

ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND HAGAR AS A BLENDED FAMILY: PROBLEMS, PARTINGS, AND POSSIBILITIES

Blended families are families where after divorce or death, and then through remarriage, at least one parent and one child (children) are not biologically connected. This phenomenon is commonplace in today's world. The dynamics of blended families are infinitely more complicated than in more traditional family configurations. What role can –or should – the stepparent (blended parent) take? What loyalty is there between the stepparent and the stepchild? And the stepchild to the stepparent? Or blended siblings? Can/should a stepparent discipline a stepchild? If exchanges between traditional family members are often potentially charged, exchanges between members of a blended family are magnified. Frequently, people clamor for status, attention, and/or power. Feelings are easily hurt, actions are misread and misinterpreted, and individuals ascribe meaning to deeds that may not necessarily have been intended.

Once a person enters into a relationship with another, any decisions made by either have consequences felt by both parties. This is true of any partnership or marriage. Adding a child (children) makes this more complicated. To a greater or lesser degree, all decisions necessarily impact everyone, whether or not the person intended this to happen.

Blended families do not come with a set of instructions how to negotiate these troubled and troubling waters. We can however, learn from the experiences of others. One prime example is found in Genesis, the lives and interactions of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and then the additional personages of Ishmael and Isaac. Their story provides us with living lessons of what might be done – or avoided – when there is a blended family.

As we analyze this ancient blended family, we do this through the lens or filter of the norms and understanding of relationships between spouses (partners), and child(ren) within family life in the 21st century. What was accepted, and acceptable in the ancient world, the cultural mores and customs of that age are not the standards and models of our time. That disjunction notwithstanding, we look at the past to inform us in the present. In seeking lessons from the past we can add to our knowledge by referring to some traditional rabbinic understandings of what was going on in this early example of a blended family.

This article is divided into three parts: Problems, Partings, and Possibilities.

The first section, Problems, considers the initial couple of Abraham and Sarah. It explores how decisions were made by Abraham that negatively impacted upon the life of Sarah. Subsequently, when it appears that she cannot produce an heir, Sarah offers Abraham her maidservant, the Egyptian woman Hagar, to serve as a surrogate womb. Initially a successful solution, difficulties soon arise. These

matters are resolved in some manner, but then resurface some years later following Isaac's birth and weaning.

The second section analyzes the Partings. There is an initial parting of the ways when Hagar flees to the desert to escape Sarah's cruel treatment, though Hagar does return. Nearly twenty years later, however, Sarah forces Hagar and Ishmael from the Abrahamic encampment.

Finally, the article considers Possibilities for this blended family. It suggests a reading of the text where Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, reconnect and reconcile. It also suggests that Abraham and Ishmael, and Abraham and Hagar reconcile.

PART I: PROBLEMS

"All happy families resemble each other, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."¹ On the face of it, the Abraham-Sarah family is an unhappy family in its own way. Though outwardly successful, in that they have many material possessions – "Now [Abraham] was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold" (Gen. 13:2)² – they have not known the blessings of a child, never mind several children. God's promise that Abraham (and presumably Sarah) would be a "great nation" (Gen. 12:2; cf. 15:3-5) has not been realized. Their unhappiness stems from their feeling unfulfilled: they have no offspring.

Rightly or wrongly, Sarah is labeled as the cause of this matter. When first mentioned by name, no details are given of her ancestry. Rather the text notes that she "was barren, she had no child" (Gen. 11:30). Underscoring its significance, the text repeats her condition. "These ominous words haunt the narrative to come. They bring [Sarah] to center stage . . . Unique and barren, [Sarah] threatens the demise of genealogy."³

Shortly after this notice about Sarah, the text explains that God sends Abraham and Sarah on a journey to a new land, where in time they (or more technically he, Abraham) shall produce a great nation.⁴ At this point, Abraham does not seem concerned about how this will happen. Abraham just allows matters to unfold.

¹Special thanks to Sandra Mayer for reading this article in an earlier form and offering constructive suggestions.

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Chapter 1, part 1.

² Genesis quotations from *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaption of the JPS Translation*, Revising Editor David E. S. Stein, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

³ Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, Alice Bach, editor, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, 281.

In a time of famine Abraham and Sarah travel southward to Egypt. There he misrepresents his real relationship to Sarah. Abraham pretends that Sarah is his sister. His stated fear is that the Egyptians would covet her and kill him. As a result Sarah is placed into the Pharaoh's harem. In this incident, Sarah is doubly a victim of abuse. Part of this abuse stems from Abraham's fears and lies; the other part is unwanted advances from Pharaoh.⁵

When Sarah was placed into the harem, "because of her, it went well with [Abraham]; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels" (Gen. 12:16). It would appear that this is Pharaoh's purchase price for his new wife or concubine, a normal transaction in ancient days.

Pharaoh was then punished with plagues by God for his having – or at least attempting – intimate relations with a married woman (Gen. 12:17).⁶ Later Pharaoh states that if he had known the truth that Sarah was a married woman he would never have taken Sarah into his harem.⁷

He returns Sarah to Abraham, and then expels both of them from Egypt.

