

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Lekh Lekha Part IV Excerpts From Judaic Seminar Discussions

### Part I. On Half-Sister

#### 1. From RRT's submission (Judaic Seminar v.5#4):

"Abram and Nahor took themselves wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah – daughter of Haran, father of Milcah and father of Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). Why was the father of Sarai, the more important of the women (Abram's wife), not mentioned while Milcah's father was?

Rashi, following the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 69b, cf. *Sifre Beha'alotekha* 99), identified Iscah with Sarai, Abraham's wife (who saw – *sachta* prophetically, or whose beauty everyone looked at – *sacha*). This explanation seems far from the peshat. Ibn Ezra's hesitation is implied in his comment: "Our predecessors, of blessed memory, said that Iscah is Sarah ...*v'im qabala neqabel* (if it is received tradition we will accept)."

The fact is that the Torah does identify Sarai's father. He is Terah. Abraham, in explaining his prevarication about Sarai's identity, reveals that she is his half-sister from his father (Gen. 20:12). The Torah withheld this information [until later] for dramatic effect.

#### 2. From Rabbi Shamah's response (Judaic Seminar v.5#7)

Although the Torah does on occasion withhold information to be revealed at a later time for dramatic effect, we should carefully consider if such a literary device is used when the effect is of trivial benefit at best. When, for instance, the fact of Joseph's begging his brothers for mercy is revealed when the brothers converse before him with a guilty conscience, there is a significant message accompanying the dramatic

effect. And the narrative doesn't suffer, as we don't miss information we don't know exists. Here, a genealogical registry is left with a glaring gap as to the identity of Sarai's father – while the far less important Milcah's father is given – for what purpose?

Furthermore, in the Egypt episode – the first time Abraham and Sarah used the "sister" ploy – when criticized by Pharaoh for the deception, Abraham did not use the half-sister explanation. And when he does do so to Abimelech, it is anticlimactic in that narrative. So what is the goal of the supposed dramatic effect? Perhaps another explanation for the omission of the identity of Sarah's father should be sought.

Additionally, although he only equivocally discounts the Talmudic view that "Sarah is Iscah" as *peshat*, Ibn Ezra is of the opinion that Abraham's retort to Abimelech was disingenuous, merely putting him off. For if Sarah was Terah's daughter, why did the verse not so identify her when it said, "Terah took Abram his son, Lot his grandson and Sarai his daughter-in-law" (Gen. 11:31)?

#### 3. From RRT's response (Judaic Seminar v.5#9)

Ibn Kaspi provides the beginnings of an answer: "This [omission of the identity of Sarah's father] is a divine action...[intended] to arouse us from our sleep and awaken us from our slumber." He might mean that the Torah requires alert readers to be properly understood. One way that the Torah creates alertness is omitting information, causing the reader to seek it. The Torah does it when the information is of great import, like the reason for God's choosing Abraham (see JS v.5#6). Or it can be done in places where the purpose is none other than the creation of the alertness (and

possibly the entertainment value of having new information revealed in unexpected places).

#### **4. From Rabbi Shamah's second response (Judaic Seminar v.5#10)**

Ibn Kaspi's statement is problematic. We often see the brilliance and sophistication of the Torah narrative brought out through an omission or the turn of a phrase. The Torah obviously assumes a close and attentive reader who scrutinizes every word and phrase. If the reader is not alert he will often, if not usually, miss the point. It appears inconsistent to say something was omitted not for a literary purpose but merely to awaken the reader!

#### **5. Rabbi Shamah's subsequent remarks:**

Despite the problem of the omission of Sarai's genealogy, it appears likely that Abraham's statement to Abimelech regarding Sarah being his half-sister does indeed reveal her true identity.

When Pharaoh castigated Abraham for his deception, no response from the latter is recorded. The accusation was essentially regarding Abraham's concealing of Sarai being his wife; whether she was his half-sister or not is totally irrelevant to Pharaoh so Abraham doesn't reveal it. Abraham is depicted as not responding at all; perhaps after G-d had intervened and vindicated him there was no purpose in his speaking.

