

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

The Surrogate Mother and the Terrorist

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The Chofetz Chaim was a righteous and holy man. (Brief biographies of the Chofetz Chaim can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Read his obituaries in the New York Times and Time magazine [here](#).) People came from all over to receive his sage advice. Rabbi Eliezer Shach was once sent to the Chofetz Chaim to request a blessing for a couple who had no children.

The Chofetz Chaim's response was surprising:

“Why do they need children?”

It is natural for married couples to want to build a family. But obviously, in the view of the Chofetz Chaim, there is more to having children than simply replacing oneself and populating the planet.

The Chofetz Chaim continued, “How will they raise them? Where in these days can they find suitable education for children?”

G-d told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. But there has to be a goal. Simple reproduction of Adam and Eve's children and their children and their children, etc. filled the earth with people who needed to be washed away in a flood nine generations later. The tenth generation after Noah, you had more of the same when almost all of humanity rebelled and tried to build the Tower of Babel.

Obviously, our role in the world is to fill it with G-dliness, in part by raising new generations of moral, ethical, G-dly individuals.

This is what Abram and Sarai wanted to do. They taught the world about G-d. They taught the world about kindness and charity. What they needed was a successor, a child who would carry on their teachings to the next generation.

But it wasn't working:

Sarai was barren; she had no child. (Genesis, 11:30) Our Sages explain this to mean that she had no **means** of bearing children. It's not just that she had a low fertility rate; she had no uterus! All the fertility experts in the world can't produce a child in a woman who lacks the equipment! It would take a

miracle! And while we pray for miracles and hope for miracles, (and eventually there WAS a miracle,) we are not permitted to rely upon miracles.

It was time for Sarai to be pro-active:

Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, "G-d has restrained me from bearing; take my maidservant, perhaps I will be built up through her. (Ibid, 16:1-2)

Who was this Hagar? Rashi tells us that Hagar hailed from the Royal House of Egypt! Her father, the Pharaoh, was so impressed by Abram and Sarai and the miracles that G-d performed for them, that he sent Hagar to live with them. "My daughter would be better off as a servant in that household than as a noblewoman elsewhere."

Indeed, it was different! Hagar used to see angels in the Abramic household. (Rashi on 16:13) Since the Torah expects us to treat even servants with respect and dignity, Hagar was certainly well-treated. And her union with her master Abram was not a forced one. She was not chattel; she wasn't, G-d forbid, a member of Abram's "harem" to be available for mothering his children.

Sarai persuaded Hagar to agree to the match. She told her what an honor it would be to be involved with a holy man like Abram.

The efforts bore fruit ... sort of:

...she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. (Ibid, verse 4)

Hagar reasoned that Sarai wasn't as righteous as she appeared to be. After all these years of marriage to Abram, she had never borne children. Now she, Hagar, a very short time after being with Abram, was pregnant. As a result, Hagar began to badmouth Sarai.

And how did Sarai react to Hagar's insolence?

Sarai dealt harshly with her... (Ibid, verse 6) Rashi says that Sarai gave the baby an "*Ayin HaRa* – Evil Eye" – whatever THAT means – and Hagar miscarried.

So much for Pharaoh's ideas about the honor of being Sarai's servant. Hagar ran away.

Hagar, as mentioned above, was used to seeing angels in Abram and Sarai's home. Now she had a vision in the desert. The angel told her to go home.

“Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination.... You will conceive and give birth to a son; you will name him Ishmael, for G-d has heard your prayer. He will be a wild man, his hand against everyone (in theft -- Rashi) and everyone’s hand against him (in hatred -- Rashi) and over all his brothers he will dwell.” (He will be a very large nation) (Ibid, verses 11-12)

And thus was born the Ishmaelite nation; our cousins, who, to this day, cause so much pain and torment to our People.

What a story! Sarai can’t conceive, so she makes Hagar her “surrogate.” Hagar conceives right away and “disses” Sarai. Sarai persecutes Hagar, causing her to lose her baby and run away. The angel tells Hagar to accept Sarai’s tough treatment, and promises that since G-d has heard her prayer, she will give birth to the father of the nation that will eventually give us Arafat, bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein!

Sarai’s behavior is puzzling. Abram & Sarai taught the world about kindness and righteousness. While it is true that Hagar’s behavior was inappropriate, wasn’t it a bit much for Sarai to give her such a hard time? It would seem that causing Hagar to lose her baby and run away is a bit over the top! It is interesting that I’ve never seen any reference to Sarai being criticized for her actions. In fact, the angel told Hagar to go back and accept Sarai’s authority.

