

## RABBI YOSEF LIPOVITZ'S SARAH

Shakespeare said, "The evil that men do lives after them/But the good is oft interred with the bones." But *Hazal* said, "It is unnecessary to make memorials for *tzaddikim*. Their words speak for themselves."

There are few memorials to be made for Rabbi Yosef Zev Lipovitz, since so little is known about this hidden pietist, a disciple of the Musar movement. There are few memorials that need to be made for Rabbi Lipovitz, since his words are taut, luminous, and penetrating.

Rabbi Lipovitz was born near Bialistock in 1889 and died in Tel Aviv in 1962. Educated in the Slobodka Yeshiva, he studied at the University of Berlin, then emigrated to Palestine in 1924. There, he taught Talmud for a few years in Hebrew (an innovation then). Poor health forced him to retire from teaching. He and his wife opened a small inn ("*pension*") in Tel Aviv, where he shared Torah thoughts with his customers. He also spoke in Tel Aviv synagogues and oversaw the finances of the Ponavitch Yeshiva on a voluntary basis.

After some years he was "discovered" by Rabbi Haim Zev Finkel, learned grandson of the Elder of Slobodka, under whom Rabbi Lipovitz had studied in his youth. A small, diverse coterie of admirers, ranging from skilled laborers to Talmud scholars, gathered around Rabbi Lipovitz to hear his lectures. His range of intellectual interests was wide. His one work published during his lifetime was a commentary on the *Scroll of Ruth*. Three posthumously published volumes, all under the title *Nahalat Yosef*, reveal abiding textual interests in Tanach, agadah and midrash, with a particular emphasis on individual portraiture, as well as theoretical interests in political theory, philosophy of history, prayer, and other fields.

The excerpt printed here reflects his textual interests. It is a portrait of Sarah our Mother, taken from *Nahalat Yosef al ha-Torah* (1972), pp. 100–104. I have translated the essay (slightly condensing it), I–III; offered a brief exegesis, IV; and provided sources. In the translation, there are three interpolations, printed in italics. The first interpolated paragraph is my distinction; the rest constitute my understanding of Rabbi Lipovitz's elliptical presentation.

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RABBI YOSEF ZEV LIPOVITZ'S SARAH

*I. Sarah's Activity: Self-conquest*

“And Sarai, wife of Abraham, took her maidservant Hagar the Egyptian . . . and gave her to Abraham her husband for a wife.”

Let us ascribe greatness to this pure and clean soul—to Sarah our Mother—as she conquered her feelings. Here she is, most of her life is gone and she is childless, nor has her husband sired children. Pious, she acknowledges the fault is hers. Her husband has been promised continuity at the “covenant between the pieces,” and if she cannot provide this continuity, perhaps another woman can. She hopes that through the merit of conquering her feelings—giving another woman to her husband—God will reciprocate in kind. She hopes that as she shows *hesed* to her husband, God will show *hesed* to her—He will render Sarah fruitful (“perhaps I shall be built from Hagar”).

So Sarah did what she did.

What is the essence of what she did? In making her maidservant Abraham's wife, Sarah made Hagar her equal, as if Hagar were on her own spiritual level. To understand the significance of Sarah's act, it is necessary to penetrate the psychological depths of women generally and of a noble woman like Sarah particularly. Sarah was a queen, luxuriating in all the honor the world could offer. She was the wife of “the Prince of God in our midst.” Yet, she gathered her inner strength, compromised her unique station, and sponsored a rival whom she created as such.

She apportioned from the splendor of her royalty to Hagar.

The greatness of Abraham also projects itself between the lines of this episode. Here *he* is, a giant in his greatness, the luminary of the world, yearning for children. But he is cut off and barren. He pours out his soul before God: “What could you possibly give me while I am barren?” Barrenness is a hard punishment for severe transgressions. Has he really been punished as such? he wonders. After all, God promised that the chosen people would derive specifically from *him*; the promise was not tied to Sarah. Perhaps God intended him to bear a child through another woman. Why should he not marry one? But he cannot. He is worried about Sarah's feelings, is ready to sacrifice everything for her. Then, Sarah herself offers him another wife.

What could be better?

Abraham should rejoice in his heart, or at least balance his pity for Sarah with his happiness over the new opportunity. Yet, as Torah records, he merely “listened to the voice of Sarai.” He went along with *her* instructions and *her* initiative, remaining emotionally unresponsive to the new opportunity. He did not free himself of his feelings of pain for Sarah, and he accepted Hagar just to please Sarah.

In the end we know what happened. “And her mistress [Sarah] became insignificant in her [Hagar’s] eyes” [Hagar mocked Sarah obscenely]. Sarah was constrained to lodge this complaint against Abraham: “You are to blame, *hamasi alekha*” [literally, *the injustice being perpetrated against me is on your account*]. This is the burden of Sarah’s complaint: When a person should speak out in defense of someone who is suffering and oppressed, and does not do so, he becomes an oppressor too. Thus Rashi explains Sarah’s complaint against Abraham: “*You withhold your words of defense of me—you ‘rob’ me by your silence—for you learned of my being degraded but kept silent.*” You did violence to my rights. You obligated yourself to defend them—to seek my honor—and therefore to speak out. With your silence you oppress.

