

**DISPLACEMENT IN THE MATRIARCHAL HOME:
A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF
THE ABRAHAM-SARAH MARRIAGE**

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Archeologists and cultural anthropologists will, with some justification, explain that the interrelationships among Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar are "simply" manifestations of customs and laws of contemporaneous Middle Eastern societies. It may be true that Sarah, impelled by her own barrenness, was concerned about her husband's status and future as the chief of the family. She may have been concerned also about her own status as foremost wife after having handed Hagar over to her husband, an act which influenced significantly the matter of inheritance, position and power within the family. However, the Bible is much more than a reflection of ethnological practices. It is a book about ancient figures who were endowed with a meta-universality that goes beyond their epochs and regions. With proper insight, we find that they reflect timeless human characteristics and, points of contact with the psychological, familial and communal concerns of modern times.

The manifold ramifications of this complexity are reflected no more clearly than in the context of the marital state, and the Torah made no attempt to hide the inevitable tensions attendant upon marriage. Two patriarchal marriages display the capacity for marital disharmony: Abraham/Sarah and Jacob/Rachel. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, in her description of the "profound frustration underlying the relationships between Jacob and his two wives," characterizes it as a "storm of emotion – hatred, jealousy [which] replaces the calm harbor of fulfillment."¹ This is especially manifest in Jacob's relationship with Rachel, whose demand of her husband, '*Give me children or I shall die*' was met with the stony response, '*Am I in place of God, who had denied you the fruit of the womb?*' (Gen. 30:1-2). Zornberg views the frustration in terms of Jacob's inability to comprehend why his love of his wife – a love for

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its own sake, not as a means of procreation – is patently insufficient to sustain her and to cement their relationship without the added blessing of children. Thus, Rachel's "primary passion" for a child is perceived by Jacob as indicative that her love for him is secondary.

We can view Zornberg's analysis as a paradigm for that of Abraham/Sarah. Sarah's barrenness and her persuading her husband to take the handmaid Hagar, so that the child born of their union might be regarded as Sarah's (Gen. 30:3) was tailor-made for an eruption of marital tension. In both situations, the barren wife asks her husband to take a handmaid in order to produce a child that will *up-build* her (17:18). Here, too, the second-choice wife is blessed with a child, while the loved wife is not; in both cases the husband is content and fulfilled with the off-spring he has from the lower-status wife. Clearly, Abraham feels no need to have his overwhelming love for his foremost wife confirmed through the act of procreation. Hence Abraham's response, when God promises him a child from his union with Sarah: '*Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee*' (17:18).²

One can understand Abraham's response because the servant, in that early society – and, indeed, for a few millennia afterwards – belonged, body and soul, to his or her master and mistress. The fruit of Hagar's womb belonged exclusively to Abraham and Sarah. They may not have known of surrogacy in those days, but they came pretty close to it in employing the services of a handmaid to conceive on behalf of her mistress. And the child born would be reared as the natural son of the biological father and his barren wife.

However, Abraham, though compliant with the surrogacy plan, apparently was never enthusiastic. At the outset, he merely *listened to the voice of his wife*. Instead of taking charge of the arrangements and taking Hagar to wife without delay, he waited passively upon Sarah who *gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife* (Gen. 16:1-3).

The classical commentator Nachmanides alerts to a significant distinction in the way Sarah initiated this arrangement for her husband. He points out that Sarah could have given her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a concubine for his use as a procreative vessel. Instead, "because of the respect she had for her husband," she insisted that Hagar should have the status of a co-wife.³ This is the import, according to Nachmanides, of the phrase *And she gave her*

to Abram her husband, as a wife (Gen. 16:3). And so was created a *menage à trois*. It did not work, because jealousy soon inevitably took root, and the sight of Hagar, flaunting her pregnancy and showing disdain for her barren co-wife/mistress, was too much for Sarah to bear. Had Sarah been able to draw strength from her husband's excitement at the impending birth of the child they were to share, she might well have been able to contain Hagar's taunts and even silence them. Abraham, as we have seen, simply abided by the requirements of the social code of his time.

Moreover, Sarah resented Abraham's insensitivity to her needs as well as his indifference to Hagar's condition. Noting his failure to chastise Hagar for her impertinent attitude, Sarah again felt constrained to take matters into her own hands.

Freud disclosed to us a basic psychological mechanism of "displacement" or "transference," whereby "a set of intense feelings is diverted from the person to whom they belong, and instead is directed to some other person, frequently the psychoanalyst himself."⁴

Ancient Near Eastern society may have taken it as the norm that a handmaid's child became wholly that of her mistress, but the biological, sexual, and emotional implications of a union between one's husband and a slave-girl were assuredly more complex. As long as the latter remained within the home, it is difficult to imagine that the mistress could feel, or convince herself to feel, that the child was solely her own. The alternative – that of banishing the handmaid-mother on a pretext – might trigger antipathetic feelings on the part of the husband whose conjugal relationship with her might well have aroused deeper feelings.

