

We can observe the inner story of Abram and Sarai's relationship by examining ten key moments in this parasha:

1. The Departure from Harran: וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ *Abram took Sarai, his wife* (Gen. 12:5). When God said to Abram, לֵךְ לֶכְח-lekh lekha (12:1) we note that those words are *demonstratively and unequivocally* in the singular. *Go-you-forth*¹ sounds awkward to our ears, but it comes closest to capturing the emphatic register of the Hebrew: *You, Abram, are to go, alone, of yourself, by yourself, and for yourself*. And he departs. And if we read the text carefully, we see that indeed, at first he goes by himself: וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם *And Abram went, as God had spoken to him* (12:4a). Meaning Abram went *alone*. But the text immediately informs us that Lot went with him לֹט *and (they sent) his wife* (12:4b). Despite the illusion of a joint departure, the text is explicit that they departed separately. If I wrote a midrash on this, I would have Abram leave alone and have Lot, the orphaned nephew, dart after him. What did he have to lose? His father Haran was dead. His uncle Nachor was gone. His grandfather Terah intended to migrate to Canaan with the remnant of the family but suspended the trip and settled in Harran for unknown reasons (11:31). Why would Lot want to stay with his old grandfather Terah, when he could have a completely different life within the orbit of his unique uncle Abram? When the next verse states that Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ *and (they sent) his wife* (12:5) I would argue that Abram changed his mind. Rather than go by himself, as per his understanding of God's instruction, he decided out of his sense of intense loyalty, that he must take his wife and nephew with him. Caught between adhering to his understanding of God's word - *Go-you-yourself-forth* - and his intense dedication to his family relationships, he opts to include them in his journey. When he *re-departs* Harran, we notice the order of the entourage: *Sarai is now first instead of last*, Lot is second, and his property is third.² *Abram elevates his relationship with Sarai above his own self-interest*. The implicit message to God is, *if you are going to bless me it's going to be with Sarai. Sarai is integral to my future*.

2. The Descent to Egypt: אֲמַרְי נָא אֶחָתִי אֶת לַמֶּעַן יִיטֵב לִי *Pray say that you are my sister in order that it may go well with me on your account, and I myself may live thanks to you*. Abram worries that the Egyptians will abduct Sarai because of her beauty. If Abram and Sarai present themselves as a married couple, Abram fears that the Egyptians will kill him and keep Sarai a captive woman. But if they present themselves as siblings, a plausible scenario since they are childless, the Egyptians will compensate him if they take her. *In either scenario,*

Abram renders Sarai vulnerable. As devoted as she might be to him to go along with this scheme, *Abram elevated his self-interest and survival above Sarai's security*. My speculation: this leaves a deep wound in the relationship.

3. The Return to the Negev: וַיֵּשְׁלַח אֹתוֹ וְאֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ *Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife* (13:1). When the Egyptians dispatch Abram and Sarai from Egypt, the Torah deliberately states it as follows: *ואת אשתו*. That means, *Take note: they are separate*. Each of them is demarcated by their own direct object marker *את* for which there is no equivalent in English. But to appreciate this detail we could render it this way: *ואת אשתו-they sent him and (they sent) his wife*. Despite the illusion that they are together, based on this close reading we can argue that they are not. When the very next line says that Abram went up to the Negev, וַיֵּשְׁלַח אֹתוֹ וְאֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ *he and his wife*, this explicitly states that they were together. My midrash: They left Egypt wounded by the ordeal there. There is distance and silence between them. But somewhere along the way back, they put it behind them. *Egypt was a crisis. But the way back offered them the possibility of a renewal*.

4. God's Promise to Abram: כִּי אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא *the one that goes out from your body, he shall be heir to you* (15:4). This is where God and Abram have their first argument. God has been promising and promising, but Abram still has no children. Abram turns to God with urgency and God reassures him, rather bluntly, that any heir of his will be a direct biological child, an *issue of his own body*. This must have puzzled him, as it would anyone. *How is this going to happen? My wife cannot conceive! Nevertheless, I will believe him*. God takes note of Abram's faith and deems it an act of righteousness, וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה (15:6). The promise, followed by an elaborate sacrificial ceremony, (the *Covenant of the Pieces*, 15:9-17) signals that we are at a demarcation point in the story. Perhaps it also resets Abram's internal life. *The promise (and the sacrifice) can inspire him to renew his relationship with Sarai and help him recognize her indispensability for his future*.

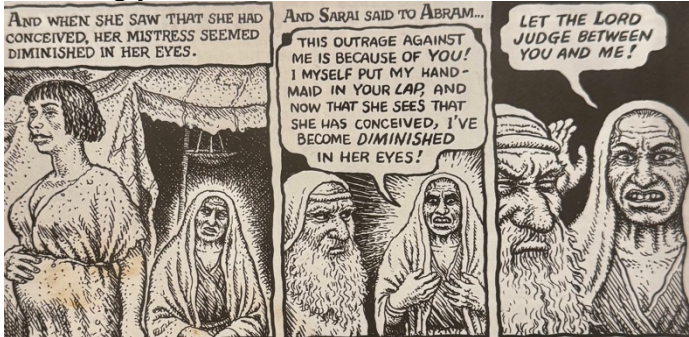
5. The Hagar Proposal: הֲנֵה נָא עֲבָדְנִי ה' מִלֵּדֶת בָּא נָא אֵל *Now here, God has stopped me from bearing. Pray come in to my maid; perhaps I may be built-up-with-sons through her! Abram hearkened to Sarai's voice* (16:2). Two stories converge here: God's relationship with Abram and Abram's relationship with Sarai. When Sarai makes this proposal she may not have been aware that God just promised Abram an heir *from his body*. In Abram's mind, Sarai's proposal makes total sense because it fulfils the intent of God's promise, albeit not with Sarai. Thus, *Abram listens to her*, (without protest, which is telling). We

¹ JPS and Robert Alter render it simply, *Go forth*. Rashi highlights the personal and singular sense of this: לְהִנָּאֵתָךְ *for your personal benefit, for your personal good*.

