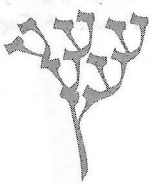
עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



Produced by THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY

MATRIARCHS AND PATRIARCHS

Debra Orenstein

The Book of Genesis addresses the primal and profound questions that children ask: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is this family I have been born into? In the Bible, these questions extend beyond the nuclear family to the primordial origins of humanity and the ancestral origins of our nation and faith. Who are we in the "family of man"? Who are we as a people?

In Genesis, these ideas are framed in the language of two other questions: the first question God ever asked, and the first ques-

tion posed by a being created in God's image. God called out to a guilty Adam, who was trying to hide in the Garden of Eden: "*Ayyeka*—Where are you?" (3:9). Later, Cain asked about Abel, the brother he had murdered: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). Both questions may appear to be rhetorical, but they reverberate throughout Genesis as profoundly serious inquiries. The family narratives serve as a discursive, exploratory, and open-ended response. Matriarchs and patriarchs continually struggle with where they are—in terms of birth order, family and gender roles, spiritual development, the chain of covenantal heritage, and (more literally) locale. Sibling rivalry regularly threatens to turn fratricidal. In the story of Joseph, brothers finally mature to the point of becoming each other's guardians and keepers. Indeed, they come to see such mutual care as the divine plan and the ultimate human purpose (43:8–9, 50:20). Finally, four generations after Abraham, the sons of both Judah and Joseph avoid conflict in the first place and accept their respective roles in the family.

The dilemmas faced by our ancestors communally, as well as personally, endure as struggles and boundary issues. We are still making our peace with Ishmael and his descendants. Within the "immediate family," division over who is a proper heir to the covenant—or, "who is a Jew"—threatens both our genealogic and our religious integrity. The matriarchs and patriarchs favored in-marriage, promoted connection to the Promised Land, and feared the lure of foreign temptations. Physical survival and continuity of heritage—difficult propositions throughout Genesis—absorb us today as well.

The terms "matriarch" and "patriarch" can be variously interpreted. They might well include such guarantors of continuity as Bilhah, Zilpah, Tamar, Judah, and Joseph. The terminology can be confusing, too, because patriarchy, in contemporary usage, refers to a broad institutionalized system of rigid sex roles, through which men retain authority over women. Of course, such a cultural system neither began nor ended with the patriarchs of Genesis. Reclaiming and relating to our male ancestors neither requires nor condones patriarchy.

In this essay and in Jewish tradition generally, the titles "matriarch" and "patriarch" are reserved for the *avot*, key figures of the first three generations: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. These exemplars are valued above all others and are considered the purest representatives of a meritorious ancestry (BT Ber. 16b). Moreover, it is in these first three generations that a single family prepares to become a tribe and a nation. During these years—roughly the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.—it is still debatable who the next rightful heir will and should be. Yet, the covenant is firmly established.

It is significant that there are seven early ancestors, because that number connotes a perfect completion in the Bible. The world was created in seven days, and the *avot*—a whole and perfect set—are said to fulfill, and even to cause, Creation (Lev. R. 36:4). The early chapters of Genesis record false starts and second chances—attempts by God to begin (and begin again) a positive partnership with humanity. Ten generations after Adam and Eve are driven from the Garden, God takes Noah as a new "first" being and initiates the covenant of the rainbow. A parallel 10 generations after the Flood, God chooses and builds a more participatory covenant with Abraham. Several genealogies link the various players in these dramas (5, 10, 11:10–32). Abraham's call marks both closure for Creation and the opening of a new era for the future people Israel and humanity.

Although a "whole and perfect set," our seven famous ancestors certainly had faults and weaknesses. Their development within Genesis can be seen as a template for personal growth; as a study in family dynamics; or, even more broadly, as a paradigm for the nation's history and destiny. Matriarchs and patriarchs represent the promise of a people as well as the fulfillment of Creation.

REPETITION PAINTS A COMPOSITE PICTURE

The themes that run throughout the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs are so often repeated that one could almost conceive a composite couple. The tales of the patriarchs are especially easy to conflate. Exceptions and nuances aside, a patriarch chosen by God finds a wife within the clan, who gives him a special son. The son chosen for succession resembles his father in several crucial respects: He will have a stormy relationship with a brother (or brother figure), leave his father's house, marry a "barren" woman, benefit from divine communication and intercession, retain and gain a firmer foothold in the land he inherits. Possessed of neither firstborn status nor extraordinary merit, he is nevertheless destined to receive the blessing of the firstborn. He may well be called by a new name, indicating a spiritual evolution. The composite patriarch will play favorites among his children, settle disputes with neighbors, build an altar, leave (or have his sons leave) the immediate area in time of famine, trick a man more wealthy and powerful than he, return with even greater wealth to where he started, and receive God's promise of chosen and numerous progeny living in a sacred homeland. God will reiterate this promise, but not (yet) fulfill it. The patriarch will become estranged from family members over the course of his lifetime, and he will heal the breaches—at least to some degree. He will offer blessings to family members, receive God's blessing, and ultimately be a blessing himself.

