

An Unusual Marriage

(Parashat Vayera)

This *parashah* is a collection of vignettes from the lives of Abraham, Sarah, and Lot. It begins with a mysterious visit by three messengers from God who predict that Sarah, despite her advanced age, will give birth. There follows the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the misfortunes of Abraham's nephew Lot, and a strange incident involving Sarah and the Philistine king Avimelech. Then Sarah gives birth to Isaac and disinherits her son Ishmael, but then Abraham attempts to sacrifice Isaac, only to be thwarted at the last moment by another messenger from God.

Many traditional commentators find Abraham's behavior here problematic. He does, after all, commit serious transgressions of Jewish law: He invites Avimelech to have sex with his wife in exchange for payment, he almost murders his son, and to top it off, when his honored guests come for a meal he serves them *treif*--veal with butter! One could argue that Abraham didn't know about Jewish law, which was only revealed to us centuries later by Moses. However, our tradition regards Abraham, not Moses, as our spiritual father, so this is an issue that is difficult to dismiss.

In fact, to make sense of these stories we must consider them in their historical context. The religious and social traditions of Mesopotamia were a dominant influence throughout the Middle East during the period when these stories were composed, and much information about Mesopotamian religion has come to light in recent decades. My starting point today is an analysis by the contemporary Torah scholar Savina Teubal. Her central idea is that Sarah (and Rebekah and Rachel) were members of a Babylonian religious order. This section of the Torah documents the adventures of Sarah, a priestess who leaves the Babylonian cultural centers to become an itinerant religious officiant in the far west, at the fringes of Mesopotamian culture.

I'd like to focus on the Avimelech incident, Genesis 20:

While he [Abraham] was sojourning in Gerar, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Avimelech, king of Gerar, had Sarah brought to him. But God came to Avimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman."...Then Avimelech summoned Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? What wrong have I done you that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done....[There follows an unconvincing excuse from Abraham, about how she is his sister, sort of.] Avimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham; and he restored his wife Sarah to him....And to Sarah he said, "I herewith give your brother a thousand pieces of silver."... Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Avimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Avimelech because of Sarah....

In last week's *parashah*, *Lekh L'kha*, something similar happened. In response to a famine, Avram and Sarai sojourn in Egypt, and tell people they are brother and sister. "Pharaoh's courtiers saw her [Sarai] and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Avram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she asses, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai." Pharaoh sends for Avram and says to him, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me she was your wife?" [Gn 12:10-18]. This behavior continues as a family tradition. Years later, Rebekah and Isaac move to Gerar and tell people they are siblings. King Avimelech happens to see them fondling and rebukes them: "What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" [Gn 26:10].

These stories should be considered in the context of Mesopotamian religious practice, which, with some local variation, was widespread throughout the Middle East. It was assumed that there are many supernatural deities. These deities can affect people's lives, and often a particular deity will take a special interest in the people of a given nation or city. People can improve their destiny by performing rituals that placate a local deity. An elaborate organization was set up to perform these rituals. Most of the religious functionaries were women, belonging to different ranks, each rank with different responsibilities. The chief priestess was called an *entu*. She was considered to be the human spouse of a local male deity and in urban areas she would serve as head of a

temple dedicated to placating that deity. The entu came from the rank of *naditu*, the highest rank. The naditus, as well as the members of several lower ranks, were required to remain childless. However, the lowest rank, the *šugetu*, were permitted to have children. A temple in a major city could employ on the order of 1000 priestesses of various ranks.

In some areas and periods naditus were allowed to marry a human male, subject to the condition that they not have sexual relations with their husband. A marriage contract would sometimes explicitly include a slavewoman to have sex with the husband and provide the naditu with children to inherit her estate. Sometimes a *šugetu* would serve this purpose instead of a slave.

The most important ritual performed by an entu was the sacred marriage, during which the entu temporarily becomes a goddess and then marries the local king. These elaborate ceremonies, which are described in detail on well-preserved cuneiform tablets, consisted of six stages:

- 1) An introductory song, as the supernatural goddess becomes one with the entu.
- 2) A ritual bath of the entu/goddess.
- 3) Love songs of the king to the goddess and the goddess to the king.
- 4) Consummation of the marriage.
- 5) The pronouncement by the goddess of the destiny of the king and his people.

These ceremonies were very sacred and taken extremely seriously. The following excerpt, from a hymn to the moon goddess Inanna, evokes the spirit of the ritual:

To the one who comes forth from heaven, to the one who comes forth from heaven, I would say: "Hail!"...
To the great lady of heaven, Inanna, I would say: "Hail!"
To the holy torch who fills the heaven,
To the light, Inanna, to her who shines like daylight,
To the great lady of heaven, Inanna, I would say: "Hail!"

[A festive procession is then described, followed by offerings of sheep, fruit, and beer to the goddess.]

On New Year's day, the day of the ritual,
They set up a bed for my lady...
My lady bathes her pure lap.
She bathes for the lap of the king,
She bathes for the lap of Iddin-Dagan,
The pure Inanna washes with soap,
She sprinkles cedar oil on the ground,
The king approaches her pure lap proudly...
Amaushumgalanna the god lies down beside her,
He caresses her pure lap...

[The human king Iddin-Dagan has become one with the god Amaushumgalanna.]

She makes love with him on her bed.
[She says] to Iddin-Dagan, "You are surely my beloved."...
The palace is festive, the king is joyous,
The people spend the day in plenty.
Amaushumgalanna stands in great joy.
May he spend long life on the radiant throne!

[S. J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, pp. 115-118.]