Abraham (as well as Jacob) seems to have had a perception of childbearing that was sharply at variance with that of his wife. The Patriarchs seem to have viewed children primarily in terms of tribal continuity and destiny, as heirs to inherited lands and traditions. Hence Abraham's complaint before taking Hagar: '*Behold, to me Thou has given no seed, and, lo, one born [to a servant] in my house is to be mine heir*' (15:3). The wives, on the other hand, viewed children as fulfilling an intensely personal, emotional and biological need. Hence, nearly the first words written about Sarah were that she was barren (11:30), and we are reminded later of the lamentable fact that she still

had no child (16:1). It evidently clouded her entire existence and preoccupied all her waking hours.

This may explain why Sarah at first pours out all her pain, frustration, and humiliation, not at Hagar, the one clearly responsible for her present *angst*, but at her husband, Abraham. This notwithstanding the fact that the suggestion to take Hagar to wife come from Sarah herself: *'The harm done to me is all your fault! . . . May God judge between me and you'* (16:5).

A midrash attempts to clarify what she means by *the harm done to me*, by suggesting that Sarah is not consumed so much by Hagar's current arrogant demeanor, as by the years of barrenness, for which she blames her husband:

When you prayed to God [Gen. 15:2], *Lord God, what will you give me, since I go childless*, you prayed only for yourself. Had you prayed for us both, I would have been remembered with you [and blessed with child].⁵

This midrash⁶ is curious, however, since Sarah, when instructing Abraham to take Hagar, displays the same self-centered attitude when she says to him: *'It may be that I shall be builded up through her'* (16:2). She ignores the fact that her husband was also suffering childlessness, and required "building up."

Although in the case of illness a man may pray on behalf of another for recovery, it seems to have been appropriate for a woman, in the case of barrenness, to petition for herself separately, like Rebecca (25:21), Rachel (30:6, 22), and Hannah (I Sam. 1:10-11). If, indeed, Sarah's statement, *'it may be that I shall be builded up through her,'* is construed as a prayer, then it would have been natural that she should petition in the first person. Sarah's desperation becomes more poignant when we recall Rachel's furious words to her husband and his uncharacteristically sharp retort to Rachel: *'Am I in place of God who has denied thee the fruit of the womb?'* A midrash amplifies Jacob's words: "You say that I should do as my father Isaac did for his wife (and pray for you also). My father at that time had no children at all. I have children. He has denied them to you, not to me!"⁷

As we have observed, Sarah's initial reaction is "displacement," transferring all her repressed emotion from Hagar to Abraham. It is also possible that, psychologically, Sarah does, indeed, regard her husband as more culpable

than her handmaid for the injustice done to her. According to Stephen Frosh, Sarah's very suggestion that Abraham take Hagar to wife may have been nothing more than her way of testing the constancy of her husband's love. She may well have been expecting a reply like that of Elkanah to his barren wife Hannah: '*No, dear wife, for you matter to me more than ten children*' (I Sam. 1:8). When Abraham did not attempt to calm her, Sarah's feelings of rejection must have intensified and thus Abraham made himself the object of her rage.⁸

Frosh also suggests that unconsciously Sarah may have detected in Abraham vibrations of her own disappointment, her own sense of guilt for setting up her husband with Hagar, or, indeed, for her barrenness itself. He explains:

She pushes the feeling away from herself, making Abraham the guilty one, whom she then attacks. This certainly would replicate a common therapeutic scenario, in which the patient, feeling awful about some aspect of her/himself, *discovers the same feeling in the therapist and attacks it there* [italics mine]. . . . What helps her, perhaps what might genuinely be Abraham's therapeutic role, is that he survives her anger without retaliating; he contains it . . .⁹

The second object of Sarah's frustration, besides Abraham, is Hagar: וַתַּעַבְרָה אֶת־פְּנֵיהֶּ [And Sarah abused her and she fled from before her face] (16:6). Such a reaction by a mistress who suffers distress at the hands or mouth of a concubine-handmaid was warranted in the ancient Near East. N. Sarna observes that

the laws of Ur-Nammu prescribe that the insolent concubine-slave "have her mouth scoured with one quart of salt," while the Code of Hammurabi prescribes that she be reduced to slave status and again bear the slave-mark. The Hebrew verb used here וַתַּעַבְרָה implies that Sarah subjected Hagar to both physical and psychological abuse.¹⁰

