



Biblical Women

Bonna Devora Haberman



SARA - HIGH STAKES

Background

The first of the four foremothers, Sara is a noble and powerful woman. She experiences the mortal trials of faith at the intersections of love, vision, and ultimate submission. Leaving her home, family and people, she journeys with Avraham to Canaan, and to Egypt to escape famine. Her extraordinary attractiveness prompts Avraham to (mis)represent her twice as his sister, twice taken into the captivity of sovereigns in order to assuage Avraham's fears for his own life. Avraham benefits from these interchanges, accruing wealth and herds.

Throughout her years, Sara is the object of divine intervention. When "God remembers" or "takes note of" Sara, the text indicates extraordinary attention (Gen. 21:1). Laughing at the wondrous transformation of the aged couple from infertility to fruitfulness, Sara brings forth Yitzchak when she is ninety years old. In class conflict with her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, she commandeers the future lineage of the Jewish People. The Torah credits her that, "sovereigns of peoples shall be of her" (Gen 17:16). Her precipitous death following the aborted sacrifice of her long-promised child Yitzchak is shrouded in mystery and conjecture. Bereaved at her sudden passing, Avraham acquires the first piece of Jewish property in Canaan in order to bury Sara honorably in the Cave of *Machpela*.

Biblical Sources

1 Some time afterward, God put Avraham to the test. S/He said to him, "Avraham," and he answered, "Here I am." 2 And S/He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." . . .

9 They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Avraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 And Avraham picked up the knife to slay his son. 11 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Avraham! Avraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." . . . (Gen. 22)

1 Sarah's life numbered one hundred and twenty-seven years. 2 Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Avraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. (Gen 23)

א ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את-אברהם; ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני.
 ב ויאמר קח-נא את-בנגר את-יחידך אשר-אהבת את-יצחק ולך-לך אל-ארץ המרעה; והעלהו
 שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך. ... ט ויבאו אל-המקום אשר אמר-לו האלהים
 ויבן שם אברהם את-המזבח ויערף את-העצים; ויעקד את-יצחק בנו וישם אותו על-המזבח
 ממעל לעצים. י וישלח אברהם את-ידו ויקח את-המאכלת לשחט את-בנו. יא ויקרא אליו
 מלאך יהוה מן-השמים ויאמר אברהם אברהם; ויאמר הנני. יב ויאמר אל-תשלח ידך אל-
 הנער ואל-תעש לו מאומה: כי עתה ידעתי כי-ירא אלהים אתה ולא חשכת את-בנגר את-יחידך
 ממני. ... (בר' כב)

א ויהיו חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים--שני חיי שרה. ב ותמת שרה בקרית
 ארבע הוא חברון--בארץ כנען; ויבא אברהם לספד לשרה ולבכתה.(בר' כג)

What is the connection between Sara's death and the near-sacrifice of her child?

Questions for Discussion

Sara's death is recorded at the conclusion of one of the most famous biblical passages, the *akedah*, the "binding of Isaac." The father's willingness and intention to sacrifice his son juxtaposes with the announcement of the end of Sara's life. Rashi, the French medieval commentator, summarizes some traditional interpretations, "The death of Sarah is recounted directly after the *akedah* because when she learned that her son had been summoned to slaughter, her soul flew to heaven and she died" (on Gen. 23:2).

According to the text, God intends to test the faith of Avraham - how he would react to God's command to sacrifice his child. Given Rashi's view, is it unnerving that Sara dies as a result of the test? How can you explain this outcome?

In relation to the determination of the line of Avraham's inheritance, God instructs Avraham to heed the voice of Sara (Gen. 21:12). Some sages count Sara among those blessed with prophetic vision (eg: *Yalkut Shimoni* 247, 42). If so, then she is aware of Avraham's and Yitzchak's journey and of its purpose from the outset. Perhaps she bargains with the Creator as Avraham does to save Sedom and Gemorra (Gen. 18:17-33)? Perhaps she offers to substitute her own life for her child's? Perhaps as a bearer of life, her soul cannot suffer to remain in this world so long as the divine Creator wills human sacrifice. How might her death assert her conviction of the immorality of God's command?

According to Isaiah (45:7), the divine Creator is also the cause of evil, "I form light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil: I God do all these things."

One of the challenges of monotheism is the view that the One divine is the source of evil as well as good. Perhaps Sara asks how life is itself tenable if the Creator is also Destroyer?

What are the trials of faith in contemporary Jewish life?, and what does it mean to pass God's test?

Links for Inquiry

For a reading of Sara's laughter based on Aviva Zornberg's teaching, see <http://www.matan.org.il/oll/parsha-vayera.html>

Savina J. Teubal's theory about Sara's status as priestess is summarized: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/Ancient/TheStoryTO/Patriarchs/BiblicalSarah.htm

Sarah: A Novel, by Marek Halter, tells an imaginary version of the biblical stories. For a "reading group" guide, see, <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/sarah1.asp>

According to a contemporary midrashist, Sarah possessed the gift of prophecy that enabled her to discern the future by means of the Holy Spirit. In this way she foresaw Israel's history and was able to offer her prayers and blessings for the future, which are still in effect. Indeed, in the gift of prophecy she ranked higher than Avraham. That is why she is sometimes known as Iscah, the seer. It was as Iscah that she pronounced the Divine Name and was transformed into the dove." © Copyright 1997, Howard Schwartz <http://www.icmidrash.org/livingt/aie.htm>

Summary of Issues

In this episode, the desire to serve the divine with faith and humility conflicts with other human values, with life itself. Sara is at the margin of the text of the *Akeda*. Building on a traditional biblical interpretation, it is conceivable that Sara becomes ensnared in the dramatic and high-stakes trial. Her staunch commitment to fulfill the divine promise of the fruitfulness of the Jewish People is challenged by a contravening commandment that threatens to cut off the young shoot. It is conceivable that Sara re-negotiates the terms of obedience to God; she exercises her ethical agency to redefine the limits of Jewish ritual practice.

Methodology Matters

This process of interpretation is based less on what is recorded in the text than on what is missing from the text. Inquisitiveness and rigorously applied creativity are important ingredients in fruitful Torah study.

Contact

Please address queries and comments to
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - haberman@brandeis.edu