

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Sarai and Hagar

By Rav Ezra Bick

In a previous shiur, (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/03lech.htm>), Rav Yonatan Grossman discussed the section dealing with Sarai and Hagar in our parasha, pointing out the Torah's implicit criticism of Sarai. In this shiur, I would like to return to this same section, but from another angle. What was the cause of Sarai's behavior to Hagar, especially in light of the fact that the entire situation was her initiative?

There are two cases of a barren wife offering her maidservant to her husband in order to have children, Sarai and Rachel. The first case turned out badly, at least in terms of the declared goal, whereas the second appears to have been successful. Let us compare the two and try and understand the differences.

Now Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not born him children, and she had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar. Sarai said to Avram: Behold now, God has restrained me from bearing; come please unto my slave; perhaps I shall have children (lit. - I shall be built) from her. And Avram listened to the voice of Sarai (Bereishit 16:1-2.)

The arrangement described here seems to indicate that if Hagar would bear a child to Avram, the child would in some sense be considered Sarai's. This same procedure is proposed by the childless Rachel to Yaakov.

Rachel saw that she had not born children to Yaakov, and Rachel was jealous of her sister ... And she said: Here is my maid Bilha, come unto her and she shall bear on my knees, that I also shall have children ("be built") from her (30:1-3.)

.1Attitude

The most obvious difference between the words of Sarai and those of Rachel is in one word - Sarai says, "PERHAPS (ulai) I shall have children from her." Now I do not believe that this indicates that Sarai had less faith than Rachel, or that Rachel was possessed of an irrational confidence in the success of her plan. On the contrary, Rachel's words should be understood as a proposition. This is the plan: "You Yaakov shall marry Bilha and then she shall children and I shall have a measure of fulfillment through them." Will this plan work? God alone knows. Rachel's words do not indicate a greater degree of confidence. What then is the difference, and what is the significance of the "ulai" of Sarai. I think that the difference is not in the intellectual evaluation of the chances of success but in the psychological acceptance and eagerness with which each woman views her own proposal. The word "perhaps" indicates Sarai's ambiguous feelings towards the very plan she is convincing Avram to embrace. This is HER plan: "You Avram shall marry my slave (no "perhaps" here) and perhaps she shall have a child ... but maybe, on the other hand, she will not." More specifically, "maybe I shall be built, shall be fulfilled by this child, but maybe I shall not." And "maybe," our ears detect her thinking, "I do not even want this child to be born or this marriage to take place".

.2Motivation

Why is Sarai uncertain and hesitant? Perhaps this results from a different motivation between the two foremothers. Rachel's desire is primarily for personal fulfillment. Her barrenness leaves her empty, feeling worthless. We find this explicit in her first address to Yaakov (which I conveniently left out of the quote above): "Rachel saw that she had not born children to Yaakov, and Rachel was jealous of her sister, and she said to Yaakov: Give me children or else I die" (30:1). This is the source of the statement of Chazal that a barren woman is like one who is dead. Rachel feels that her life is worthless without children. For her then, the success of her plan will mean that she will have a child - Bilha's, to be exact - who will give meaning and life to her.

Sarai, I would like to suggest, is not PRIMARILY motivated by feelings of inner worthlessness and emptiness. Whatever her pain over her barrenness, she has been married to Avraham for many years and is no longer young. We see later that, at least on the conscious level, she views the possibility of her having children as being almost droll, if not fantastic. As opposed to the introduction to the Rachel episode - "Rachel was jealous of her sister" - we find here the introduction, "Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not born him children." Notice the identification of Sarai as the wife of Avram. Sarai's motivation was to provide a child for Avram. Because she is the wife of Avram, she proposes to him that he take another wife in order that he should have children. On the other hand, this is obviously not a concern of Rachel, since Yaakov already has five sons, from Leah, Rachel's sister.