Even the vocabulary of the stories recurs across the generations. When called to make a change that will initiate a higher calling and connection to God, the patriarchs are told or tell the next generation to "go" (*lekh*) and "take" (*kaḥ*). "Going forth" from one's roots and habits is a necessary step on the road to spiritual growth and independence. According to Hasidic commentary, it enables the patriarch to "go unto himself" (Gen. 12:1)—i.e., his best self. That inner journey prepares him to unite with family and land and to receive God's blessing.

Duplications in language and behavior specifically connect Jacob back to Abraham. Abraham's name is changed upon his circumcision; Jacob's name is changed at the point when he receives a wound on the thigh. Jacob repeatedly refers to the covenant and God of "my father Abraham" as well as "my father Isaac." On their deathbeds, Abraham and Jacob both extract oaths from trusted men for the care of future generations.

The (conflated) matriarch is chosen for a man whom God has chosen. With even greater consistency than her male counterpart, she leaves her father's house and homeland. Probably discovered near a well, she journeys with her husband and serves the mission to which he has been called. The matriarch suffers various trials and tribulations with him, including dangers she must face because of his apparent greed or self-protection, such as when he passes her off as his sister.

Most likely, the woman is barren and prays for children. In response, God blesses her with a son and a divine message about his birth. If the matriarch is fertile, her life still appears to be "barren" with respect to affection and social station. Regardless, she, and the household generally, struggle with procreation and sexuality. Although infertility is the matriarch's ultimate source of grief, motherhood may well be her ultimate source of rivalry and pain. Perhaps because her power is so limited in the male-dominated world, she is fierce in attaining and defending her status as a mother and will compete with other women in this arena. She gains prestige, security, and personal fulfillment by becoming a mother and may well form impressive connections with God along the way. The matriarch exercises significant control over domestic and sexual issues, e.g., assigning a handmaid to her husband, setting the schedule for conjugal relations, dispatching members from the household, naming children.

The matriarch, more than the patriarch, understands and shapes the destiny of their progeny. She plays a major role in managing the transition from one generation to the next,

championing the proper son for inheritance. Her voice is generally in synch with God's voice and often out of synch with that of her husband (Gen. 21:12, 25:23, 31:16). Yet, when God remembers the matriarch, it is for fertility, not covenant. Her ability to bear children secures the covenant for the patriarch. The miraculous birth of a son confers upon the child—not his mother—the status of a divinely chosen leader. In biblical literature and society, the matriarch remains a secondary character, with major ellipses in her biography. Inheritance is neither hers to give nor hers to receive. The primary focus is on brothers' rivalries, male lineage, and God's covenants with and through men.

Literary and psychological patterns cross gender as well as generational lines. For example, while the matriarchal and patriarchal figures prove complex in their own right, they also serve as foils to one another. Sarah is the aggressor on behalf of the passive Isaac; Hagar is helpless and retreats from action in defending her aggressive son, Ishmael. In the next generation, favored sons seem to live out the repressed side of their parents. Isaac's favorite, the outdoorsman Esau, resembles Ishmael and Rebekah more than Isaac. Rebekah's favorite, the domestic Jacob, has his father's temperament. Similarly, Jacob will reject the wife who resembles his youthful self (Leah) and favor her more aggressive sister (Rachel). In an extended struggle toward maturation and balance, he lives out both hyperaggression (25:29ff.) and extreme passivity (34:5–30).

The last scene of the archetypal ancestral marriage is one of silent betrayal regarding a beloved child and prospective heir. Abraham goes off to slay Isaac without speaking to Sarah, whose death is reported just after Abraham returns. Rebekah guides Jacob to make a fool of Isaac and steal Esau's blessing. Dialogues between parents and children move the story forward, but Rebekah and Isaac do not speak until the trick is done—when Rebekah addresses Isaac briefly, gruffly, and for the last time in their lives (27:46). With her dying breath, Rachel names her son *Ben-oni* (son of my suffering, son of my strength). Perhaps Jacob never hears, or perhaps he doesn't listen; he renames the boy *Ben-yamin* (which roughly repeats Rachel's "son of my strength," but ignores her suffering).

Already in the first generation, we are alerted to the significance of repetition, as it is too consistent and relentless to be coincidental. Hagar is driven from the household twice; both Isaac's parents laugh at the thought of his impending birth; and Isaac's name is announced twice. Twice Abraham identifies (or perhaps misidentifies) Sarah as his sister, separates from Lot, encounters Abimelech, enters into covenant with God, is told "get yourself out . . . to a place that I will show you" (12:1, 22:2). Abraham has two potential heirs and is willing to sacrifice both.