The sacred marriage is performed in response to a calamity, such as a famine or an earthquake, or as a preventative measure to ensure future fruitfulness and fertility. If anything goes wrong, such as a procedural error, or an inadequate sexual performance by the king, the ritual could end with a curse instead of a blessing and

the marriage would be called off.

It seems likely that Sarah's sexual liaisons with Pharaoh and Avimelech are sacred marriages. In the case of Pharaoh, the reason for the ceremony is fear that the famine in the North will spread to Egypt. The wedding gifts are the animals and slaves. The ceremony is botched and the result is a plague. Pharaoh blames the failure on Avram, for not letting it be known that he and Sarai were married. Perhaps Pharaoh suspects that Avram had defiled Sarai with sexual relations rendering her unfit for the sacred marriage, or perhaps the custom in Egypt was for naditus not to have regular husbands.

In the case of Avimelech and Sarah the reason for the ceremony seems to be Avimelech's infertility. Avimelech calls off the ceremony before the sexual consummation after learning in a dream that Sarah's relationship with Abraham disqualifies her. In the case of Rebekah, there is a famine and she goes to Gerar apparently to set up shop as an entu and offer her services to the king. Avimelech makes it very clear that he does not consider her fit for the sacred marriage.

Why did Abraham and Isaac conceal the fact that they were married to naditus? Perhaps in Egypt and Gerar any marriage with a naditu was regarded as a sacred marriage--they did not recognize the institution of profane marriage with a naditu. Abraham's marriage to Sarah would then make him a god in the eyes of Pharaoh and Avimelech. For this reason they treat him with respect. However, Pharaoh, who in Egypt is also considered to be a god, sees Abraham as a threat to his authority and has him forcibly deported. Avimelech, in contrast, asks the god Abraham to intercede for him instead of the goddess Sarah. Abraham obliges, by praying to God (with capital "G"), and Avimelech becomes fertile. Abraham, in defense of concealing his marriage with Sarah, claims his marriage is sanctioned by *his* God, Elohim. He tells Avimelech that he concealed his marriage because אֵין הוּהָ בַמְקוֹם הַזֶּה יִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים [Gn 20:11]; that is, Elohim is not worshiped in this particular locale. In Gerar they recognize the authority of their own local deity whose rules are different from those of Elohim.

So what happens if a naditu gets pregnant? A famous son of a naditu was Sargon I, the military leader who founded the Akkadian empire in the 24th century BCE. An inscription has been found describing his birth:

I am Sargon the mighty king, king of Agade.
My mother was a high-priestess, I did not know my father...
My priestess-mother conceived me, and bore me in secret,
She put me in a basket of rushes, she caulked my lid with bitumen,
She put me into the Euphrates river, which did not rise over me.
Akki the irrigator drew me out as he dipped his pail.

[S. J. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood* (Swallow Press: Athens, Ohio, 1997), p. 108]

(Note the similarity to the legend of Moses.) The usual practice was for the infant to be put to death by exposure to the elements immediately after birth.

This brings us to the birth of Isaac.* It is clear that Sarah and Abraham have begun having sexual relations. Fear of pregnancy would, presumably, deter a naditu from violating her vow of celibacy with her profane husband. Why then did she risk it? The explanation is given in the Torah: חָדַל לְהוֹיֵת לְשָׂרָה אֶרֶךְ כְּנָשִׁים [Gn 18:11]. In other words, Sarah's menstrual periods had ceased--they thought they could now get away with having sex and no one would know. But God knows! When the three messengers tell Sarah she is pregnant with Abraham's child, she laughs. They misinterpret the laughter as her expressing doubt as to the veracity of their prophecy. In fact, it is nervous laughter at the irony of the mess that she and Abraham have gotten themselves into. The Torah tells us she laughed because "she was afraid" [Gn 18:15].

After Isaac is born, Sarah disinherits Ishmael. This is a decisive break with religious tradition. It signifies that Sarah the naditu is now in the service of Elohim, the God of Abraham. The inheritance in question is Sarah's--Abraham has no say in this matter. According to Babylonian law Ishmael is Sarah's legal son, and Isaac is not. It is this disinheritance, which in the context of her culture is a truly audacious act, that causes Jewish religious tradition to split off from Mesopotamian tradition.

* Here my analysis diverges somewhat from Teubal's. Her interpretation relies on various textual emendations while mine is more consistent with Torah text as it was passed down to us.

Seen in this light, the עקרה, the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, is a conservative act, an act that would restore the proper legal and religious status of Sarah and restore the inheritance to her rightful heir Ishmael. Sarah has broken the law by willing her estate to Isaac, who according to the law of the land is illegitimate and should not even exist. She has flouted religious tradition by blatantly violating the sacred vow she made to her Babylonian god when she became a naditu.

The substitution of a ram at the last moment shows that Elohim condones the new order, but does not condone Sarah's act of defying her vow. Implicit in this narrative is the understanding that it is damaging to the order of the universe for someone to break a sacred vow. A sacrifice is necessary as an act of expiation for that sin.

In our tradition an important function served by these ancient stories is to instill in us particular attitudes towards our history and thereby provide us with a concept of our function in the universe. So what messages do these stories of Sarah and Abraham convey? A sense of humility is one implication. We descendants of Isaac owe our existence to an illicit, unplanned, unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, we are being taught that there is something very unusual about the Jewish nation; namely, that in the normal course of history we ought not to exist at all. We exist only because of a last-minute intervention by God. The unstated implication is that in exchange for this intervention we as a nation are forever obligated to serve God. This message is emphasized by the haftarah the Rabbis chose to accompany the reading of the עקרה at Rosh Hashanah, which recounts how the infant Samuel was dedicated by his mother to a lifetime of religious service.

David Goodson, November 2000