² As opposed to the listing of the entourage in Terah's migration, when she was in the last position. See 11:31 וַיֵּקַח תֶּרַח אֶת (1) אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת (2) לֹט בֶן הָרָן בְּנוֹ וְאֶת (3) שָׂרַי כְּלָתוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ.

sense the tension. He wants to fulfil God's promise, but he might also want an alternative to Sarai. Abram's marriage to Hagar, an Egyptian slave, will challenge an already fragile relationship. But Sarai is willing to risk that so that **she** may have a child. **Sarai puts her own self-interest first.**

6. Sarai's Angry Eruption: חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וְנִמְרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ וְאָקֵל בְּעֵינַיָהּ יִשְׁפֹּט ה' בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ - *The wrong done me is on you! I myself gave my maid into your bosom, but now that she sees that she is pregnant, I have become of light-worth in her eyes. May God see-justice-done between me and you!* Now that Hagar is pregnant, the family system reconfigures itself. Conflict erupts between Hagar and Sarai. Hagar belittles Sarai and Sarai lays all the blame on Abram. No wonder. **When Abram went to Egypt, Abram rendered Sarai vulnerable to the Egyptian lords; when they returned from Egypt, (bringing a little "Egypt" with them) Abram rendered Sarai vulnerable to an Egyptian slave!** But Sarai is angry not only because Hagar usurped Sarai's child-bearing role; now she has usurped Sarai's wifely role as well! She is **in Abram's bosom** - a euphemistic way of saying that he takes delight in her sexually. And why does Sarai invoke God's judgement here? We sense that **she feels betrayed** even though she gave him permission and encouraged him to cohabit with her in the first place. Hagar's pregnancy sets in motion circumstances that Sarai did not imagine. Perhaps in her anger at him, she is also angry at herself.



7. Abram's Dispassionate Response: הִנֵּה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עָשִׂי - *Here is your maid in your hand, deal with her however seems good in your eyes* (16:6). No apologies. No placating. No compassion. He is harsh and dismissive. **This is the lowest point in the relationship.** Where everyone needed to come together, now everyone is coming apart. Abram does not engage with Sarai, Abram detaches from Hagar, and Sarai begins to behave abusively to Hagar. We have **ruchmones** for her. Under the strain, Hagar escapes. They need a remedy from outside the family system, a divine remedy. Thus, a messenger of God steps in to re-calibrate the family system and bring it back from the brink. The messenger sends Hagar back to the family, with the consolation of a blessing that she will go on to be the progenitor of an untold number of people (16:10).

8. The Aftermath of the Breakdown: וְנִמְלֵד הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן - *And Hagar bore Abram a son* (16:15). Sarai undertook her initiative to fulfil her own need to be built up, to have a child. But the text tells us that this child is ultimately

Abram's. **Sarai is absent. The relationship is in serious trouble.** Ironically, God's promise to Abram (#4 above) which may have kindled in Abram a desire to renew his relationship with Sarai, leads to a crisis. While the messenger of God brings Hagar back, and holds the family together, this new child might potentially cause enough stress to break the family apart. To stave this off, God now intervenes and opens a possibility for change.

9. Circumcision and A New Name for Both: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים - *God said to Abraham: As for Sarai your wife—you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah/Princess is her name!* The covenantal mark on his body - circumcision - and his commitment to circumcise all of his male descendants is a turning point in Abram's relationship with God. And of course, so is his name-change from Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. **The name-changes ought to be understood as the terminus of the old identities - Abram and Sarai - and the end of that phase of the marriage. The new names symbolize a new beginning with new identities and a new phase in their marriage.** But upon hearing this, and that she will bear a child too (!), Abraham laughs. The prospect of a centenarian fathering a child with a nonagenarian is funny enough on its face, but we could speculate that Abraham may have had other reasons not to take God seriously. **Sure. Right. Never mind that we are old. We barely talk to each other. How could he expect that we will be expecting!** Not wanting to imagine how this child will come into being, he appeals to God: **לוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִהְיֶה לְפָנַי - Let Ishmael be the one to live before you** (17:18) which God opposes. **Sarah was integral to Abraham's past. And Sarah will be integral to Abraham's future.**

10. The Final Reset of the Relationship: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲבֶל - *And God said: but Sarah is your wife.* There are several layers of meaning here. Having gone through all of these complicated chapters in the story with her, we can appreciate Abraham's reticence at the prospect of having a child at such an advanced age. But when God says **אֲבֶל שָׂרָה - but Sarah your wife will bear you a son** I would recommend reading it slowly, carefully, and persuasively, pausing between the words, as if God is trying to tell him something deeper. **אֲבֶל שָׂרָה...אֲשֶׁתָּה - but Sarah...is your wife. You cannot go back to the beginning. You cannot undo what has happened. But the two of you, as old as you are, have new names, new identities, and the potential for a new story. And now she, in addition to you, has my blessing. Sarah is your wife, Abraham. Through her, you will have a son.** The marriage of Abraham and Sarah is a story. Despite its pathos and anguish, it is powerful and beautiful and contains within it the potential for blessings. We are all the descendants of that marriage, which means that we are all part of that story. And with God's help of course, we too, have the potential for blessings!

SHABBAT SHALOM!

שַׁבַּת שְׁלוֹמִים!