Nachmanides does not attempt to cover up for Sarah: "Our mother sinned by that abuse, as did Abraham in permitting her to inflict it." He then proceeds to disclose the consequences of their sin -- that God heard Hagar's cry when she fled from Sarah and sent her a child who was destined to be "a wild ass of a man who would afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah in a multitude of ways."¹¹ The depth of Sarah's anguish would hardly explain how

someone like Sarah could possibly have physically abused a pregnant woman, especially one carrying the seed of her own husband! The only explanation that we may credit is the psychological one, and postulate that Sarah was in fact not in control of herself, and that she attempted to destroy and remove the perceived cause of her anguish. That is a suggestion implicit in Rashi's comment that "Sarah cast the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy so that she miscarried her first conception."¹² Rashi, while attempting to soften the force of the Hebrew אָבַדְתִּי [abused], directs us to the realm of the subconscious for an explanation of Sarah's reaction.

Perhaps she was clearly trying to undo what she herself set in motion, namely, the liaison that led to Hagar's pregnancy. In her troubled emotional state, Sarah might well have justified to herself the abuse she perpetrated on Hagar, possibly attempting to destroy the fetus that owed its origin to a decision that she had the authority to make. It was, in effect, her fetus, her child. Hagar was her servant and surrogate, an instrument for the realization of Sarah's own happiness and posterity.

Sarah's actions allow for another explanation of the words she snapped at Abraham, "עַלֶיךָ אֶשְׁמַד". One may interpret the phrase, '*My violence* [is directed] *against you!*' (16:5) or in modern parlance, "I'll make you suffer for this!" In other words, the suffering she inflicted on Hagar would serve equally, if not more so, as a punishment of Abraham for his perceived lack of concern for Sarah's plight.

Most significantly, it is in the chapter immediately succeeding the Sarai-Hagar episode that the names of both Abram and Sarai are changed, clearly to denote their changed status as a direct result of this dreadful incident. *Abram* ("Exalted Father") becomes *Avraham* (explained as "Father of a Multitude of Nations"). The contextual significance of this might well have been to exonerate Abram from any blame for the consequences of his relationship to Hagar. He wished to exercise paternity over the fetus developing in his concubine's womb. His dearest wish was to become *the father of a multitude of nations* – which included Ishmael's progeny, and was not to be restricted to his own and Sarah's lineage.

There is an ironic twist to the conclusion of the Abraham/Sarah/Hagar episodes. We are told (25:6) that Abraham bestowed all his possessions upon Isaac, but upon the offspring of the concubines (Rashi questions the use of

the plural in this verse)¹³ he distributed only gifts. But then he *sent them away from Isaac his son while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country*. By his volition, Abraham reacts identically as did Sarah years before to protect his son Isaac from possible contamination. Sarah is finally vindicated. Perhaps that was Abraham's way of acknowledging and purging a nagging, long-felt guilt for having initially opposed Sarah's request to him to banish Ishmael, and for all the other tribulations he felt he had brought upon her.

Sarah's status as the first and foremost Matriarch of the Jewish people remains undiminished. Her anguished experiences foreshadow so hauntingly all that her descendants were destined to suffer throughout their checkered and violent history – the hurts, ignominies, wanderings, banishments, rapine, violence, grief for lost husbands and children. Rachel may well have *wept for her children, for they are no more* (Jer. 31:15), but Sarah could not find surcease in tears. Hers was the most acute form of pain – that which was repressed. Just as she *laughed within* (18:12), so she wept within and betimes flared out. Reflected in Sarah's response to her pain is the depth of misery that can unsettle even the most composed of people, that can generate marital tensions through "displacement" or "transference" of intense emotions from the sorely troubled to the one whom they look to provide balm and therapy. As the rabbis truly said, the experiences of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs are reprised among their descendants.

NOTES

1. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Image Books, 1995) p. 209.
2. It should be noticed that God rebukes Abraham by telling him that it is Sarah's son who will inherit his father's destiny, not Hagar's (Gen. 17:19).
3. Peirush ha-Ramban on Gen. 16:3.
4. See Stephen Frosh, *For and Against Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 19ff. I am most grateful to Professor Frosh for having read the first draft of this article and for his perceptive insights which have been incorporated into the later version.
5. See Rashi on Gen. 16:5
6. Rashi cites Breishit Rabah 45 (5)
7. Midrash Breishit Rabbah 71 (10).
8. Frosh, personal communication, November 5, 1997.
9. Frosh, *ibid.*
10. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 120.

DISPLACEMENT IN THE MATRIARCHAL HOME

11. See Ramban's commentary on Genesis 16:6.
12. See Rashi on Gen. 16:5.
13. See Rashi on Gen. 25:6