Why all the repetition? Recurrent patterns show that the trials and promises we have come to associate with our ancestors were not their individual concerns. This family was passing on a vision and a covenant. In response to that—then and now—certain foibles and resistance typically arise: We laugh (17:17, 18:12), we doubt (28:15 vs. 28:20ff.), we banish others (21:14), we rob them of their blessings (27:19ff.), we act superior (21:10), we offer up human sacrifices (22:10), we favor one heir over another (25:28, 37:3). Victory in Genesis depends on three crucial passages: leaving one's parental home; confronting trials and lessons in the wider world; and returning, a changed person, back to family and land. The final third of that journey is male dominated and directed. Nevertheless, the lives of both the matriarchs and the patriarchs become a paradigm of being and becoming, of how to—and how not to (BT Shab. 10b). As heirs to the covenant and as heirs to Western culture, we owe a debt to these Genesis narratives for the very notion that spiritual maturity has something to do with repeated exposures to a challenge and more to do with noticing and transcending the patterns, than with resolving or escaping the situations.

NOTING THE ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

While it is useful to notice repetition, differences and nuances are also instructive. Variations in a known, archetypal story yield lessons about the uniqueness of a particular matriarch's character, patriarch's mission, or generation's dilemma.

Virtually every action Isaac takes re-enacts some episode from his father's life. Gen. 26:18 can be read as a summary of Isaac's biography: "And Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father, Abraham." Yet Isaac differs from both his father and his son, in that he tends to react, rather than initiate action. In fact, biblical scholars have quipped that—based on commonalties in leadership, risk taking, deception, travel, and aggression—the patriarchs might more accurately be listed as "Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob." Rebekah exercises a degree of power initiative unmatched by the other matriarchs. The contrast between Isaac and Rebekah is more than temperamental. It represents differing approaches to managing a sacred inheritance. Isaac models persistence, even without the allure of innovation or the glory of completion. Rebekah models aggressive and zealous commitment to a divinely approved end.

Social and genealogic developments in Genesis profoundly affect both women's status and the transmission of the covenant. Early on, matrilineal and patrilineal descent are not wholly separable. Abraham and Sarah may actually have been (half-) brother and sister (20:2,12). That would explain why Sarah's genealogy is omitted. (Alternatively, the couple may have been related by means other than blood. Adopting one's wife as a sister was a known way of elevating her status.) Rebekah the matriarch is part of the patriarchal family, being Abraham's grandniece and Isaac's cousin once removed. Laban was Jacob's uncle on his mother's side, living in what was also the land of Jacob's "fathers" (24:38). Yet Paddan-aram comes to be associated exclusively with his mother's house (28:2). Women are allied with Paddan-aram, and men, of a related genealogy, with Canaan. Continuity, kinship, and the Promised Land are general family interests that come to be dominated by men. Despite women's place on the family tree and their role in promoting the proper heir, covenant and blessing are ultimately passed down from father to son.

Disputes over the Land, doubt over succession, and rivalry within the family are recurrent problems. Yet, each generation faces a higher order of the dilemma. For example, Jacob's concern over brutality against his neighbors indicates a far more secure and settled position in the Land than do Abraham's tussles with neighbors over the wells, or his beholden position in bargaining for the cave of Machpelah. The matriarchs and patriarchs face the same questions, more than once, in relation to transmission: Will there be an heir? Which son will be chosen to inherit the covenant? Will the sons make peace with one another? All three questions are relevant in each generation, but the first is dominant for Abraham and Sarah, the second for Isaac and Rebekah, and the third for Jacob, Rachel, and (to a lesser extent) Leah.

Repetition in Genesis is not an endless loop, but an upward spiral. In the first generation of a revolutionary new faith, Abraham must leave his father's house and establish ownership and presence in the Land; in the second generation, Isaac must stake claim to that still-insecure inheritance; in the third generation, Jacob must learn the ways of the world and his own heart, before returning home to greet his brother and father and resettle the Land. In the fourth generation, the family reconciliation is more complete, as Joseph remains in contact with his father and brothers over time. Yet Joseph asserts love and responsibility for his brothers outside Canaan. Genesis is working its way toward complete redemption: peace and communication among siblings united by a covenant and living in their own land. Devora Steinmetz has pointed out that the narrative progresses toward this dream, achieving pieces of the vision without full realization: Genesis—indeed, the entire Torah—ends on the cusp of completion. The text thus invites the reader to continue, and fulfill, the story.

WHERE IS THE FAMILY HEADED?

