

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS

GENESIS CHAPTER 21

VERSES TAKEN FROM “THE TANAKH, THE JEWISH BIBLE.”

21:1...The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken.

It is noteworthy that the text does not read, “the Lord did for Abraham and Sarah as He had spoken,” but only “did for Sarah.” The promise of a son, after all, was made to both. If the Torah were as sexist as some modern critics suggest, it likely would have mentioned only Abraham. But the Torah affirms the equal worth of the sexes—from the Creation story (where the woman is the final creation) to the demand that children honor both parents to the depiction of women as heroic—frequently more so than the men in their lives: Rebecca, Moses’s mother Yocheved and sister Miriam, the daughter of Pharaoh, among others.

21:2...Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken.

21:3...Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac.

Abraham named this son Isaac in accordance with God’s prophecy in Genesis 17:19. The name means “laugh,” and it reflects both Abraham’s and Sarah’s initial reaction to the news they would have a baby at their advanced ages. Although the name Isaac (Yitzchak in Hebrew) is common today, it would originally have been highly unusual to call a child “Laugh.” Nonetheless, in modern Hebrew the word still means “he will laugh.”

21:4...And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him.

21:5...Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

21:6...Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

First Sarah laughed when she heard she and Abraham would have a child. (Genesis 18:9-12) Now she laughs at the fact that she really has given birth.

21:7...And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age.”

Though it does not come across in translation, Sarah’s statement in Hebrew reads like a little poem or ditty she has composed.

21:8...The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

Abraham was a wealthy man who could afford to throw a great party in honor of his son’s weaning. Today, parties are often made on the eighth day, at the time of the child’s circumcision. But in the ancient world, with its very high rate of infant mortality, it was only later—at the time of weaning. For example—that parents felt confident the child would survive and would throw a party in the child’s honor.

21:9...Sarah saw the son whom Hagar, the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing.

The word “playing” (mitzachek) is another play on Isaac’s name. Literally, it means “make to laugh.” But it may also mean “mocking” or even have sexual connotations. (as it does when used later to describe the Israelites behavior around the Golden Calf—Exodus 32:6)

At this point, Ishmael was about sixteen years old and Isaac was about two. According to Genesis 16:16, Abraham was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born, and according to Genesis 21:5, Abraham was one hundred when Isaac was born. The brothers are thus fourteen years apart. Since a child is usually weaned at about two, this would make Ishmael about sixteen.

The older brother was probably just trying to amuse his little brother. But for whatever reason—and the following verse certainly offers one possible reason—this scene disturbed Sarah.

21:10...She 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.”

There is no reason to believe Ishmael had done anything wrong. But now that Isaac has survived past the critical age of weaning, Sarah realized he will have competition for his inheritance, and she sought to eliminate it. She succeeded: Genesis 25:5 records at the end of Abraham’s life that “he gave everything he had to Isaac.”

21:11...The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.

This translation downplays Abraham’s internal reaction. The Hebrew does not say “distressed.” It says, “the thing was very bad in his eyes.”

Sarah’s demand must have stunned Abraham. Ishmael was, after all, also his son—a son whom he loved and, furthermore, who was conceived at Sarah’s behest. But she long since regretted her scheme (Genesis 16:4-6) and now wanted both Ishmael and his mother gone. Sarah believed it was beneath her dignity to even mention Ishmael or his mother’s names. That must have further been upsetting Abraham.

There are many things that can produce tension between a husband and a wife. The raising of children is one of the biggest—particularly when they have different mother’s.

21:12...But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued through you.

God’s instruction must have felt like another body-blow to Abraham, already reeling from the callousness of his wife’s demand. According to ancient Rabbi’s, God told Abraham to listen to Sarah because she was right, even though her reasoning was shameful and dishonorable. Though Sarah’s intent was to banish Ishmael to safeguard her son’s inheritance, God nevertheless supported her plan because it coincided with His ultimate purpose. Isaac would carry out Abraham’s mission. It is possible that Sarah was also concerned with Isaac’s divine destiny, since she heard the words of the three angels heralding his birth. (Genesis 18:10)

Still, it is disquieting that she demanded the expulsion of Ishmael and that she phrased her demand solely terms of inheritance.

21:13... As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.”