Abimelech, on the other hand – one who is depicted as a righteous man to whom G-d appeared in a dream – insisted that Abraham respond. He wanted to know how Abraham, a righteous man, spoke as he did! This is indicated in the text by a literary device. Abimelech summoned Abraham and complained about his behavior (Gen. 20:9). There was no response. The following verse (10) begins with another *vayomer* on the part of Abimelech, indicating that he pressed Abraham to explain himself. So he was compelled to respond. He informs Abimelech of the fear he had that he might be killed over Sarah, which answers the primary question and then adds that, "Also, truly, Sarah is my half-sister" (v. 12). Explaining himself when there no longer was any danger – speaking to a moral individual who wanted to know "why did you

prevaricate?" – the latter information is relevant and appears truthful.

Concerning the omission of Sarai being Terah's daughter in the genealogical statement of 11:29, since the Torah views the husband-wife relationship as creating a bond that overrides that of the parent-son (Gen. 2:24), and surely that of the parent-daughter, perhaps it would have been inappropriate to mention Sarai being Terah's daughter in the context in which she is identified as Abram's wife.

#### **Part II. Rabbi Shamah's Response to RRT's Statement on Polygamy**

In Judaic Seminar vol. 7 #8, RRT makes the points that the Patriarchs did not favor polygamy even when a wife was barren and that the Talmudic tradition (*b. Yebam. 64a*, a passage replete with *aggadic* interpretations) did not draw its lesson from the patriarchs. However, closer analysis of the biblical material does not allow anywhere as near as strong a case as RRT proposes from the patriarchs themselves.

Although Isaac did remain with only Rebekah through a barren period that extended nearly the first twenty years of their marriage, that cannot have been thought of as the standard and as a precedent for other marriages, as divine providence was active in making that match. Undoubtedly, a truly heavenly ordained marriage would eventually include children, as had been the case with Abraham. There was no reason to doubt the story of Abraham's servant regarding G-d's response to his prayer at the well.

While it is true that Jacob did not originally indicate interest in marrying more than one wife, Rachel, that says nothing about our subject. On the other hand, his decision to marry Rachel as his second wife also is irrelevant, as she was his true love whom he was scheduled to marry, who possibly would have been his only wife. However, accepting Rachel's offer of her maid because she did not have children at a time when he already had several children from Leah, though Rachel herself initiated and encouraged the match, is not consistent with a negative disposition toward polygamy. And Jacob's subsequent acceptance of Leah's maid when he already had four sons from Leah appears to indicate that he did not have any

objection to polygamy when its purpose was to sire more children.

We are left with the indication from Abraham, which the rabbinic tradition interpreted as setting a standard of waiting ten years without children before taking a second wife. Of course, even Abraham's monogamy before accepting Hagar is not a precedent for other cases as he had a promise from G-d that he would have children.

That Abraham did not marry another wife besides Hagar while Sarah was alive – based on interpreting the relevant Biblical narrative in chronological order – although he may have desired more children, may be related to Sarah's hostile disposition toward Hagar and her son that eventually led to her insistence that they be sent away (Gen 21:10) and to the fact that G-d supported Sarah on this latter matter. Following the chronological order of the Torah it appears that Abraham married Keturah not only after Sarah passed

away but also only after Isaac was married, and “left” his father's household, thus not intermingling the other children with Isaac. (Apparently Abraham was no longer considered too old to father children after he had Isaac.)

Although we do not see the patriarchs as individuals being opposed to polygamy when its purpose was for the sake of having children, the Bible itself clearly appears to have a negative attitude toward it and sets the stage for the future movement away from it. This can be seen from the resounding proclamation attached to the creation of woman, “Therefore shall a man leave father and mother and attach himself to his wife and so become one flesh” (2:24), a statement that promotes a monogamous relationship. In addition, the Bible promoted monogamy through its realistic and vivid depictions of the disastrous results that often ensue from children of multiple wives.

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