had a double dimension, Abraham and Sarah together. One striking indication of this duality is the recurrent mention of the two as a unit -"Abraham and Sarah" - which is not found elsewhere in the Bible, not even in the accounts of the other patriarchs. They are depicted as a team, as a couple, and invariably as equals - as, for instance, where the Bible speaks of Abraham and Sarah as "old and well-stricken in age" (Genesis 18:11). The midrashim, too, have caught the significance of this relationship. Thus, when Abraham and Sarah (as Abram and Sarai) left their place of origin, Ur of the Chaldees, passing through Haran, they came with all "the souls that they had gotten in Haran" (12:5). This passage is interpreted in terms not of slaves but rather of those they had converted, who had acquired their faith -Abraham converting the men, and Sarah the women. Once again, we find this image of Abraham and Sarah as partners, working together for the same goals, walking together along the same path, united in thought, word, and deed. This is the kind of relationship that was common only in a much later age, perhaps only in modern times, and that was certainly extremely rare in ancient times.

This brings us to another aspect of Sarah's story. She was childless - a personal tragedy for her and for Abraham, but it did not affect their strong, close bond. Hence, it is possible to understand Sarah when she offered Abraham her servant Hagar to bear his children. This act must be understood in the cultural context of the period and by the fact that Sarah nourished a grain of hope that she, too, might benefit from this union: "It may be that I may obtain children by her" (Genesis 16:2). At the same time, Sarah's behavior reveals a deep sense of security and personal connection with her husband. She was willing for Abraham to have children by another woman because she felt certain that the ties between Abraham and herself were not dependent merely on their having children. It is interesting to compare Sarah's reaction to her barrenness with that of another biblical figure, Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. Hannah could not reconcile herself to her childlessness, although her husband, Elkanah, assured her that he loved her more than ten sons. Hannah wanted, at all costs, to have a child of her own. Sarah, on the other hand, although she desired a child just as much and was happy to bear

one around whom she later built her life, is shown as able to cope with the fact that she might never become a mother. She could contemplate, with at least a degree of equanimity, a situation in which Abraham's children, by her own maidservant, would be hers only by adoption. The Abraham-Sarah bond was thus personal-spiritual, not only legal-biological. They saw themselves not so much as childbearers and raisers but as a team bent on the realization of a specific ideal. The nature of the Abraham-Sarah relationship is evident in the account of Hagar's first expulsion, to which Sarah obtained Abraham's agreement, and which she justified by saying, "I was despised in her eyes" (16:5). Hagar despised Sarah and felt that she could replace her; while Sarah was jealous not because of the child, but because it seemed to her that the servant might be usurping her place in Abraham's affections. She would allow Hagar to be an instrument of procreation, but would not allow her the honor and privilege of being Abraham's beloved wife-companion.