This explains another difference between the proposals of the two women. Rachel says, "come unto her and she shall bear on my knees, that I also shall have children from her." Sarai proposes, "come please unto my slave; perhaps I shall have children from her." In her mind, Sarai does not actually see herself as raising the child (this is the meaning of the phrase "bear on my knees"). She will fulfill her duties towards her husband by providing, indirectly, a heir, but the joys of motherhood are not her aim or her dream.

This is the explanation of Sarai's hesitation. If Bilha will bear a child for Yaakov, this will in no way undermine Rachel's position in the house of Yaakov. In any event, Bilha is not Rachel's rival; if anyone is, it is her sister Leah. Rachel's position as Yaakov's love has survived the five births of Leah, and the birth of a child to Bilha will not change anything. But if Hagar gives a child to the childless Avram, she will become, it would seem, the instrument of the fulfillment of the divine promise to Avram, she will be the mother of the nation. Legally, in some sense, it would appear that Sarai would be counted as the mother of the child. But Sarai suspects that this legal fiction (which, it should be noted, is not reflected in Torah law) will not really be true. Rachel, on the contrary, knows that she can only gain from being the mother, in any sense, of Bilha's child. here there is no tension between the legal status implicit in this arrangement and her true goal - to have a child, at least in some sense. Yaakov's gain is her gain; Avram's gain may be Sarai's loss.

.3The status

There is a subtle difference expressed in the "marriage" itself, between Bilha and Hagar. Compare:

"She gave him her slave Bilha as a wife" (30:4)

"Sarai, the wife of Avram, took Hagar the Egyptian her slave, ten years after Avram had settled in the land of Canaan, and gave her to Avram her husband, to him as a wife" (16:3.)

Notice:

- .1 Sarai, THE WIFE OF AVRAHAM, took Hagar HER SLAVE.
- .2 After ten years.
- .3 Gave her to Avram HER HUSBAND.
- .4 to him, as a wife.

This verse, which I think should be viewed as a formal legal declaration of what Sarai is doing (after all, the previous verse already states that Avram followed Sarai's proposal), stresses the difference that Sarai insists exists, and should continue to exist, between herself, the wife of Avram, and Hagar, the slave. For although the verse states that Hagar is given to Avram as a wife, Sarai stresses that she, the "real" wife, is the one who is arranging it all. Since the word for wife - "isha - means no more than "woman," it is not really clear if Hagar is meant to have the status of wife or concubine. Sarai is very concerned that the success of her proposal will undermine her position and therefore attempts to guarantee her status. This attempt does not really succeed, and therefore we find that shortly afterwards the relationship between Sarai and Hagar boils over into outright enmity.

The Netziv makes an interesting point here concerning the repetitive phrase "to Avram her husband to him as a wife." He claims that the emphasis on "to him for a wife" means that Sarai stipulated that she would have the status of "wife" only in relation to Avram, but would remain a slave in relation to Sarai. This explains the continued reference to Hagar as "the slave of Sarai" in the following verses, both in Sarai's and Avram's words (16:5-6), and, somewhat more surprisingly, in the address of the angel to Hagar: "And he said, Hagar, the slave of Sarai, from where are you coming and where are you going?" (16:8). On the contrary, both Bilha and Zilpa are not called servants subsequent to their marriage, except in the presence of Lavan when he is searching through the tents (31:32). The term used by Rachel to introduce Bilha to Yaakov - my maid (amma) - is also less derogatory than that used exclusively by Sarai - my slave (shifcha). Only later, after bearing Yishmael, is Hagar called an "amma." This fits in perfectly with my point.

