

Even so, Abimelech's insistence that an oath be taken not to deal falsely with him or his people (v. 23) will remind some readers of the earlier interaction between the leaders.

The lessons learned from leadership mishaps—whether one's own or those of a predecessor—form part of the web of what should inform all leaders: truth, principle, and purpose. Certainly, Abraham and Sarah modelled not only stellar leadership but growth in leadership.

As our country moves on in the aftermath of such a difficult and divisive presidential election season—a time requiring a special sense of unity among our citizenry—may we be witnesses to true and steadfast leadership and the ability of our political leaders to learn from past mistakes. Only then, in this sweet land, will liberty and freedom ring.

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## Lessons on Leadership from Abraham and Sarah

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*Sarah Imenu*, matriarch of the Jewish people, is a rich and complex biblical character. As we read this week of her demise and her husband's quest for her rightful resting place, it seems fitting to reflect on her extraordinary life, her role in the creation of the Jewish people, and the model of leadership she, together with Abraham, bequeathed to us as a legacy.

Sarah is, perhaps, the first woman we encounter in the Bible whose humanity and personality shine through in the text. She is physically beautiful, even drawing the attention of kings. She is wise; God instructs Abraham to heed her words. She is selfless, a barren woman giving her handmaid to her husband so that he may have progeny. She is jealous, enraged by that same handmaid's ability to birth a son. And, finally, she is passionate, sexually active even at an advanced age.

As if the literal meaning of the Torah's text did not provide enough details about Sarah's qualities, in their midrashim, the talmudic Rabbis broaden our view of her and deepen our awareness of her contributions to public life. Baffled by her barrenness, for example, one rabbinic opinion flies in the face of the literal meaning of the text to assert that not she, but rather Abraham was sterile! Another rabbinic approach contends that along with Abraham, Sarah spread monotheism among the pagans and was charged with converting the women. In short, both the biblical and rabbinic traditions are full of appreciation and admiration for this "first lady of Israel." Indeed, as her name connotes, Sarah is the first female royal of Israel—in Hebrew her name means "princess," and if based on the Akkadian *sharratu*, "queen" (Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Commentary*).

Among all the characterizations of Sarah, I would like to highlight one description that contemporary readers find unusual, if not perplexing: the notion that she was both Abraham's wife and sister. While travelling in the Negev with Sarah, Abraham claimed not once, but twice [!] that she was his sister and according to one account, Sarah herself said, "he is my brother" (Gen. 20:5). It was feared that if it were known Abraham was her husband, he might be killed by one of Sarah's admirers. Indeed, under the assumption that Sarah was not married, King Abimelech of Gerar had Sarah brought to him. Only when God appeared to Abimelech in a dream and accused him of abducting a married woman—an act which if followed by cohabitation was punishable by death—did Abimelech realize the truth. Abimelech confronted Abraham, accusing the couple of being untruthful and nearly bringing tragedy upon the king and his people. Abraham defended himself and his wife saying that Sarah was, in fact, his sister, even if only through one shared parent.

Much has been written on this incident, with some Bible scholars focusing on the trickery and deceit in which Abraham and Sarah took part. Were Abraham and Sarah being completely honest with Abimelech? Was such an act by the "first couple" of Israel appropriate behavior? In the following, I would like to address the question, "what does it mean to be a wife and sister?" To answer this, I will offer a possible historical and cultural context that deepens our understanding of why Sarah's status as wife and sister of Abraham is so important to her position as a leader. Sometimes examining the unstated presumptions of a biblical narrative results in an interpretation that can enlighten.

We can understand the wife-sister motif in our narrative in relation to the practice in some parts of the ancient near east where a man would, at times, marry a woman and simultaneously adopt her as a sister. Under this arrangement, with the juridical status of a sister, a married woman had greater protection and rights. As one scholar emphasizes, this might hark back to a cultural web of practices in which brothers were expected to be responsible for sisters. And, certainly, a half-sister married to her half-brother, as in our story, would have enjoyed the same benefits. Some have argued that the arrangement was primarily among the upper crust and royalty, which would attest to the power and position that our biblical couple may have enjoyed. Such a social status would have been appropriate to emphasize in the presence of King Abimelech.

While the biblical text does not share these details of the wife-sister status, it adds an important dimension to the narrative. As the meaning of her name and her status as a wife-sister would suggest, Sarah too was a focal figure in contributing to Israelite religion's humble beginnings. As appropriate for her time and place, with her pedigree, position and protection in hand, she—together with Abraham—faithfully brought their joint message of monotheism, the mission of God in heaven who would bring freedom, salvation, and eternal truth to the world. To paraphrase one great scholar, the purity of the content was protected by the quality of its container. Through Sarah, the very human, beautiful, courageous, regal, and strategic spouse of Judaism's first "president," the message of monotheism's truth spread and sounded in the land of milk and honey and beyond. But what of the trickery with Abimelech? Was this not a stain on the first couple's legacy of leadership?

The confrontation between Abraham, Sarah, and King Abimelech potentially marks a pivotal stage in the development of Abraham and Sarah's leadership, an opportunity from which the couple learns important lessons for leadership. As the tradition intimates (see above), the couple eventually grew into the appropriate leadership qualities that became their legacy. In describing the next encounter with Abimelech, the acquisition of the well at Beer Sheva (Gen. 21:22–34), the Torah uses the ambiguous phrase *ba'et ha-hi*, "at that time," to open the story of Abraham's meeting and pact with the king. The great medieval French commentator Rashbam (grandson of Rashi) explains that the phrase here refers to the time of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. Against the simple meaning of the text, Rashbam comments that the couple came together to meet Abimelech and acquire their first property in the promised land. Isaac's miraculous birth to his mother at such an advanced age provided the optimal opportunity to approach the king who was, seemingly, aware of the extraordinary event.

In contrast to the earlier misleading encounter with Abimelech, the verses here describe a sophisticated, open, and diplomatic negotiation for the acquisition of the well. There is no evasiveness in dealing with royalty and Abimelech is even reproached because his servants prevented Abraham and Sarah's herds from free access to water. It is not without intention that verse 22 specifically refers to Abimelech without his royal title, intimating that he and the other party were now equals. With their previous ways behind them, Abraham and Sarah entered a new and mature phase of their leadership.