BS”D

Parshas Lech Lecha 5774

The Quest of Avraham and Sarah for a Child

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

Avraham and Sarah are getting on in years and still have no children. Sarah tells her husband to marry her maidservant Hagar because “perhaps I will have a son through her.”

What does this mean? Rashi, as well as many other commentaries, explain that Sarah was saying, In the merit of my giving you Hagar, I too, may have a son.

The Radak explains that Hagar’s son would be considered as if he were Sarah’s. He would be sort of a foster or surrogate son.

It seems to me that according to this interpretation Sarah had just about given up on having a child of her own. (She was 75 or 76 years old at this time.) At least she could have a foster son through Hagar, and Avraham would have an heir.

The story of Avraham and Sarah’s desire to have children is discussed by the Akeidas Yitzchok.

Before proceeding with his interpretation, I would like to explain something about this work. The author, Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, lived in Spain in the late 1400’s (C.E.). He explained the Torah in an in-depth manner which took into consideration the philosophical concepts of his time. He was well versed in Talmudic learning and in Kabbalah, both of which are often referenced in his work. But what makes his work unique is its integration of philosophy into the stories and laws of the Torah. In the comments that I’m going to discuss, the Akeidah explains the stages of Avraham and Sarah’s growth in awareness of Hashem throughout their lives. A more traditional approach would not agree with this assessment. It would see Avraham and Sarah on a very high spiritual level from the beginning of the Torah’s story. I personally subscribe to that view. Nevertheless, the Akeida’s interpretation explains many details of our story in an original and consistent manner and can teach us much. What follows is based on his interpretation:

The sages say that Noach walked with G-d, but Avraham walked in front of Him. Noach believed in G-d because of the tradition he received from his righteous ancestors. Avraham had been cut off from that tradition. After all, his parents were idolaters. But, by the force of his intellect, he concluded that there was a G-d, a creator and master of the universe.

Now Avraham did not come to a perfect level suddenly. He progressed step-by-step in stages. First, he believed in the creator and discussed and debated this with the people of his generation. After he experienced the miraculous deliverance from Nimrod’s furnace, he saw that at least in certain situations, G-d intervenes in the world. He still was not convinced that Divine Providence extended into the smaller details of life. When he was confronted with difficult situations, he exerted great effort to extricate himself rather than rely on Hashem for help. For example, when there was a famine, the rational thing to do was to go to Egypt. To escape possibly being murdered over his wife, he and Sarah pretended to be brother and sister. All of this shows that at this stage of his development, Avraham felt he was on his own and couldn’t count on G-d’s help.

Avraham made altars which he used to propagate his faith in G-d, but we do not find at this stage that he prayed. He still was not aware that one could address his personal needs to G-d. (In contrast, we find Jacob praying, both when he left his parents and when he set out on the return journey.) Even when G-d said that he would receive great reward, Avraham merely asked what’s the point of a reward if I have no children. He didn’t actually *pray* for children.

But then Avraham grew. When G-d told him he would have children, he believed. He believed that G-d’s providence extended to the details of life. He believed that fate could be overridden by G-d’s intervention.

Avraham continued to grow. G-d made the covenant of circumcision with him. Now Avraham began to pray. He prayed for the people of Sodom. He prayed for Avimelech, the king of Gerar.

Avraham was constantly being tested. The tests were actually the vehicle of his spiritual growth. He finally reached the highest level at the test of the sacrifice of Yitzchok.

Let’s turn now to the incidents in our parsha with Sarah giving Hagar to Avraham and afterwards to Hashem’s promise to Avraham that he would have a son from Sarah.

Sarah had indeed given up hope of having a child of her own. She did not feel Hashem would intervene miraculously so that she would bear a child. She didn’t even pray for it. All she wanted was to at least have a foster son who would be her husband’s heir.

Years passed. At age 99, Hashem instructed Avraham to undergo the covenant of circumcision. It was time for Avraham to rise in the level of his faith, to go beyond the natural and rational and to experience the Divine intervention. “I am G-d, Sha-dai, walk before Me and be whole.” The name Sha-dai represents G-d’s overturning fate and nature. Accept this fact, Hashem says to Avraham, and then you will be whole.

When Avraham was told that Sarah would have a child, Avraham laughed. He said to himself, can a 100-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman have a child?

The commentators asked, how come when Avraham laughed, he was not rebuked, but when Sarah laughed upon being informed she would have a child, she was rebuked? They answer that Avraham was not doubting; he was laughing joyously. But Sarah doubted.

The Akeidah says that Avraham too doubted. G-d saved his rebuke for afterward to Sarah, but Avraham was included in the reprimand.

However, we should not look harshly at Avraham and Sarah. This was a hurdle they had to clear in their growth. They struggled mightily with the notion of G-d’s miraculous intervention. That struggle must be respected. Both of them emerged from the struggle with a deeper and profounder faith in a personal G-d who hears our prayers and who, if He chooses to do so, can change our lives miraculously.

Whether we view the lives of Avraham and Sarah as evolving in religious consciousness or whether we interpret the story in a more traditional manner, one thing is sure:

Our great patriarch and matriarch did not stay the same for all of their lives. Their knowledge and relationship to G-d was always growing. We must learn from them. Many of us were born into religious families or have been religious for many years. We can easily go through life observing all of the Mitzvos and studying Torah, but not really growing. We must go deeper into ourselves and deeper into our connection with G-d. We must cultivate prayer as a means of feeling closer to G-d. We must study not only the “practical” parts of Torah, but also those parts of Torah that open our minds and hearts to the A-lmighty.

If the great Avraham and Sarah grew closer and closer to G-d as their years went on, then we, their descendants, no matter how small we are in comparison to them, must do likewise.