Time passes. Sarah still fails to produce an heir. God had previously presented Abraham with a view of the future as a great nation, and God repeats this promise in a vision, though no specific mention is made of Sarah (Gen. 15:1 ff.) Inasmuch as Abraham already had experienced Sarah's apparent infertility he

⁴ God speaks to Abraham, and the language is in the second person masculine singular.

⁵ Abuse is a very strong designation and description. The biblical term for abuse or betrayal has the root *bet-gimel-dalet* (*b-g-d*) and as a verb is used only once in the Torah, and then not in Genesis but in Exodus 21:8b, where it refers to a man who "broke faith" with his wife. The root *b-g-d* has a range of meanings. The prophets often use it; it also appears in the Psalms and Proverbs. First Isaiah weaves the word most poetically and alliteratively into his speech: *bogdim bagadu u'veged bogdim bagdu* – "For the treacherous deal treacherously, the treacherous deal very treacherously" (Isa. 24:16). It is in this sense of "breaking faith/faithlessness/treachery" that the terms "abuse/abusive" are used.

⁶ The rabbis suggest that though he tried to approach Sarah, Pharaoh was thwarted in his attempts. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 41.2.

⁷ Pharaoh claims he would not have taken Sarah into his harem had he known she was married. That does not mean he would not have had Abraham killed to achieve the goal of Sarah as an unencumbered woman. Abraham may have been fearful of Egyptian practices for good reason.

may have well have begun to expect that she could not provide the heir or heirs he needed. In order to translate God's promise into reality he would need another wife. Polygamy was accepted in ancient times.

Becoming a Blended Family⁸

Sarah herself provides an answer to their mutual problem. "Consort with my [Egyptian maidservant Hagar]; perhaps I shall have a child through her" (Gen. 16:2). "Surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman's status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (see [Gen.] 16:2; 30:1-2; . . . 38)."⁹

Abraham acceded to Sarah's request, and in time, Ishmael is born.

Since "blended family" is a modern expression, Sarah does not use this term. Yet, Sarah's inviting Abraham to acquire a concurrent second wife creates the phenomenon of a blended family. The blended Abraham-Sarah-Hagar family is even more complicated than most blended families, because there has been no divorce: everyone is living in the same household, and further, wife number one has some considerable power over wife number two.

The dynamics of the interplay between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Abraham with Sarah, Abraham with Hagar, Sarah with Abraham, Sarah with Hagar, Hagar with Abraham, and Hagar with Sarah) are mindful of the interchanges that one finds in blended families. Adding the children

⁸ Moshe Reiss writes: The term "Blended Family" applied to Sarah and Hagar was first used (to my knowledge) by Rabbi Dr. David J. Zucker in his article "Blended Families: Sarah, Hagar, and All That . . .," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 2003, 57.1, 33-38.

⁹ Susan Niditch, "Genesis" in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Woman's Bible Commentary*, (London: SPCK, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 17. For the cultural context of this legalized surrogate motherhood, see Nahum N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 119, comment to verse 2; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 120; Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, Fully revised and expanded Third Edition. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2006), 48 f., 110.

The sense of shame felt by a woman unable to conceive continues to haunt modern society. See Michael Gold, *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Ishmael and Isaac, the dynamic quickly becomes exponentially more multifaceted.

With the presence of Ishmael and Isaac, interactions become more intricate. There now is an additional Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael dynamic, an Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael, an Ishmael-Isaac dynamic, and many other permutations as well.¹⁰

Hagar is used by Sarah as a surrogate mother¹¹ whose womb apparently is available at no financial cost to her mistress. Sarah's statements to Abraham literally are the first words she speaks in the biblical text. The phrase she uses creates a pun, for the literal Hebrew translation of her words, "*I shall have a child through her*" are "*ib-ba-neh*" – I will be built up – is a word play which also could mean "sonned" through her (the Hebrew "*ben*" is son).¹²

¹⁰ "There is a considerable body of research concerned with the impact of changing family forms, with implicit and explicit attention to stability for children. Discussions around [which] . . . arrangements are best for children after divorce or separation . . . Step-family formation is posed as involving a cluster of changes for children . . . Most of the literature on step-families stresses the complexity of family forms and dynamics of family life involved . . . including changing relationships over time." Rosalind Edwards, "Creating 'Stability' for Children in Step-families [Blended-families]: Time and Substance in Parenting," *CHILDREN & SOCIETY* Vol. 16 (2002), 156.

"[T]hose in stepfamilies [blended families] may be more insecure in their attachments; further there is evidence that parental conflict is associated with attachment insecurity . . ." Judith M. Planitz, Judith A. Feeney and Candida C. Peterson, "Attachment patterns of young adults in stepfamilies [blended families] and biological families," *Journal of Family Studies* (2009) 15:70.