Though God instructed Abraham to listen to Sarah, God reassured Abraham He would not neglect Ishmael. At the same time, God reinforced His support of Sarah by using precisely the same words Sarah had in referring to Ishmael and Hagar—“son of the slave-woman.” (Verse 10)

21:14...Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water,

A container made of animal skin.

21:14...(Cont.) and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child,

Abraham placed the provisions over Hagar’s, not Ishmael’s shoulder. Given that Ishmael was now sixteen years old, “together with the child” means that Abraham put the child in Hagar’s care, not that Abraham put Ishmael on Hagar’s shoulder.

21:14...(Cont.) and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba.

21:15...When the water was gone from the skin

How is Abraham’s behavior to be explained? He gave Hagar meager supplies—some bread and water—and sent her and their son out into the desert. Shouldn’t Abraham, this wealthy man, have sent Hagar and Ishmael away with far more provisions or at least accompanied by some of the large number of servants and retainers in his camp? (see Genesis 14:14) In retrospect, it would seem so. Perhaps he did not think they needed more provisions or help because of God’s reassurance that He would look after them. And perhaps, given his wife Sarah’s resentment of Hagar and Ishmael, he did not want to seem overly protective of them. Wives have great influence over their husbands—even a husband who communicates directly with God.

21:15...(Cont.) she left the child under one of the bushes,

21:16...and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies."

Hagar's behavior was even more confounding than Abraham's; one would expect a mother to remain with her child if she fears he is dying.

21:16...(Cont.) And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

21:17...God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

Ancient Rabbi's note that both of Abraham's sons were saved from death by an angel's voice from the heavens: Ishmael was saved when he was dying in the wilderness, and Isaac was saved in the next chapter as he lay on the altar. (Genesis 22:12)

21:18...Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

God promised Ishmael will be a great nation but, he does not promise him territory; Abraham's seed was promised both nationhood and territory. Ironically, Ishmael's descendants ended up with far more territory than Isaac's.

21:19...Then God opened up her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

21:20...God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman.

21:21...He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Hagar was Egyptian, so it makes sense she arranged for her son to marry an Egyptian.

21:22...At that time Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything that you do.

21:23...Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my kith and kin but, will deal with me and with the land in which you have sojourned as loyally as I have dealt with you.”

Having experienced both Abraham's dishonesty (about Sarah) and the patriarch's being under the protection of God, Abimelech was well aware Abraham had the upper hand. He therefore sought assurance Abraham would not again use deception or God's protection to take advantage of him.

WE CHOOSE WHEN TO FEEL HURT OR INSULTED.

21:24...And Abraham said, “I swear it.”

Abraham was in no way defensive. He well understood Abimelech's apprehensions. Many lesser people would be insulted if someone made them swear to be honest before engaging in a business dealing.

It is very important in life to know when to feel insulted or hurt and when not to. I have seen people feel insulted when store clerks checked their money to ensure it was not counterfeit. The best way to determine whether one was insulted is to react with one's mind, not one's feelings. If your money is examined, you are not being insulted because you were not unjustly targeted for special inspection. To put it another way, we choose whether to consider ourselves insulted. Abraham chose neither to be hurt or insulted. He knew he had earned Abimelech's mistrust.

21:25...Then Abraham reproached Abimelech for the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized.

For whatever reason, the Torah has said nothing about Abimelech's servants seizing of a well. We first learn of it in this verse.

21:26...But Abimelech said, “I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until today.”

21:27...Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a pact.

THE NUMBER SEVEN.

21:28...Abraham then set seven ewes of the flock by themselves,

The number seven figures prominently in this story, as it does throughout the Torah and in the Book of Genesis in particular.

The seven ewes are one example, as are Abimelech and Abraham's names, each of which is mentioned seven times. Another tie-in of the number seven is the men swearing an oath, (verse 31) which in Hebrew is "sheva," a word having the same root as the Hebrew word for "seven." (sheva) And although the name of the place where they make their oath, Beer-sheba, derives from the Hebrew word for oath, Beer-sheba also means "well number seven."

Seven often signifies completion or perfection. But, more than anything else, seven signifies either God's involvement or remembrance of the seven days of Creation.

21:29...and Abimelech said to Abraham, "What mean these seven ewes which you have set apart?"

21:30...He replied, "You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well."

21:31...Hence that place was called Beer-sheba, for there the two of them swore and oath.

21:32...When they had concluded the pact at Beer-sheba, Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, departed and returned to the land of the Philistines.

21:33...[Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God.

21:34...And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time.