

**Sarah Blau**

### **Sarah the Matriarch**

Historical, mythological, and religious figures can often be highly influential in our lives, as role models, or as part of cultural, spiritual, or mental DNA.

I am a religious, modern orthodox Jew. The Bible (Old Testament) has always been present in my life. Biblical characters accompanied me from my childhood until today.

I was always interested in the four biblical matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. They were married to the three biblical fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob had two wives, which at the time, must have made the lives of men easier, but I'm not sure if the same was true for the women (the last comment is related to a feminist reading of the Bible, which has been developing in the past few years, both in a religious and secular world, in Israel, and elsewhere).

But the character who has influenced me most is Sarah, the first Hebrew matriarch. In the Jewish tradition, she is seen as strong and iron-fisted but is also considered a difficult person. I feel she was misunderstood, and I'd like to correct this injustice here, in front of you, by offering a new perspective on her character.

A personal note before we dive in: my name is Sarah. I am named after my grandfather's mother, who died of a lung infection at 27, and also after his daughter, Sarah, who was murdered in Auschwitz, when she was five. It was not easy growing up in the shadow of these two family members. But I actually find the darkest shadow to be that of the biblical Sarai.

Sarai was Abraham's niece. She married him at a young age (some say twelve), and they set off for a long journey in the desert. Her barrenness is what defined her status for many years. During the biblical period, barren women were considered to have the lowest social status. If a woman hadn't given birth to at least one child, she hadn't earned her bread. She was a burden.

As a barren woman, Sarai's life was tough. But she deeply desired to have a child, so she devised a plan that was reasonable for the time: Sarai planned for Abraham, and their servant, Hagar, to have a child together, and for her, to be his mother.

It was a good plan, but it did not succeed.

First of all, from the moment Hagar became pregnant, she began teasing Sarai. There are plenty of Talmudic stories showing that Hagar spoke ill of Sarai. But Sarai did not remain indebted. She fought back until Hagar was forced to flee to the desert. That is where the perception of Sarai as a tough, ruthless figure crystallizes (and unfortunately, I can't do much to defend her). But eventually, Hagar returns home to Abraham. And to Sarai.

When Ishmael, Abraham and Hagar's son, is born—In front of Sarai's hungry eyes—a new family unit comes into existence, that of Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar. Sarai is left out.

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What choice does she have, besides praying to God?

God hears her prayers, and in a special ceremony, he changes her name, adding the letter “h.”

On a personal level, twenty years ago, I changed the spelling of my name, just like Sarah. I added an extra “h” to my name. I was in a very depressive period and needed a change. In the Bible, Sarah gets pregnant shortly after her name change. In my case, the change I was searching, was not pregnancy, but after I added the extra h, I felt something shifting inside me. I don’t know if it was a miracle or some kind of psychological awakening—but whatever it was, it worked.

In the Bible, when God tells Sarah that she will have a child (via three angels who stop by for a visit), she is in such a state of disbelief that she bursts out laughing. In Jewish tradition, this laughter is considered an expression of disbelief. But I believe Sarah. I believe that she laughed out of surprise, pure joy, and belief.

Even today, the Jewish tradition continues to view this laugh in a negative light, as part of the ambivalence associated with Sarah’s character, but I see it differently. I support Sarah.

Today, men are not the only ones who get to interpret the Bible—women can do so as well. Women tell these stories through a feminist lens.

The story of the “Life of Sarah” was the weekly Torah portion, read exactly one week ago in synagogues. Ironically, the portion begins with Sarah’s death.

The portion describes how Abraham came to her house for a visit—which suggests they no longer lived together. Sarah may have died alone. But I still hear her laughter ringing in my ears, vibrating through time, the millennia, and countless generations.

I wish that ancient history had written about happy, laughing, cheerful women. New feminist readings of the canonical texts like the New Testament, Quran, ancient Asiatic texts allow us to reimagine the women of those time periods and interpret their stories in new ways.

I’d like to say “thank you” to our matriarch Sarah’s laughter, and to her, she who overcame so many challenges, whose figure survived, through the rise and fall, of civilizations, until today.

Thank you, Sarah.