¹¹ Surrogate motherhood began early in the Bible and was apparently fairly common. Note Sarah, Rachel, Leah. It is also noted in the Code of Hammurabi #146. Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, (London, SPCK, 1988), 124; it is also found in the Nuzi and Mari texts (18th century BCE) in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian sources relevant to Genesis 16:1-6 are found in Matitiah Tsevat, "Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael," *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies*, (New York: Ktav; Dallas, TX: Institute for Jewish Studies, 1980), Excursus 1, 70-72.

In modern times, the surrogate/birth mother generally is not involved with her offspring following delivery.

¹² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: Translation and Commentary*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996), 77; Sarna, *JPS-Genesis*, 119. Sarah can be compared with Rachel who too was preoccupied with her own

The biblical text terms Hagar a (second) “wife” (Gen. 16:3) using the term *‘isha*, (not a *pilegesh* – a concubine).¹³ Hagar presumably was given some undefined rights of a wife, albeit a secondary wife. Yet, here “when Hagar becomes [Abraham’s] wife (v. 3), she does not cease to be [Sarah’s] slave; when Abraham surrenders Hagar to [Sarah’s] authority (v. 6), he acknowledges that his wife has prior claims that supersede his.”¹⁴

Hagar makes no comment to either Sarah or Abraham regarding her new status. Hagar might have conjectured that having sexual relations with her mistress’ master and having a child would elevate her status; it would seem a natural reaction. Abraham appears aloof and largely abdicates any responsibility in this very sensitive triad but as we shall see the dynamics and interpersonal relationships assume massive importance for the two women involved.

Abraham impregnates Hagar. Whether this relationship continued beyond the point of Hagar’s conception is not explicitly stated but seems likely given her wifely status. Abraham probably expected to have more than one child.

Earlier God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land. No explicit mention was made of a wife; so Abraham assumed that the child born to Hagar would be his promised son.

Hagar Oversteps

Once she is pregnant, Hagar makes a serious error in judgment. She starts to flaunt her status, *her* ability to become pregnant, in contrast to Sarah’s state of barrenness. “Hagar . . . conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived,

immortality when as a barren woman she cried to her husband Jacob “give me children or I will die” (Gen. 30:2); meaning to her that without a child her house or lineage would die.

¹³ Second wife, or concubine? Speiser and Sarna make the case that Hagar is a concubine, not a wife. Speiser, 117; Sarna, *JPS Genesis*, 119. The rabbis disagree. A midrash proclaims, “TO BE A WIFE, but not a concubine.” *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.3. English translations also use the term “wife”. Cf. the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New English Bible (NEB), New International Version, Jerusalem Bible. See also, *The Schocken Bible, Volume I, The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox trans., (New York: Schocken, 1995). Nahmanides (Ramban), the 13th Century Spanish commentator on the Bible, also suggests the correct term is wife not concubine.

¹⁴ Susan Niditch, “Lech L’cha” commentary to Genesis 16:1, in Tamara Cohn Ezkenazi, Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 71.

she looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen. 16:4). As noted earlier, “childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor.”

The rabbis explain the situation thusly: Hagar draws attention to the fact that while Sarah had been married for years, she was unable to conceive. Hagar suggests Sarah deserves the punishment of being barren, because she is not a moral person. The unspoken message is clear. *I, Hagar, am a “moral” person, I conceived immediately.*

A midrash explains that female visitors would come to visit and spend time with Sarah. Sarah would suggest to them that they also should visit Hagar. Instead of being thankful to Sarah for arranging these visits, “Hagar would tell them: ‘My mistress [Sarah] is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!’”¹⁵

Hagar’s parading her newfound pregnant status, though unwise considering her being the second wife, was not an uncommon phenomenon “Childless wives were humiliated and taunted by co-wives.”¹⁶

Sarah “was lowered in [Hagar’s] esteem” (Gen. 16:4). This reaction would be similar to that of the later blended families of Jacob/Leah and Rachel, or that of Elkanah/Hannah (mother of Samuel) and Peninnah (Gen. 30:1-21; 1 Sam. 1:6). In each case the wife who is able to produce offspring acts and certainly is perceived by society as superior to the barren woman.

Perhaps Hagar ceased to feel subservient and became more confident; she had achieved the “impossible mission” assuring Abraham his posterity. Hagar’s very swollen belly and smile must have seemed an affront to Sarah.

Instead of retaliating directly against Hagar, Sarah initiates the “blame game.” She accuses Abraham of being solely responsible for this state of affairs. She says, “The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem” (Gen. 16:5). The term Sarah uses, the “wrong done me is your fault!” is very strong (literally, “my violence is on you.”)

Her accusation is that Abraham has committed an injustice to Sarah. What crime had Abraham committed? A case can be made that he was merely obeying and passively carrying out Sarah’s unilateral suggestion.

¹⁵ *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.4; *Midrash ha Gadol*, Mordecai Marguiles, ed., (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1947), Genesis 1.244.

¹⁶ Niditch, “Genesis,” 17.

