

Avraham's Treatment of Women

Avram's relationship with the women in his life is not an easy one. Fearing for his life he presents Sara, his wife and life partner as his sister because in ancient society wives were dispensable and disposable but blood relatives took priority. He puts her in a very difficult position yet she out of loyalty and love, does as he asks. Was he right? Does life always trump deception?

Sara is barren. At her suggestion, he takes her maid servant Hagar to bed in order to have a child. It sounds strange to us and indeed heartbreaking for Sara. But it was common practice then to have slaves act as 'surrogates' for their mistresses. Just as nowadays 'renting a womb' often results in unforeseen complications, so it was then. Hagar tries to parlay her fertility into power and challenges Sara's position. Sara feels humiliated and helpless. She asks Avram to intervene but he shirks his responsibility and leaves her to sort it out. Sara asserts her authority. Hagar resents it and runs away. But she encounters a dose of reality and returns to her subservient role.

Avram will continue to be dogged by the clash between his affection for Hagar, his love for her son Ishmael and yet at the same time his greater loyalty and love for his wife Sara. The situation remains unresolved. Even at the end he is unable to discuss the command to sacrifice Isaac with her.

Very often in our lives we experience conflicting interests as between parents and children, husbands and wives. We often fail to communicate properly. Often there is no easy answer. Sometimes we reconcile them. Sometimes we don't. Life is indeed a constant struggle. The narrative of the Torah teaches us what the true values should be but recognize the fact that we don't often succeed. The message is clear. If even the greatest of our forefathers could fail to find the right balance all the time, so do we. Still, like them we must try to be honest with ourselves and persevere. We have to try to understand the other side too.

The Torah is concerned with humanity in all its greatness and its limitations.