As rabbinic tradition teaches, beginning with Abraham "the deeds of the ancestors are a sign for the descendants" (*ma·asei avot siman l'vanim*; see Ramban at Gen. 12:6). The patriarchs and matriarchs not only give rise to a nation but also embody it and portend its future. God predicts that the nation will sojourn in a foreign land and emerge with great property. The covenant through which God reveals this to Abraham clearly refers to the exodus from Egypt. At the same time, the terms of that covenant are fulfilled, albeit on a smaller scale, in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—who each leave home, best a wealthy and powerful man, and return with some of his riches. To Abraham, as to the Israelites at Sinai, God declares: "I am the God who took you out" (Gen. 15:7; Exod. 20:2).

Jacob, renamed Israel, is father, namesake, and symbol of the Israelite nation. His children are sometimes textured and complex characters, but they are also eponymous stand-ins for the tribes. The Israelites are called "the people of the God of Abraham" (Ps. 47:10), "the House of Isaac" (Amos 7:16), and most popularly the "Children of Israel." Rachel becomes mother to the entire nation (Jer. 31:14). Procreation from the womb of a "barren" mother represents not just a hope, but a paradigm, for Jerusalem's rebirth (Isa. 54:1–3).

Stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs are linked to the Israelite's national destiny. Like Rebekah and Rachel before her, Zipporah, Moses' wife, is discovered and chosen at a well. Miriam, too, will be associated with wells and water, symbols of women's power to mother, nurture, manage danger, and redeem. Later biblical books regularly invoke God's promises to the patriarchs in relation to the divine covenant with subsequent generations (Exod. 2:24; Lev. 26:42; 2 Kings 13:23). We now take it for granted that the covenant made at Sinai is one with the covenant established with the patriarchs. Deuteronomy, in particular, makes that link.

The Midrash further connects the ancestral family with subsequent generations. Abraham was understood to have observed all the commandments, even though the revelation at Sinai would happen centuries later (BT Yoma 28b). Similarly, Sarah and Rebekah are said to have practiced extraordinary hospitality, set dough aside during baking, and enjoyed the distinction of a holy cloud above their tent; in these ways, the matriarchs both presaged and modeled conventions that would govern the Tabernacle and Temple (Gen. R. 60:16).

An important principle that motivates our continuing connection to the ancestors is *z'khut avot,* their merit. In deference to the merit of matriarchs and patriarchs, we were delivered from Egypt (Exod. 2:24), forgiveness was granted for building a Golden Calf (BT Shab. 30a), and our sins are pardoned on the Day of Atonement (PdRE 29).

Avot can be translated as "ancestors" or, using a gender-specific reading, as "fathers" or "patriarchs." In relation to ancestral merit, it is probable that "fathers" was generally meant, because Rabbinic sources also attribute God's mercy on later generations to *z'khut imahot,* the merit of the mothers. However, Hebrew grammar permits us to interpret most texts about *avot* as inclusive of *imahot,* in that one male among myriad women will alter the feminine plural to the masculine. Where the context is ambiguous, counting matriarchs among the *avot* has the effect of enfranchising women and reading them into the texts and tales of our ancestors. For that reason, many feminists prefer to call all the ancestors *avot,* rather than distinguishing Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel as *imahot.* Traditional liturgy sometimes invokes mothers along with fathers, e.g., in relation to healing and the birth of baby girls. Following a responsum by the CJLS, many Conservative synagogues have added the matriarchs to the *Avot* blessing in the *Amidah.*

THE LIVING HERITAGE

Using our earliest ancestors as models in liturgy and ritual communicates essential values, even as it connects us intimately with our past. This process began within the Bible itself. In the Book of Ruth, Boaz is blessed: "May the

LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel" (4:11). In a prewedding ritual still practiced today, we invoke Leah, Rachel, and Rebekah. As the groom veils the bride (making sure he is getting the correct sister!), he quotes the bridal blessing given to Rebekah: "may you grow into thousands and myriads" (Gen. 24:60). Today, as in the ancient world, we wish our daughters progeny and power. At the Friday night dinner table, parents bless their daughters: "May you be like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah." To their sons they say, "May you be like Ephraim and Manasseh."

By using scripture and its characters as a guide for contemporary living, we create an interchange between a fixed text and the changing, subjective contexts in which it is read. Reading ourselves backward into biblical text and our ancestors forward into contemporary situations is nothing new. During the time of the Crusades, Isaac, bound to the altar, became not only a hero but a tragic role model as well. For the philosopher Maimonides, Abraham exemplified the highest level of faith because he used reason to verify God's existence. Today, feminists read the experience of the matriarchs in light of the women's movement.

From a purely historical point of view, "our God and God of our ancestors" should be rendered as two different phrases and ideas—separated by time, experience, and theology. Yet, however we re-engage and reinterpret God and scripture over time, our relationship to them and to ourselves is influenced and nurtured by the *avot* of old. In the words of Isaiah, "Look back to Abraham your father / And to Sarah who brought you forth" (51:2).