Sarah may be overstating the wrong done her, but it is clear that she is very angry. She feels deceived and displaced by Abraham. Sarah then challenges Abraham with the words, may “[YHVH] decide between you and me!”¹⁷

In a very close reading of the biblical text, an insightful midrash makes a good case for Sarah’s sense of outrage. She points out to Abraham that earlier (during the divine vision recorded in Genesis 15) he had the chance to make a case for *both he and Sarah becoming parents, but he did not do so* Abraham had said to God, “I shall die childless . . . Since You have granted me no offspring” (vss. 2-3). Sarah chastises Abraham, saying you *should have said* to God that “we will die childless . . . Since You have granted *us* no offspring.”¹⁸

In the face of Sarah’s anger and accusation, Abraham abdicates his responsibilities to Hagar as his (second) wife. He figuratively turns his back on her. He says to Sarah, “Your maid [*shifhateykh*] is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.”¹⁹

As noted earlier, “when Hagar becomes [Abraham’s] wife (v. 3), she does not cease to be [Sarah’s] slave; when Abraham surrenders Hagar to [Sarah’s] authority (v. 6), he acknowledges that his wife has prior claims that supersede his.”

“Then [Sarah] treated [Hagar] harshly” (Gen. 16:6). Sarah abuses her pregnant maidservant who was intended to be a surrogate mother, producing an heir. The Hebrew for “treating harshly” is *va-t’anneha*. This word suggests physical as well as mental abuse. It “generally carries the connotation of physical harm: it can mean . . . to oppress . . . as well as simply to humble or humiliate.”²⁰

¹⁷ There also may be a legal side to this matter. Tsevat suggests that in “vs. 5. the legal form has a litigious ring. A law suit is indicated with [Sarah’s crying to Abraham that she has been wronged]. He, the master of the house, is permitting her handmaid to infringe on her position as mistress. . . Whatever protection under custom of agreement Hagar might have had before, she has forfeited by her conduct” Tsevat, 55.

¹⁸ *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.5.

¹⁹ When Hagar escapes to the desert, she meets an angel of God. The angel addressed Hagar as Sarah’s *shifhah* (Gen. 16:8).

²⁰ Jo Ann Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern” in Peggy L. Day, ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 14. See also *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45:6.

A number of *midrashim* (plural of midrash) suggest Abraham should have been more sensitive and reprimanded Hagar's behavior protecting Sarah's feelings.²¹ Other sources however are more critical of Sarah. The medieval commentator Nahmanides writes, "Our mother sinned by this harsh treatment as did Abraham in permitting her to act this way."²²

Hagar's continuing change of status is dizzying. She moves from *shifhah* (maidservant/female slave) to mistress's master's wife (*'isha*) and then while pregnant she returns to her status as a *shifhah* (maidservant/female slave). For Hagar this was both understandable and overwhelming. She has succeeded when her mistress has failed. That she might smirk with her swollen belly is not unreasonable, albeit unwise. Sarah's angry reaction, borne out of rival-filled jealousy at realizing that she and Abraham's infertility can now be seen by the outside world as her (Sarah's) responsibility is equally understandable.

Sarah's response to Hagar, Sarah's abusing her maidservant might be explained (though not excused) by seeing this as her delayed reaction to the abuse she suffered in Egypt. Abraham had turned her over to Pharaoh. Some contend that in effect, Abraham pimped her for his own personal gain. Sarah was forced into having sexual relations with Pharaoh, or at the least she had to ward off his advances. Hagar, as an Egyptian, represented all that was hateful and hurtful in that land. For feminists, male or female, this perpetuation of abusive behavior, and especially an abused female abusing another female, is painful to encounter. As a contemporary critic has written, the

"violence that is practiced by Abraham against Sarah, she now recapitulates in relation to the most vulnerable person in her own household. Thus, the cycle of abuse goes on . . .

"[The] Torah . . . makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society"²³

thereby offering us lessons that continue to be relevant today.

As noted earlier in this article, with any partnership or marriage, decisions that one person makes impacts others as well, whether or not that was the intent of the act.

²¹ *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.5 (see also 45.6).

²² Nahmanides, Comment on Genesis 16:6.

²³ Judith Plaskow, "Contemporary Reflection," "Lech L'cha" in Ezkenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 107.

Sarah sets up a situation, and then upon reflection rues her actions. She makes life unbearable for Hagar. A modern observer notes, “Hagar is Sarah’s victim and Sarah was wrong to impose a role upon her and then begrudge her for playing it too well.”²⁴

PART II – PARTINGS

Because Sarah mistreats Hagar, Hagar runs away to the desert. There she has an angelic encounter at an oasis, which is then designated by the name Beer Leḥai Ro-i. Hagar eventually returns and gives birth to Ishmael. Abraham names Ishmael and claims him as his own son (Gen. 16:15). For more than a dozen years, it appears that Ishmael will be the designated heir. Although unstated, Sarah has apparently made her peace with the situation, and reconciled with Hagar, regarding Ishmael as her own surrogate son.