.4 The consequences

Sarai's ambiguous attitude towards her own plan and her fears of its success are immediately tested when Hagar becomes pregnant and shows, in some undefined way, that she senses that her status in the family is changing. The commentators disagree in evaluating Sarai's conduct towards Hagar. The Ramban states starkly, "Our mother sinned." Others have attempted to defend or explain Sarai's oppression of Hagar. What I have tried to show is the background to this conduct. Sarai fears that she will have no place in the future of Avram's house, and by extension, in the Jewish people. Hagar becomes, by virtue of her pregnancy, her potential replacement. I think that however we evaluate her conduct (assuming that it is necessary or worthwhile to do so), we should realize that it is, to some extent, a result of the idealism which has motivated her until now. Rachel, by contrast, is motivated by personal needs. Her initial expression of those needs appears to be childish - "Give me children or else I die" - and Yaakov rebukes her strongly. (The midrash takes Yaakov to task for this response, accusing him of not being sufficiently sensitive to Rachel's personal anguish, but this does not change the objective correctness of his response). Sarai is motivated by considerations of the future of Avram and the promise of God; in other words, the Jewish people. Paradoxically - and perhaps this is precisely part of the lesson to be learned - it is her concern for the building of Am Yisrael that leads to her cruel reaction to the

subsequent developments, whereas Rachel's more personal desires can be met with less conflict.

That is why Sarai takes out her anger Avram, who, to us, appears to be totally innocent here. Sarai's attack on Avram is very fierce - "My wrong is upon you ... let God judge between me and you." What, after all, has Avram done, other than, as the Torah testifies, to have "listened to the voice of Sarai." The answer is that Sarai's problem is not really her honor in the eyes of Hagar, but her status in the house of Avram. Avram is not really guilty of anything, but Sarai is expressing her frustration, born of her own spiritual aspirations and her partnership in Avram's mission, and this frustration finds its immediate target in Avram. It is worth noting that the Sages make a concerted effort to portray Sarai as an equal partner in Avram's public mission of spreading God's name, rather than as a pious homemaker. For ten years, if not more, they have worked together (see Rashi 12:5) as a team. This is expressed powerfully in a midrash which states that Avram's "monitin" (the word means "publicity" in modern Hebrew but refers to the commemorative coin issued by kings and emperors) was "an old man and an old woman on one side, a young man and a young woman on the other." Now, when God's promise is to reach fruition and the foundations of the permanent entity which will carry on God's name are being laid, she finds herself left aside.

Her next step is afflict Hagar, and finally drive her away. Of course, from the historical, national point of view, Sarai is correct. Yishmael is not the heir of Avraham, and Hagar not the mother of Am Yisrael. Bilha's children, raised on the knees of Rachel, are part of the Jewish people. The question that the Rambam and others faced, however, was the justification for Sarai's conduct from her point of view, as a individual actor facing a moral problem. If Sarai offered to have Yishmael be considered as her own son, how is it that later, when Yishmael is born, she still refers to him as "this son of the maid (21:10). The answer can only be that Sarai is acting and thinking on the national level, considering questions of the future destiny of Am Yisrael. Rachel is acting on the personal level. Both are "mothers," though in a different sense. It is not surprising that the mother who cries on the path of exile for her lost children is Rachel, while the national mother of the nation is Sara. Sara, fiercely protective of her own child, protects the exclusivity of the people, reminding Avraham ("father of many nations") that only Yitzchak is his heir. Rachel gathers together the lost remnants, no matter from which tribe they stem, waiting for the fulfillment of the promise "ve-shavu banim li-gevulam".

There are two ways to analyze many of the sections of Sefer Bereishit. In the parasha series three years ago, R. Menachem Leibtag read the Sefer as describing primarily the story of bechirat Yisrael, the separation and choice of the Chosen People. Last year, R. Yonatan Grossman used individual incidents from the lives of the avot to illustrate moral lessons. (These are basically two different meanings of the dictum "ma'asei avot siman levanim" - historical or personal.) At times, I think, the two approaches intersect. Yitzchak's personal attachment to Eisav will affect his approach to the historical mission of giving a berakha. Yaakov, who perhaps more than any av consciously embraced the historical role of building the Jewish People, nonetheless was heavily affected by his personal feelings for Yosef and Rachel. In our parasha I have tried to show that Sarai's understanding of the historical element is intertwined with her personal feelings, with unfortunate results, in contradistinction to Rachel who is acting only on the personal level. Perhaps this is the moral lesson of this story - that one must carefully insulate the two realms when making decisions.

