

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Sarah: Our Matriarch of Faith

The nation of Israel traces its roots to exceptional men and women who had an eternal influence on generations. We refer to them as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The *Talmud*, Judaism's oral tradition, states: "There are only three Patriarchs and only four Matriarchs," referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. These four Matriarchs, or *imahot* (אמהות) in Hebrew, are recognized as co-founders of Israel along with their respective husbands.

But what makes a mother a Matriarch? After all, there were six mothers, not four, who produced the twelve tribes of Israel. Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, bore two sons to Jacob. Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, bore two sons to Jacob as well. These four sons are equally a part of the twelve tribes of Israel as the other eight born to Leah and Rachel. So why aren't Zilpah and Bilhah considered Matriarchs as well?

When we speak about our Matriarchs, we are not speaking about biological mothers; we are referring to our *spiritual* mothers. This distinction is critical in understanding the role that the Matriarchs filled in their lifetimes as well as how they affect us today.

There is an axiom in Judaism that says: "What happened to the forefathers (and mothers) is a sign of what will occur to their children." The life of each Patriarch and Matriarch echoes throughout history. Moreover, their godly contributions created profound spiritual potential for every one of us.

Sarah *Imeinu*, Sarah our mother, was the first of the Matriarchs. Even though she spent only 37 years as an actual mother to her only son, Isaac, she spent a lifetime serving as the spiritual mother to many and to all Israel forever. She is the Matriarch of all the other Matriarchs, perhaps the most important woman in history.

In reminding the exiled Israelites of their spiritual heritage, the prophet Isaiah spoke these words from God, "Look to the

rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth" (Isaiah 51:1-2).

Yet, who was Sarah really? How well do we know her? In addition, what can we learn from her?

In this month's *Limmud*, we will study Sarah's life in-depth and gain a greater understanding of this monumental figure in both the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Sarah was born in the epicentre of culture and advancement, Ur of the Chaldeans, the most progressive and educated society in the world at that time. However, the people were also idolaters, steeped in falsehood and immorality. We often speak about how Abraham, also born in Ur, was able to see through the façade of his society and grasp the great truth that there was One True God.

How did Sarah come to know God? Jewish tradition teaches that Sarah was born a prophet. She had a profound relationship with God from the very beginning of her life.

When Sarah followed Abraham into the wilderness, she wasn't just a dutiful wife following her husband; she was a woman of great faith following God into the great unknown. In all their journeys, Abraham and Sarah pitched their tent together and taught people about faith in God.

Sarah had unique challenges in her lifetime. Despite being barren until age 90, Sarah remained steadfast in her faith, unwilling to give into the doubts and disappointments that certainly must have plagued her. She would not relinquish her faith under any circumstance, and in doing so made it possible for each of us to do the same.

It is my hope and prayer that through this study, you will be encouraged in your faith and be inspired to persevere in whatever challenges may come your way.

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"I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

— Genesis 17:16





The journey to Canaan.

A Faithful Partner

He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

— Genesis 12:5

There are two “mothers” of the entire world. The first is Eve, the biological mother who gave life to every human being. The second is Sarah, the first of the Matriarchs, who gave spiritual life to humanity.

As a young girl, Sarah’s name was *Yiska*, which means “to gaze” or “to see.” This was because Sarah, according to Jewish tradition, was one of the four most beautiful women to ever live (the other three being Rahab, Abigail, and Esther). People would gaze at her astounding beauty, and we see this referenced in Abraham’s apprehension for his wife when the two fled to Egypt during a famine (Genesis 12:11-13).

However, there is another reason for the name *Yiska*. According to the *Talmud*, Sarah was considered a prophet at a young age, connecting to God at the deepest level. Although never called a prophet in the Bible, like Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21) or Deborah (Judges 4:4-5), Sarah was considered one in Jewish tradition because it was said that she was blessed with divine inspiration, or insight.

We often speak about how Abraham forged a connection with the One True God despite the idolatrous society in which he lived. According to Jewish tradition, Sarah, too, believed in God and developed a relationship of her own. In fact, when God told Abraham in Genesis 21:12, “Listen to whatever Sarah tells you,” Jewish scholars say that was because Sarah was an even greater prophet than Abraham!

When we first encounter Sarah in the Bible, her name is *Sarai* (Genesis 11:29). Abram called his wife *Sarai*, which means “my princess,” because he saw her not as an object of beauty, but as a woman to be honored and respected. In ancient times, women had no rights, little respect, and were largely perceived as less than their male counterparts. In this way, Sarah’s relationship with Abraham was completely revolutionary. The two were partners in every way — partners in faith and in teaching faith.

Scripture tells us that God instructed Abraham to leave his country and to go “to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Subsequently, we read: “He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there” (Genesis 12:5).