Then, without warning, when Ishmael is about thirteen, God suddenly comes to Abraham and creates the covenant of circumcision, wherein both Abraham and Ishmael are circumcised. God further makes a covenant of land for Abraham’s heirs. God finally then tells Abraham that Sarah will, in her own right, bear a child who will become the link to their future descendants (Genesis 17).

God tells Abraham that Sarah his elderly wife who is nearly ninety years will give birth. Abraham expresses doubts about his own ability and fertility despite having had a son thirteen years earlier with Hagar (Gen. 17:16). He also questions whether Sarah, in her advanced age is capable of such a feat. (In the next chapter, Sarah herself laughs at the thought of giving birth, describing herself as post-menopausal – Gen. 18:11-12). Nonetheless, “[YHVH] took note of Sarah as promised . . . Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken” (Gen 21:1-2). Abraham named this son Yitzḥaq – Isaac.

When the boy is weaned, perhaps at about three years of age, Sarah apparently feels threatened by the presence of Hagar and Ishmael.²⁵ Unexpectedly and aggressively Sarah demands that Abraham send away both Ishmael and his Egyptian mother. She cannot bring herself to speak Hagar’s or Ishmael’s names, referring to them instead by their status and role. “[Sarah] said to Abraham, ‘Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share

²⁴ Elie Wiesel, “Ishmael and Hagar” in Joseph Edelheit, ed. *The Life of Covenant* (Chicago: Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1986) 238.

²⁵ Though a few midrashim describe Ishmael in positive terms, most ascribe negative behaviors to him, ranging from rape, to idolatry, to murder. Cf. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 53.11.

in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Gen. 21:9).²⁶ Sarah disregards that Ishmael is Abraham’s son and that she instigated the entire scenario resulting in his birth.

The family inheritance included what Abraham and Sarah had brought from Haran, and in addition, the gifts bestowed upon them by Pharaoh. Other possessions come from King Abimelech of Gerar where Sarah is again offered up as a “sister” to Abraham (see Genesis 20.). These latter gifts came to Abraham because of his willingness misrepresent his relationship with Sarah. Sarah having been abused twice may well feel she is entitled to all the full inheritance; she had earned them. Since Abraham in a sense had sold her to Pharaoh and Abimelech, they could be considered a “dowry price” which, under ancient law belonged to the wife.²⁷

This is a difficult text. As a modern commentary notes, “the call for the expulsion of Hagar raises troubling questions. The story portrays the oppression of one woman by another.”²⁸

Sarah’s insistence “Cast out that that slave-woman and her son [Hagar and Ishmael]” has thrown what is already a vulnerable family situation, into complete chaos.

Abraham, seemingly against his will agrees to Sarah’s demand. According to Genesis 21:11; “The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.” God needs to direct Abraham to submit to Sarah’s stipulation. Abraham severs his relationship with his second wife, and his firstborn son, and they with him. The brotherly bonds between the stepbrothers (“blended brothers”) Ishmael and Isaac are torn asunder. Whatever relationship Isaac has established with his stepmother Hagar (and she with him), is instantly curtailed, as is the relationship with Sarah and Ishmael, and so forth.

²⁶ The term that Sarah uses for slave-woman is *amah*. Earlier the term used had been *shifhah*. The terms *amah* and *shifhah* are used interchangeably in the Bible. In Genesis 21:13, God describes Hagar as an *amah* (maidservant/female slave). See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York, London, W. W. Norton, 2004), 77. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, C.A., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 51 (*amah*), 1046 (*shifhah*).

²⁷ Theophile J. Meek, “The Code of Hammurabi,” James B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East Texts*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 153, see Laws 137, 138.

²⁸ Ezkenazi and Weiss, note to Genesis 21:10, 98.

As noted earlier, the dynamics of the interplay between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Abraham with Sarah, Abraham with Hagar, Sarah with Abraham, Sarah with Hagar, Hagar with Abraham, and Hagar with Sarah) are mindful of the dynamics that one finds in blended families. Since there now are two children, Ishmael and Isaac, the dynamics and the partings are even more complicated than they were before. Each character is affected by the presence –and the anticipated absence – of the other, whether directly stated in the Bible or not. Consequently the possible distress felt is exponentially larger than just between the three characters of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

At the conclusion of Genesis 21, Abraham’s primary and secondary families seem to be irrevocably and irretrievably estranged. The last words that are spoken while they are still together are Sarah’s: “Cast out that slave-woman and her son.” As noted above, Sarah appears so angry that she cannot bring herself even to mention them by name. They have moved from being close family members, human subjects, with real names, to objectified others, property to be disposed of.

When last seen, Hagar and Ishmael are in the desert wildness, alone, afraid, but at least protected by the presence of an angel who promises that nearby is a well of water. They may also be comforted by the fact that God has promised to watch over them. God told Abraham, “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave . . . As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a great nation of him, too, for he is your seed” (Gen. 21:12-13). The difficulty is that there is no way of knowing if Hagar and Ishmael are aware of this promise to Abraham. Did he tell them, or not?

