

No Sir, She is not my Wife. She is my Sister

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah repeats three times with variations, a narrative twice about Sarah and once of Rivkah being taken into a King's harem because their husbands say they were sisters not wives.

The first time, in Genesis Chapter 12, tells how Avram and his entourage had to go down to Egypt because of a famine. He fears that there, they will kill him for his beautiful wife, Sarai, so he asks her to say that she is his sister. Sure enough, she is taken into Pharaoh's palace, and Pharaoh enriches Avram in return. God intervenes and plagues Pharaoh's household. Pharaoh discovers indirectly that Sarai is Avram's wife. He calls in Avram, accuses him of misleading him, and kicks them all out of his realm, but not without enriching him!

One can take this at face value. Avram should have relied on God to see the events safely through to a satisfactory conclusion. He was, after all, promised that he would be blessed and by implication protected. But this was another one of his ten trials or tests. Faith in God does not immunize one from earthly troubles. Commentators emphasize the fact that saving life overrides most other concerns (though not adultery of course) and even perhaps that Avram could take nothing for granted and had to try and defend himself by whatever means possible in a pre-Sinaitic, morally corrupt world.

And of course, one might wonder at what a close call it was, since Sarai was actually moved into the harem and Pharaoh himself said he was about to marry her. Feminists of course will be scandalized at Avram's treatment of Sarai even if he did beg her to agree. If one delves back into the cultures of the times, one will know that taking other peoples' wives was a common transaction, often a sign of hospitality. Whereas family members of a person one was in alliance with, were treated with great respect.

The story is repeated with greater detail in Chapter 20, except this time in Philistinia with a local boss called Avimelech. God intervenes directly with Avimelech in the middle of the night and warns him off! Avimelech protests his innocence to God and then rebukes Avraham) for assuming that Avimelech's regime was as bad as all the others and one in which such things could happen. Avraham excuses himself and says, anyway, Sarah was his half-sister. But it all ends well, and Avraham is allowed to stay and prosper.

Consider the nuances. Pharaoh somehow guessed the true story, or perhaps, as with the later Pharaoh of Joseph's era, he used his magicians. Whereas God appears to Avimelech in a dream (and to Avraham when he is awake). Pharaoh kicks Avraham out, whereas Avimelech invites him to stay. Avimelech vaunts his country's standards and morality, whereas Pharaoh is simply concerned with being misled. Avimelech uses similar language to Avraham when he appeals

to God's mercy in his plea to save the men of Sodom.

These two narratives become even more problematic to the rationalist, because of a third event a generation later recorded in Genesis Chapter 26. This too takes place in Philistinia with a king called Avimelech, but this time it's with Yitzchak and Rivkah. It's the same story, told more tersely. Avimelech finds out because he actually observes intimacy between Yitzchak and Rivkah.

We might argue that in an idol-worshipping, corrupt Middle East, this sort of thing was likely to happen often, certainly to nomads entering the territory of a strongman. It's not unlike the idea of the Droit De Seigneur, that a monarch or duke had the right to sleep with a girl living in his realm before she married. Women were often expendable in those days. Wives were often pawns, bought and sold or bartered or used in political alliances, much less powerful than sisters of important men. This fact is confirmed by excavations in Tel el-Amarna. One needs much more archaeological evidence to flesh out the true nature of what happened, and at this distance one can really only guess. And why should guesswork be any more reliable than a text?

Modern scholars might ask whether this could be one event that different traditions recorded differently or orally and the compiler of the final text chose to insert all versions. One reply to that might be that if there was an editor, he certainly did a pretty poor job. The name Avimelech could be a title used by lots of kings, as indeed the generic term Pharaoh was. And perhaps this is all a polemic to show how bad Egyptian society was compared to others, to explain the exodus. Perhaps the core message is that there are different ways of discovering the truth. Just as there are different ways of interacting with other cultures, and surviving.

In truth, to look at an ancient text through modern eyes is a risky business. We have no way of knowing for certain either the context or the intention 3000 years ago. The traditionalists' position has some merit. Take the text at face value, and examine it to see what moral or spiritual lessons can be learnt from the variations in it. Everything in the text has a didactic purpose, so be positive and look for what lies beneath the surface, rather than trying to recreate the process of transmission.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a fundamentalist viewpoint. I am a fundamentalist in the way that I regard the text as a holy text and relate to it more spiritually than rationally. That is my choice. But I do not deny that there are other ways of looking at the text. The fundamentalism I dissociate myself from is the one that says that there is only one way and all others are either wrong or valueless. I might say that I value one way over all others, but I would not say there is no merit in any of the rest altogether. So, whether it was three separate events or one, the text (to follow Jacques Derrida) is all we've got. Some of us accept it. Others dismiss it. I would argue that we should treat it with reverence and try to find a message and relevance in the light of our own experiences.