At first glance, it seems that Sarah is a passive player in this bold move. Yet a closer look reveals that Abraham and

Sarah were on a joint mission. The verse mentions that the couple took with them “the people they had acquired in Harran . . .” A more literal translation of the original Hebrew reads “the souls they *made* in Harran,” prompting the Jewish sages to explain that these were the people that Abraham and Sarah brought close to God.

When God told Abraham to step out in faith with his followers, he did so together with his wife and partner who had played an equal role in acquiring those followers. Sarah and Abraham were a team, bound by love and mutual respect.

The words of Proverbs 12:4, “A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown,” are attributed to Sarah, implying that she played a major role in Abraham’s success.

Sarah was the paradigm of a faithful wife who herself was full of faith. Her faith led her to play a critical role in the joint mission that she shared with Abraham. Instead of taking a back seat, she stood up, stood out, and made a lasting impression on all humankind.

think about it...

1. What spiritual lessons and values did you receive from your parents? What one lesson would you want to pass on to others?
2. Sarah waited decades for God’s promise of a child to come to fruition. What promise from God are you waiting to happen? How might Sarah’s faithful waiting encourage you?
3. For 2,000 years, like Sarah, the Jewish people waited for the fulfillment of God’s promise to return His people to Israel. They never gave up and never stopped praying for this promise to be fulfilled – and it was. What biblical promises have you seen fulfilled in your lifetime? How does that deepen your faith?
4. What aspect of Sarah’s life has encouraged you the most? Share that with someone you know who is in need of encouragement today.
5. The Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, is closely related to the word *emunim*, which means “training” in Hebrew. From this we learn that faith must be practiced. How can you “practice” your faith each day?



Living in Faith

Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

— Genesis 11:30

Of all the challenges of faith that Sarah encountered in her life – from following God to an unknown land, to being kidnapped not once, but twice by foreign kings because of her great beauty – the most challenging was being childless.

In a world in which childbearing was considered a badge of honour and barrenness a sign of divine disfavour, Sarah was a failure. She carried the additional burden of knowing that God had promised both Abraham and herself that together they would create a great nation through their offspring. Yet, as the years went on, it seemed impossible that God's promise would be fulfilled.

In fact, one of the first things we learn about Sarah is her inability to have children. In many of the translations, we read, *“Now Sarai was barren; she had no child”* (ESV). In considering why this fact about being barren is repeated, the Jewish sages teach that Sarah not only was beyond childbearing age (Genesis 18:11), but she also had no womb. They taught it was physically impossible for Sarah to have a child.

And yet, God had promised. So Sarah believed Him.

How did Sarah manage all those painful, difficult years? We find the answer in Habakkuk 2:4, *“... but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”* It was Sarah's deep and unshakable faith that kept her hopeful all those years. Sarah lived her faith daily, and her faith breathed life into her.

On the basis of her faith, Sarah was included in the Christian Bible's great roll call of heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews: *“And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise”* (Hebrews 11:11). All that faith, all those prayers that Sarah poured out to God, created a spiritual potential for all her offspring. That faith is in our veins, in our DNA, and in our souls, gifted to us by Sarah.

However, Sarah's faith journey was not without its detours and mistakes. About 50 years into marriage, still childless, Sarah had an idea. She reasoned that perhaps God intended for her to be the *spiritual* mother of the nation, not the *biological* mother. In this manner, she offered her handmaid, Hagar, to become a second wife to Abraham. It couldn't have been an easy decision. But with a firm belief that this was God's plan for Abraham to be the father of a great nation, Sarah took this painful, fateful step.

Of course, Sarah's plan was a disaster. It was clear that she would not be able to raise Hagar's son Ishmael to be the heir to Abraham and her legacy. She knew immediately that she had made a mistake after Hagar had become pregnant and began insulting Sarah (Genesis 16:4-5). Sarah's plot may have been unsuccessful, but her faith stood strong.

When Sarah was 89, God changed Sarah's name – and her life – completely. *“God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her’”* (Genesis 17:15-16).

In changing her name from *Sarai*, meaning “my princess,” to Sarah, which means “the princess of all (nations),” God reaffirmed His promise to Sarah, and the miraculous happened. She would, in fact, give birth to the child who would carry on the promises given to Abraham to future generations.