Further, even though Ishmael’s future is assured by God, there is no indication that the central characters have a chance to work through their grief at this sudden separation, much less effect some kind of reconciliation.

Yet, despite there being no explicit biblical support for this notion, it is conceivable that this blended family, or at least parts of this blended family, were able to transcend their difficulties and find room for reconciliation. The Bible does not state so directly, but there are inferences and clues that would seem to point in that direction.

PART III – POSSIBILITIES

In the ensuing chapters the Bible offers several suggestions that there is a “back story” to this situation, that all is not as it appears on the surface. In addition, rabbinic traditions present variant explanations as to how some of these characters interact (or fail to interact) in the coming years. Finally, contemporary scholarship offers some conjectures as to how many of the major characters found a way to reconcile what appears to be an unbridgeable chasm.

Biblically-based Clues

Sarah When last seen alive Sarah was at Beersheba, about age ninety-three, at the time of Isaac's weaning. At next report she has died at age 127. "Sarah died in Kiriath-arba –now Hebron – in the land of Canaan, and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah" (Gen. 23:2). The more literal translation of "proceeded to mourn" (the Hebrew reads: *vayavo Avraham lispod*) would be *and Abraham came to mourn Sarah*.

When Abraham was last seen, he was dwelling in Beersheba (Gen. 22:19). If Sarah is in Hebron, why is Abraham in Beersheba, and why is his wife not with him? What is she doing in Hebron?

The Bible is silent on these issues, but it suggests that the two were living separately.

Isaac Genesis 22 is the famous *Aqedah*, Abraham's "Binding" (of Isaac) and this son's near-sacrifice at the hand of his father. In that chapter he is termed a boy or young lad (*na'ar*) at several points. Presumably he is a teenager.²⁹ At the end of chapter 22, Abraham returns to Beersheba. There is no indication that Isaac went back with him following this terror-filled ordeal. In the text, they never speak again. Equally interesting is that God likewise never again speaks to Abraham.

When Isaac next appears in Genesis, he is forty years old. He is about to meet his future bride, Rebekah. Isaac is portrayed walking in the area around an oasis termed Beer Leḥai Ro-i, in the area of the Negev (Gen. 24:62). Later the Bible tells us that Isaac settles there for a time (Gen. 25:11). Beer Leḥai Ro-i is not an unknown locale in the southern part of the land. Beer Leḥai Ro-i is directly connected to Hagar (Gen. 16:14); and presumably to Ishmael. It is likely that this is the spring mentioned in Genesis 21:19. One explanation is that following the "Binding" on Mount Moriah, Isaac joined his blended family, Hagar and Ishmael who were living at Beer Leḥai Ro-i.

Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael In Genesis 25:9-10, Isaac and Ishmael together bury Abraham.

Each in his own right has reason to be upset with and estranged from Abraham. In both cases Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, at God's behest. God had told Abraham to listen to Sarah's request to cast out the slave-woman and

²⁹ There are several midrashim that suggest Isaac was thirty-seven at the Binding. This reasoning is based on the fact that Sarah was 90 when she gave birth (Gen. 21), that the Binding took place in Genesis 22, and that Sarah died at the beginning of Genesis 23 at age 127. The term used for Isaac is *na'ar* (boy/young man) and the plain sense meaning of the text suggests that he was a youngster.

her son, and in the opening words of Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a distant mountain.

That deserved anger notwithstanding, and though there is no direct text to support Isaac and Ishmael's living in harmony, the fact is that they are there at his funeral. "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah . . . the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites" (Gen. 25:9-10.)

Rabbinic (midrashic) explanations

Though there are no explicit verses to support their contention, the rabbis also suggested that there was a reconciliation between members of the Abrahamic family.

Abraham and Ishmael In the midrash collection *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* the author suggests Abraham, following Ishmael's expulsion from the home encampment, nonetheless tried to develop a relationship with this son. Abraham takes his camels and goes into the desert, visiting Ishmael's campsite. On the first visit Ishmael was not at home. Abraham asked for some water and bread. Ishmael's wife said "There is no bread and there is no water." Perhaps this is an ironic response reminiscent of the insufficient water and bread Abraham supplied on Ishmael's expulsion. Upon Ishmael's return home his wife tells him of the visit, and her response. He is angry and divorces her. Three years later Abraham came again and Ishmael [and Hagar?] was/were again not at home. Ishmael's new wife gives Abraham bread and water, and then he leaves. When Ishmael comes back to the campsite, his new wife tells him what happened. The narrator explains that Ishmael knew his father loved him.³⁰

Abraham and Hagar According to one source, Abraham was concerned about Hagar and how she will fare in the desert. Before she left, he ties some kind of sash around her, which will leave a mark in the sand wherever she goes. Then at some later point he can go to find her.³¹

The rabbis also suggest that Hagar and Abraham reconciled. In fact, there are suggestions that Isaac and Rebekah helped to achieve this reunion.

