

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS CHAPTER 16.

VERSE TAKEN FROM “THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE.” TRADITIONAL HEBREW TEXT.

16:1...Sarai, Abrah’s wife, had borne him no children.

The Torah repeats that Sarai has not been able to conceive a child to add perspective to the drama that is to follow.

In the ancient world—and in much of the world to this day—it was common for men to divorce their wives when the wife did not bear children. Given how common and accepted that practice was, it is a testament to Abram’s commitment to Sarai and their marriage that he did not divorce her.

16:1 (cont.) ...She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

16:2...And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid.

While the Torah mentions Hagar’s name, Sarai does not. To Sarai, Hagar is merely “my maid,” Her resentment and belittling of Hagar has begun.

SARAI’S WELL-INTENTIONED, BUT BAD, IDEA.

16:2 (cont.) ...perhaps I shall have a son through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request.

According to the Laws of Hammurabi and other ancient Near Eastern legal codes, infertile wives often provided concubines so their husbands could

have children. Those children were considered the wife's children as much as biological children would be.

The concubine was entirely Sarai's idea. We cannot be certain whether Abram was enthusiastic about it but, based on his lack of reaction—he said nothing—one suspects he was not. All we are told is, “And Abram heeded Sarai's request.”

16:3...So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—

As noted, Sarai's suggestion is understandable given that ten years went by without the fulfillment of God's promise.

16:3 (cont.) ...and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine.

The Hebrew word translated here as “concubine” is actually the Hebrew word for “wife.” (Isha) Why this translation uses the word “concubine” is difficult to explain. All other translations—including the previous JPS translation, (1917) the King James Version, and the NIV—translate the word as “wife.” This, of course, renders the relationship among the three—Sarai, Abram, and Hagar—far more emotionally complicated than if Hagar were only a concubine.

16:4...He cohabitated with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.

Hagar suddenly felt superior to Sarai because in the ancient world—and, sadly, much of the world through the modern period—a wife's worth declined if she could not give birth. Ancient Near East documents reveal that even a slave woman who gave birth to her master's child felt superior to a mistress who had not given birth.

16:5...And Sarai said to Abram, “The wrong done to me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!”

Amazingly, Sarai became angry at her husband, even though all he had done was heed her wish. She regretted her suggestion, and she was now angry at Abram for acting on it.

16:6...Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right."

16:6 (cont.) ...Then Sarai treated her harshly,

Abram's response was not impressive. But it was certainly understandable. Most men will do anything to end a wife's anger and try to keep her happy. That is where we get the motto "Happy wife, happy life." And of course, the inverse is equally true: "Unhappy wife, unhappy life." Abram allowed his wife to take control of the situation, hoping that would end her anger.

A more precise translation than "treated her harshly" is "tormented her." The Torah uses the same word to describe the Egyptians mistreatment of the Israelites. (Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 1 :12) In other words, while of course, not morally compared to slavery, the Torah uses the same word to describe an Israelite mistreating an Egyptian as it does to describe the Egyptian mistreatment of the Israelites. The Torah is "ethic-centric, not ethnic-centric.

The Torah does not shy away from describing biblical heroes, including the patriarchs and matriarchs, as flawed people. The same holds true for the traditional Jewish commentators. Two major medieval Jewish commentators, Ramban (Nachmanides—Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270) and Radak (David Kimchi, 1160-1235) wrote that Sarai sinned in dealing cruelly with her Egyptian maid and that Abram sinned in allowing her to do so.

The female Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997) argued that while it was noble of Sarai to offer her handmaid to her husband, she should have thought in advance about how she would react to seeing another woman carrying his child. Leibowitz wisely cautioned that before

people undertake a mission that requires moral and spiritual discipline, they should first make sure they possess moral and spiritual discipline. Otherwise, they are likely to descend from the “pinnacle of altruism” (the selfless concern for the well-being of others) to selfishness, as is evidenced by Sarai’s torment of Hagar.

It is not enough to have good intentions.

16:6 (cont.) ...and she ran away from her.

Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar’s only recourse was to flee to the desert.

GOD CARES ABOUT EVERYONE—NON-JEW AS WELL AS JEW.

16:7...An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur,

The Hebrew word translated here as “angel” (malach) refers to a messenger of God. (Interestingly, the Greek word “angel” also means “messenger.”)

As in the earlier story of Noah—as well as in later stories—the Torah teaches that God cares about non-Jews just as He cares about Jews. Later in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Amos proclaimed: “To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians, declares the Lord. True, I brought Israel up from the Land of Egypt but, also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir.” (Amos 9:7) And the Prophet Isaiah declared: “for the Lord of Hosts will bless them, saying, “Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel.” (Isaiah 19:25)

It is exceedingly rare, unique, among the texts of the world’s religions that other religious and national groups are depicted as equal in God’s (or the god’s) eyes.

16:8...and said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”

16:9...And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.”

HAGAR, AN EGYPTIAN, RECEIVES A UNIQUE GIFT FROM GOD.

16:10...And the angel of the Lord said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring. And they shall be too many to count.”

There is a crucial point to make here: There are many instances in the patriarchal stories where the man is promised a child(ren)/descendants...but Hagar is the only woman in Genesis who is honored with such a revelation. This sets her apart from the matriarchs of Israel. Such is the moral greatness of the Torah and the God of the Torah that a non-Israelite woman received a divine revelation no Israelite woman received.

16:11...The angel of the Lord said to her further, “Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; You shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering.

The name “Ishmael”—from the Hebrew words “shma” (hear) and “el” (God)—means “God hears.”

16:12...He shall be a wild ass of a man; His hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.

In spite of God’s troubling characterization of Ishmael, Hagar was probably pleased to learn that she, a lowly concubine, would give birth to a strong, virile man who would fight others and emerge victorious enough to father many descendants.

16:13...And she called the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-roi,” by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!”

The Hebrew El-Roi is generally translated as “God sees me.” That is in fact what the Hebrew says.

This once again points to the uniqueness of Hagar in the Torah: Hagar actually confers on the deity a name. No other character in the Old Testament, male or female, does that. It is not unusual for mortals to give names to family members, to animals, to sacred sites, but, never to one’s God, with the exception of Hagar.

16:14...Therefore the well was called beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.

16:15...Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael.

16:16...Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.