This understanding of the idealistic aspect of the Abraham-Sarah relationship can help to clarify the strange episodes where it appears that Abraham had renounced Sarah, once before Pharaoh and once before Abimelech. Sarah apparently supported the story that she was his sister, and she was subsequently taken to the king's house. The surprising thing here is not so much Abraham's behavior, which is a separate issue, but Sarah's silence. This silence did not arise from passivity or surrender, nor from a wish to be taken by another man, nor because Sarah was a mere tool of her husband: her acquiescence was obviously prearranged with Abraham, with whom she worked as a team on the basis of decisions jointly made. Here, they had decided, despite the shame and humiliation involved, that it was preferable to preserve the wholeness of Abraham's camp — representing, as it did, the new ideal — even at the cost of Sarah's honor. They felt it was better to pay this awful price than endanger her own happiness and well-being, with all that was here implied, because she and Abraham were working together toward a specific common goal. This willingness to sacrifice her personal well-being for the common cause is surely borne out by the fact that Sarah never reproached Abraham for the injury done to her; nor, indeed, did she even mention it. In fact, when Sarah did complain to Abraham and spoke harshly to him — "My wrong be upon thee; ... the Lord judge between me and thee" (Genesis 16:5) — it is in the quite different context of her fear that Hagar and Ishmael would take her place at Abraham's side. Sarah was willing to give up her love for, and her life with, Abraham, to be separated from him forever — but only when that separation was merely physical. What she was not willing, or able, to countenance, was spiritual separation. This is where the special essence of the Abraham-Sarah relationship is revealed, and this is why the nation of Israel has two parents: Abraham and Sarah together. It is no accident that this relationship echoes that between Adam and Eve. Abraham and Sarah are the historical-ideological-spiritual fathers of the nation, just as Adam and Eve are its biological progenitors, the two fundamental elements of the human species. This is why Abraham and Sarah saw themselves (and are thus seen by future generations) not as a couple raising a family, but as people building a society, realizing an ideal: parents of a nation. To this day, converts to the Jewish faith are called "sons of Abraham" and the women among them "daughters of Sarah," because conceptually — and, indeed, halakhically — Abraham and Sarah are ideological ancestors of the Jewish nation, and all who join that nation are their children. Abraham and Sarah see themselves as leaders, forging a new road, a new worship of the Lord; as guides of a nation, diverse and yet united.

Yet this is not all. In the biblical story, we find the recurrent promise that Sarah would become the mother of the nation, in the sense that she would bear a son who would fulfill God's covenant with Abraham: "And thou shalt call his name Isaac" (Genesis 17:19). In the fullest sense, Abraham and Sarah were thus brought back to the family hearth.

Incidentally, the account of the angels' visit to Abraham announcing the coming birth of Isaac is interesting for the variety of means that the messengers used in trying to draw Sarah herself into the conversation. According to the sages, it was not the angels who spoke to Sarah, but God Himself; indeed, the Lord never spoke directly to any woman but Sarah. It seems as if this special mission, the talk with Sarah, had a deep significance because what she heard altered the whole course of her life. She had already become reconciled, and was content, with having renounced the biological aspect of womanhood. Now, she had, as it were, to be born again, with a new name, a new personality: After many years in which she had ceased to function as a woman, she was almost forcibly dragged back into the female round of pregnancy and giving birth. To a certain extent, Sarah's experiences are paralleled by the events in Abraham's life, since he was circumcised in the same year, undergoing a process of renewal, a rite of passage into a new life phase such as occurs in most societies during adolescence. Sarah, having received the angel's message of conception, underwent a renewal, a rejuvenation; and it has been said that Abraham and Sarah once again looked like young people.

In conclusion, Abram and Sarah had lived together for many years during which time they worked as a team, as partners, as equals, as leaders realizing an ideal to which they were committed. When the turning point came, a new relationship was formed between them. They underwent a name change, becoming Abraham and Sarah, as an indication of rebirth. Abraham was circumcised; Sarah entered the female cycle once again. This transformation provides the symbolic meaning of the story of the patriarchs. In earlier generations, to the extent that it existed at all, spiritual influence passed from teacher to pupil. Here, this spiritual tie received a new dimension and was reinforced by the biological tie, by the birth of the child who would transmit the ideal through-out the generations of his descendants. For this reason, Abraham and Sarah were not only the spiritual forebears of the Jewish people. The meaning of the name "Children of Israel" could be made tangible only when the relationship between them underwent another level of change and became a blood tie, a biological link. It thus became the relationship that bore Isaac, in order that he, and only he, could continue the line arising from the union of Abraham and Sarah to form the nation of Israel, the Jewish people. This biological-spiritual relationship has withstood the test of time, throughout the generations that followed. The converts of Abraham and Sarah have disappeared into history, and what has remained is the product of the strength and validity of the double bond: the Jewish nation. The dual parenthood of Abraham and Sarah remained, but only when Sarah gave birth to a child from her own womb — "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed" (Genesis 17:19) — could they become the eternal parents of Israel in the fullest sense.