

## Who Was Abraham's Last Wife?

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Parashat Hayyei Sarah focuses on the devoted relationships between two of our patriarchs and two of our matriarchs. We begin by reading of how Abraham strove to fully acquire the land for Sarah's burial. We then see that Abraham wanted to find a fitting wife for his son, Isaac. Abraham's servant brings back Rebecca, and she and Isaac begin a partnership which seems supportive and loving—as soon as Isaac and Rebecca meet, we read that Isaac loves Rebecca and finds comfort in her after his mother's death (Gen. 24:67). In both accounts, we see that each of these pairs was specifically well-matched. Why, then, does the parshah end by saying, "And again, Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah" (Gen. 25:1)? Who was this additional wife, Keturah, and why do we read about her in the context of the loving relationships of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebecca? Is Keturah introduced simply to transmit information about Abraham's genealogy, or does her presence signify something deeper?

Biblical commentators make two main claims about the identity of Keturah. One claim is that Keturah is, in fact, Hagar, who is brought back into Abraham's life after being sent away earlier in Genesis. Here, she has a new name, which could symbolize a few different aspects of her character arc. Genesis Rabbah, an early work of midrash, explains:

"And her name was Keturah"—Rav said: This is Hagar. Rabbi Neḥemya said to him . . . "But is it not written, 'and her name was Keturah'?" [Rav] said to him: "That is because she was perfumed [*mekuteret*] with mitzvot and good deeds."

(Genesis Rabbah 61:4)

Hagar is renamed Keturah due to her numerous good deeds, which surround her like perfume. Perhaps this describes how Hagar repented from idolatry, and her good deeds rose up to God like the incense [*ketorah*] that would later rise from the altar. Rashi, however, cites the next section of Genesis Rabbah, addressing the other meaning of *keturah*, which means "closed" or "bound." Genesis Rabbah states that after she was sent away from his household, Hagar "closed her opening," remaining celibate until Abraham took her back as a wife (61:4). Although Rashi approaches her name from a different linguistic angle and adds another detail to Hagar's life in the intervening years, he agrees that Keturah is the new name of Hagar.

On the other hand, commentators like Ibn Ezra and Rashbam say that Keturah is not Hagar. The name is not meant to tell us anything about Hagar's transformation, but to simply mark a new person in the story. The verse starts with the verb "*vayosef*," meaning that Abraham added "an additional" wife, not that he remarried a previous wife. The book of Jubilees, an apocryphal book likely composed in the 2nd century BCE, describes Abraham's marriage as follows: "And Abraham took to himself a third wife, and her name was Keturah, from among the daughters of his household servants, for Hagar had died before Sarah" (19:13). Jubilees states explicitly that Keturah is a third woman, distinct both from Hagar and Sarah, both of whom have already passed away.

Whether Keturah is really just Keturah or a new iteration of Hagar, why is it important for us to learn that she married Abraham after Sarah died, and after Isaac married Rebecca? Genesis Rabbah uses this verse to emphasize our responsibility to have children, even at an old age (61:2–3). Additional commentators on the verse, including Chizkuni, explain that we read about Abraham's additional marriage

only *after* Isaac married Rebecca; this instructs us that parents who are widows should first secure the marriage of their children before finding themselves a partner.

Beyond teaching us how an older parent may remarry and continue to have children, I see Abraham's marriage to Keturah as another way Parashat Hayyei Sarah emphasizes the unique marriages of our patriarchs and matriarchs. Although Abraham marries again, Keturah's children are later called the "offspring of concubines" (Gen. 25:6, 1 Chronicles 1:32). Her offspring are given mere gifts upon Abraham's death, not an inheritance. Keturah's inclusion in the narrative serves to further emphasize how special Sarah was to Abraham, and how the line of the Israelite family was continued through Sarah's son, and through Isaac's marriage with Rebecca. Even if Keturah is really Hagar, a woman who remained chaste and committed to God, her actions do not merit the continuation of Israel through her offspring.

If the Torah had not included Abraham's marriage to Keturah, we would still know that Sarah's child is the one to carry on the Israelite family. However, including Keturah and her children provides a backdrop against which Abraham's relationship with Sarah stands out even more. There was another woman in Abraham's life—maybe multiple women—and he had many more children who might have inherited his legacy. The fact that Isaac is the sole inheritor out of a whole group of Abraham's children highlights Isaac's singularity. It is a testament to the unique and devoted connection between Abraham and Sarah; it is a fitting close to a parashah which begins with Abraham devoting himself to Sarah's burial, and to finding a good match for Isaac.