Another question. The angel told Hagar, *“You will conceive and give birth to a son; you will name him Ishmael, for G-d has heard your prayer.”*

What prayer? Where do we see any reference to Hagar praying?

I believe I found the answer (and an important lesson) in a quote from Rabbi Aryeh Levin (quoted in the Stone Chumash, page 71):

Rabbi Aryeh Levin noted that it is incongruous to believe that a woman as righteous as Sarah would persecute another human being out of personal pique. Rather, Sarah treated Hagar as she always had, but in the light of Hagar’s newly inflated self-image, she took it as persecution.

Based upon Rabbi Levin’s explanation, much of this becomes easier to understand. Let’s read the verses again:

...she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.
HAGAR NOW MADE THE MISTAKE OF THINKING SHE WAS MORE RIGHTEOUS THAN SARAI.

Sarai dealt harshly with her'. HAGAR'S **PERCEPTION**, BASED UPON HER OVERSIZED EGO, WAS THAT SHE WASN'T GETTING THE RESPECT SHE DESERVED. SHE FELT THAT SARAI SHOULD HAVE TREATED HER **EVEN BETTER** THAN SHE HAD IN THE PAST. PERHAPS SHE EVEN FELT THAT SHE, HAGAR, SHOULD NOW BE TREATED AS ABRAM'S PRIMARY WIFE. HAGAR WAS SO DISTRESSED BY THIS PERCEIVED SLIGHT, THAT SHE LOST THE CHILD WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ABRAM'S FIRSTBORN SON.

"Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination -- C'MON HAGAR! CUT IT OUT! SARAI IS YOUR MISTRESS AND YOU ARE HER MAIDSERVANT. SHE HAS ALWAYS TREATED YOU WELL, AND SHE WILL CONTINUE TO TREAT YOU WELL.

"AND, YOU ARE GETTING ANOTHER CHANCE. You will conceive AGAIN and give birth to a son; you will name him Ishmael, for G-d has heard your prayer. He will be a wild man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him and over all his brothers he will dwell."

So, there you have it. Sarai was right, and Hagar was wrong. Hagar misunderstood what Sarai was all about. It was Hagar's fault that she lost her child, and she shouldn't have run away.

Right?

Well, it doesn't seem so simple. There is still one question. Where is this prayer that Hagar supposedly recited that led to the birth of Ishmael?

"You will conceive and give birth to a son; you will name him Ishmael, for G-d has heard your prayer."

What the verse actually says is "*Ki shama Hashem es ANYEICH.*" The literal translation would appear to be, "*...for G-d has heard your AFFLICTION.*"

Hagar was hurt. She mistakenly assumed that she was entitled to more honor than she was receiving. It was her mistake. It was her own fault that she got herself all upset; Sarai had done nothing wrong.

Yet, she was hurt. And G-d doesn't ignore the pain and suffering of His children. G-d saw Hagar's anguish over an insult that never really happened. He saw her heartache over losing her unborn child. The tears she shed opened the Gates of Heaven, and G-d promised her another child if she would but accept her position in Abram and Sarai's home.

I wonder. That first child. The one who was SUPPOSED to be Abram's firstborn. What if he had survived and been born? Would HE have grown into the "*wild man*" whom the angel told Hagar that Ishmael would someday be? Would he be a man with "... *his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him*"?

Or, perhaps not. Could it be that the child that died would have grown up to be the type of child that Abram (and Sarai!) wanted to carry on the traditions and teachings of Abram? Could it be that the whole episode soured Hagar and tainted the way she raised Ishmael? Might it be that had it not happened she would have exercised a more positive influence on that first son?

Is it possible that if Sarai had handled Hagar's attitude differently, that there never would have been an Ishmael??? To be sure, Sarai was the boss, and that couldn't change. And Sarai wasn't being mean; she was continuing to treat Hagar with respect. It just wasn't as much respect as Hagar **WRONGLY** expected. But could it be, perhaps, that Sarai could have found a better way to deal with it?

Pain hurts! Whether the source is real or imagined, when another person suffers, it behooves us to be sensitive to their feelings, and try to defuse the situation. It's not good enough to say, "I'm right and she's wrong, so it's HER problem!"

Someone else's pain is everyone's problem. If we don't take care of it, G-d will. And we may not be happy with the results!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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