³⁰ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Gerald Friedlander trans., (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981) Chapter 30. This author was writing after the advent of Islam and there are some polemical aspects of the text, but he clearly distinguishes between Ishmael as Abraham's deserving son and the Ishmaelites as the final evil kingdom. A very similar story is told in an Islamic *hadith*. al-Tabari, *Prophets and Patriarchs.*, trans. William M. Brinner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987). There is great debate in the literature as to whose text came first.

³¹ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 30.

In the opening verses of Genesis 25 the text explains following Sarah's death (Genesis 23), and Abraham's arrangements for a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24), that Abraham remarried. "Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him [six sons]" (Gen. 25:1-2). In several midrashim, the rabbis equate Keturah with Hagar.³²

Not only is Keturah the same person as Hagar, Isaac himself promotes this extraordinary (re-)marriage.

"THEN ABRAHAM TOOK A WIFE AGAIN. It is simply that when Isaac took Rebekah, Isaac said: Let us go and bring a wife to my father. Hagar and Keturah are the same person."³³

Contemporary scholarship

Though the Bible is silent, we in our own day can address and offer answers to some of the outstanding issues that remain unaddressed in the narrative in Genesis. These explanations require reading the text closely, and sometimes reading between the lines. This may be a form of intertextual modern Midrash,³⁴ but these suggestions offer answers to matters that concern the lives of many of the major characters.

As noted earlier, when last seen alive in Genesis 21, Sarah was about ninety-three years old. She dies at age 127 (Gen. 23:1).

- What happened in the intervening three-plus decades between Sarah's presence at Isaac's weaning and her death?
- Where was she in those years?
- Why was she at Hebron?
- Why were Abraham and Sarah not living together when she died?
- Where was Isaac in the years following his near sacrifice on Mt Moriah?
- Why was Isaac living at Beer Lehai Ro-i?

³² *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 61.4; *Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis*, Vol. 1. S. Buber Recension, John T. Townsend trans., (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989), *Hayye Sarah* 5.9 Genesis 25:1 ff., Part III; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 30.

³³ *Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis, Hayye Sarah* 5.9 Genesis 25:1 ff., Part III; *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 60.14; *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Genesis and Exodus*, Samuel Berman trans., (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1996), Genesis 5.8, 163.

³⁴ We use Midrash in the sense explained by Kugel: A "non-obvious interpretation [seeking] for hidden implications [that] seemed to solve so many problems in the Bible that otherwise had no solution." James L. Kugel, *How To Read The Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007) pp. 14-15.

- How did Abraham know how to find Ishmael's camp (based on the rabbinic suggestion that Abraham tried to reconcile with Ishmael)?
- How did Isaac and Ishmael know when Abraham died?
- How is it that they both were there to bury him?
- How did Isaac know where Hagar was living that he could bring her to Abraham (based on the rabbinic suggestion that Hagar = Keturah)?

The blended family of Abraham-Sarah-Hagar, and then Abraham-Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael, and finally the blended family made up of Abraham-Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael-Isaac stayed intact for well over fifteen years, and probably close to two decades, as the biblical text explains. Undeniably, there were initial tensions between Sarah and Hagar when Hagar was first pregnant. When, however, Ishmael is born, the two women find a way to make peace. Sarah adopts Ishmael for his role is the heir-child for the Abraham-Sarah household. Everyone understands that Hagar is Ishmael's birth-mother. It is in everyone's self-interest that there is harmony between Ishmael's mothers, and his father, Abraham.

Sarah, reluctantly, but realistically, makes her peace with the situation. It is conceivable that she forms some kind of sisterly bonds with Hagar. They both are married to a man who has visions and acts strangely; he is given to falling into trances (Genesis 15). At age 99, he suddenly speaks about a ritual of circumcision, and he circumcises both himself and Ishmael (Genesis 17). He sometimes communicates with his God, and sometimes argues with his Deity (Genesis 18). Even in their mature years, he tries to claim that he and Sarah are siblings, and not husband and wife. Once again, Abraham tries to pimp Sarah to achieve his goals (Genesis 20).

Statistics suggest that divorce rates are very high among blended families. That the Abraham-Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael household held together in its initial years is a sign that these people were able to compromise for the greater common good.

The birth of Isaac, and the years leading up to his weaning appear to change – and irreparably upset – the balance that had existed. Sarah appears to be saying that she does not wish any “foreign” competition in their household (Hagar was an Egyptian). Further, Sarah appears to be stating that she does not wish any ambiguity about who is to be the true heir for the Abraham-Sarah household. Consequently, in her immortal words, “[Sarah] said to Abraham, ‘Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac’” (Gen. 21:9).

Yet, perhaps what appears to be the surface story is actually a ruse, a play-acting to achieve another end?

Sarah and Hagar share more than a common husband. They share the position of being a mother, and they share a deep commitment to their respective sons.

As noted above, Abraham is given to strange behaviors. Who knows what he will propose next?