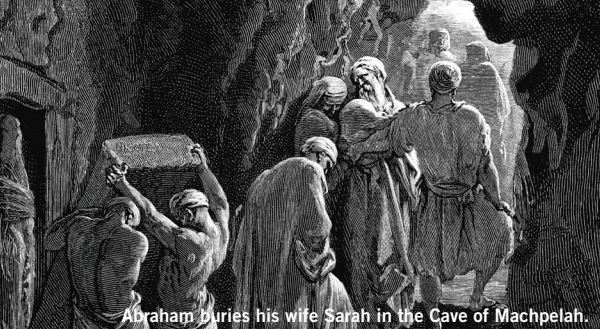
At ages of 100 and 90 respectively, Abraham and Sarah, at long last, had a son named Isaac, meaning “laughter” or “joy.” Sarah's faith gave way to Sarah's joy.

Yet even as the promise of a child came to pass, the faith that Sarah had developed through the decades remained – both as a lasting resource for her and as a legacy for all her descendants.

apply it...continued on page 4

- 1. ENCOURAGE OTHERS.** Faith is contagious! Think of a time in your life when you overcame a challenge through faith. Share your story with others. (Psalm 40:10; Acts 20:20, 27)
- 2. LET FAITH GUIDE YOU.** During these uncertain times in our world and in our lives, cling to your faith in God, as Abraham and Sarah did. Trust He is guiding you. (Proverbs 3:5-6; John 16:13)
- 3. REACH OUT TO A PERSON IN NEED.** Just as Sarah was a spiritual mother to many, think of how you can serve as a spiritual mentor to someone you know. (Psalm 34:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)

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Abraham buries his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah.

A Lasting Legacy

Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old.

— Genesis 23:1

Sarah passed away at the age of 127. Curiously, the section in the *Torah* that relates Sarah's death, the purchase of her burial site at the Cave of Machpelah, and the search for a wife for Isaac, is called *Chayei Sarah*, which means "the life of Sarah." This seems strange since this portion of Scripture deals not with Sarah's life, but her death, and then the life of Isaac.

The Jewish sages explain that when a righteous person has passed on, it is considered as though that person is still alive. The good deeds that the person did in his or her lifetime remain, a lasting legacy to all generations, thereby perpetuating the "life" of the deceased.

Sarah's life goal was to have a son who would continue the work she and Abraham began of bringing worship of the One True God and spreading godliness throughout the world. There is no greater testament to the life of Sarah than her son, Isaac, and his wife Rebekah.

The Jewish oral tradition, which Jesus would have been taught in the synagogue, teaches that while Sarah was alive, three miracles were always present in her tent. First, her Sabbath candles remained lit from one Sabbath eve to the next. Second, there was a blessing in the dough of her bread. Third, a divine cloud continually rested over her tent. These were all signs of the godliness that Sarah brought into her home, into her life, and into the lives of others.

These three elements were later mirrored in the Tabernacle and the Temple as the lampstand (Leviticus 24:3-4), the bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:30), and the Cloud of Glory, representing God's presence (Exodus 40:34-35).

When Sarah died, the three miracles disappeared. However, when Rebekah married Isaac and moved into Sarah's tent, all three miracles returned, signalling that Isaac and Rebekah were worthy successors of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah's life goal had been achieved. The torch had been passed successfully to the next generation.

Sarah's lifetime of faith led to her son Isaac, to his son Jacob, to his 12 sons, to the tribes of Israel, and to the many nations and "*kings of peoples*" that God had promised her (Genesis 17:16). In his study on Sarah, Christian author John Foster wrote, "Through faith, Sarah received the miracle of being able to conceive a child in her old age, and she bore to Abraham a son of promise, Isaac. She became the mother of many nations

"Through faith, Sarah received the miracle of being able to conceive a child in her old age, and she bore to Abraham a son of promise, Isaac. She became the mother of many nations and the mother of a royal line of kings . . . a mother of heirs of the promises given by God to Abraham."

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Despite the many disappointments, obstacles, mistakes, and miscues, Sarah's faith in God never waned. While others may become jaded or bitter through a lifetime of difficulties, Sarah remained ever confident that all was for the best. As a small child trusts a parent unquestionably, Sarah continued to have faith in her Father in Heaven until her very last breath.

Sarah's quiet beauty, her steadfast loyalty and obedience to her husband, Abraham, have served as models for women throughout the ages. In the Christian Bible, the apostle Peter advised women to follow Sarah's example in how she honoured Abraham (1 Peter 3:6).

Inner beauty, partnership, godliness, and obedience – all undergirded with a steadfast faith in the One True God of Israel. These are the legacies for us today from Sarah, our true spiritual Matriarch.

apply it...continued from page 3

- 4. BELIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE.** When Sarah wondered if she could indeed give birth to a child at the age of 90, God responded: "*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*" (Genesis 18:14). Believe that anything is possible with God. (Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:26)
- 5. BE PATIENT.** Sometimes our prayers are answered immediately; sometimes, we must wait years, even decades. As we learn from Sarah, never give up and never stop praying. (Isaiah 40:31; Luke 18:1)