It is in their sisterly self-interest to form a close alliance where they will be able to protect themselves, and their sons, against the possible whims of Abraham. After giving the matter great thought, the two women decide that they want to establish their own encampment somewhere else. After due deliberation, they decide that a perfect solution is for the two mothers and their respective sons to decamp and move to the nearby oasis of Beer Leḥai Ro-i. There they will raise their sons. The two boys have bonded, for they only have each other as close relatives of this next generation.

Sarah and Hagar develop a scheme where Hagar and Ishmael will first go to Beer Leḥai Ro-i to establish themselves there. Then Sarah will report to Abraham that Isaac misses Ishmael and Hagar. Next, she will make plans to join the two of them, and reunite the two sons and the two mothers.

When Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, he gives them limited supplies, and no pack animal. Contrast this with Abraham's own journey in Genesis 22, when presumably he will be gone for less than a week. On that occasion, he takes two servants and a donkey. Abraham clearly loves Hagar and Ishmael ("The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.") He would not send them away without proper provisions; unless he was sending them on only a short journey (to nearby Beer Leḥai Ro-i).

Regrettably, Hagar momentarily loses her way in the desert wilderness, and the whole plan is in jeopardy. Fortunately, the Deity is watching over this plan, and through the intervention of an angel rescues Hagar and Ishmael, pointing out the way to the spring, presumably Beer Leḥai Ro-i.

In Genesis 24, when Isaac marries Rebekah, the text states clearly, that "Isaac then brought [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah . . . Isaac loved [Rebekah], and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (Gen. 24:67).

That Isaac took Rebekah into Sarah's tent strongly suggests that Sarah had been living with Isaac (and perhaps Hagar and Ishmael) at Beer Leḥai Ro-i.

This explanation, though conjecture, does provide answers as to Sarah's missing whereabouts for over three decades, why Isaac knows where Hagar is living so that he can bring her to Abraham (i.e. Hagar = Keturah), and how Isaac and Ishmael not only know about Abraham's death, but are able to coordinate their being there together.

What it does not answer is why Sarah died at Kiriath-arba/Hebron. One explanation for that is that at age 127 she was of a goodly age. She senses that her time is near, and so she wants to see some of the sites that she saw early in

her life in Canaan. For a time Abraham and Sarah lived at the neighborhood of the oak trees (terebinths) of Mamre, which are at Hebron (Gen. 13:18). She went there, and died at Hebron.³⁵

Conclusion

With the addition of Hagar to the Sarah-Abraham family unit, a blended family came into being. Following the birth of the additional personages of Ishmael, and then Isaac, the difficulties and potential for misunderstanding and concomitant anger-driven actions grew exponentially.

Abusive behavior preceded Hagar's presence, and would continue irrespective of her being part of the household (namely, Abraham's misrepresentation of his and Sarah's marital relationship in Genesis 12 and 20). That said, Sarah's abusive behavior toward Hagar has the hallmarks of someone who was abused in turn abusing someone else, often a person who has less power in that particular relationship cluster.

Abraham abuses Sarah. Perhaps, Hagar verbally abuses Sarah ("I can get pregnant, and you can not!"). Sarah verbally abuses Abraham (the "wrong done me is your fault!"). Sarah abuses Hagar – whether verbally and/or physically. Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled from the Abrahamic encampment. Though Sarah's reasons are debatable, potentially this is another example of abuse. Abraham is an active and a passive abuser. Certainly he does nothing to prevent abusive acts. On two occasions, he submits to Sarah's request without an argument. In the second case he acquiesces despite being personally distressed (Gen. 21:11).

Blended families are at risk at a greater rate than families who do not have to face those issues. In the Abraham-Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael-Isaac family there are many instances of improper behavior, and "blaming."

The biblical text makes no direct attempt to tie up the loose ends of this familial narrative. Hagar and Ishmael are off somewhere in the wilderness of Paran (Gen. 21:21). After Isaac's weaning, Sarah is missing, until her death. Following the Binding of Isaac, Abraham and Isaac never speak again.

Yet, there are intriguing clues that there was some kind of reconciliation. Ishmael and Isaac are at Abraham's funeral. Isaac lives at Beer Lehai Ro-i. He takes Rebekah into Sarah's tent. Perhaps, as the rabbis suggest, Hagar is Keturah, and Abraham (re-)marries her after Sarah's death. This article suggests that following the problems of this blended patriarchal-matriarchal family, and the

³⁵ For an alternative explanation why Sarah is at Hebron, see David J. Zucker, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Sarah," *Judaism*, Fall/Winter, 2006, 55:3-4, 30-39.

subsequent partings, that at least some of the players were able to reconcile and reconnect, that past their difficulties their respective futures had possibilities.

As noted in the beginning of this article, blended families are now commonplace in society. Because of their nature, their dynamics are more complicated than traditional family configurations. The biblical examples of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, as well as Ishmael and Isaac, separately and together, provide us with living lessons of what might be done – or avoided – to make and keep peace for the greater good of all.