Sarah’s readiness for self-conquest, self-sacrifice, was genuine, but she could not restrain herself in the face of Hagar’s vulgar behavior. She was like a wealthy king who gives liberally to charity. He is kind-hearted, but in business he will not relinquish a single penny. He will contest the smallest sum. How so? His liberal giving springs from within. Just as it is his “I” that gives, it is his “I” that is not prepared to be exploited or coerced in the slightest. It is easier to give than to give in.

We cannot grasp the soul powers of an exalted figure such as Sarah our Mother; still, the Torah sets forth the subtlest lineaments of her character (and of all the great personalities in *Tanakh*) to teach us the depths of the human soul, hewn from matter. Metaphorically, we may explain Sarah to have said: I may be able to bring myself to give in with respect to my honor and station, but when Hagar comes to strip them by force, this is violence. This is oppression.

“And so Sarai oppressed Hagar” to reassert her lordship.

## II. Sarah’s Misjudgement

“And Sarai oppressed.”

Nachmanides (Ramban) comments: “By oppressing Hagar, Sarah sinned. So did Abraham in allowing Sarah to act this way. God responded to Hagar’s being oppressed by giving her a *pere’ adam*, a ‘wild-ass of a man’ whose oppression of the seed of Abraham and Sarah would be multifaceted.”

The greatness of Nachmanides, making such a frightening comment! Nachmanides’s was a clear Torah perception. He peered into the verse at hand and perceived our long, sad history. Our teachers (*Hazal* and *rishonim*) were like angels in their contemplation of Torah through a clear lens (*ispaklaryah ha-me’irah*). They saw how every letter of the Torah was like a shining star in the world of the Holy One, Blessed Be He—a star lifting fog and darkness from the wide horizon of history. Just two words, *Sarai oppressed*, and already Nachmanides knows why we

suffer—why we are made to suffer—justly at the hands of our oppressors, the “sons of Ishmael.” Ramban perceives and accepts the Divine judgement.

It would have been appropriate for Sarah to make do with a strong rebuke of Hagar, not to oppress her. Hagar, to be sure, was hardly free of guilt (“*Sarah became insignificant in her eyes*”), but Sarah’s response was excessive—and God plays no favorites. He forgets no injustice, no matter how slight, done to any of his creatures.

Look how great the traits of kindness and mercy are in the Divine Torah. It would seem that every nation of the world would be won over to this verse (“*Sarai oppressed*”) and to the others like it, all the way to the worst punishments enumerated for Jewish disobedience (“*your wives will become widows*”). They all teach how God stands at the right side of the weak, the persecuted, the down-and-out, and punishes their oppressors.

Whence did Nachmanides learn this?

Perhaps from the narrative’s continuation, as an angel of God announces to Hagar, “God has listened to your oppression.” Heaven heeded the anger in her heart. The Higher Law ruled that indeed there had been some measure of oppression, injustice, worthy of punishment. The narrative contains the angel of Heaven’s words to “Hagar, maidservant of Sarai.” The point is that although Hagar was a servant, this was to her credit. Seforno explains: “You [Hagar] have come from a holy place, a house of *tzaddikim*, while you are going to an impure place, to wicked people.” The angel advises, “return to your mistress [Sarai]—let her oppress you.” It is worth it. It is for your own good. Your own happiness.

With all this the angel confirms that injustice was done. “God has listened to your oppression.”

For this oppression Hagar was rewarded with Ishmael, who, by his very name (“God will hear”), symbolizes the entire sequence of events. Ishmael and his seed are called forever by the name of a certain injustice done to their matriarch Hagar in the household of Abraham our Father. Again, we have proof of the severity of Divine judgement for oppression of the down-and-out.

### III. Sarah’s Receptivity

“*Sarai*” connotes *my lord, my mistress*.

“*Sarah*” connotes “*mistress of the entire world*.”

Sarai was the name of the *wife* of Abraham—not of the “companion” of Abraham, certainly not of his “servant.” Rather, “*Sarai*”: my lord, my mistress. This is how the Jewish nation relates to its wives—as masters. Our sages warned man to love his wife as his own body, and to honor her even more than his own body. *Sarai*: this is how Abraham related to his wife.

However, God summoned her to be “Sarah,” mistress of all the nations (“kings of nations will come from her”). Hearing this, Abraham was content to say, “let Ishmael live before You.” Rashi explains Abraham’s thinking: “I am not worthy of such a reward [as a child from Sarah; let Ishmael suffice].”

Shall we say that Abraham did not desire to bear a child from Sarah?

The answer is provided through an incident in the Talmud concerning a man whose wife had died. After her death, the man miraculously nursed their infant and kept him alive. The Talmud demonstrates how miniscule the merits of such a man are, since nature had to be changed on his behalf. “With wisdom, God founded nature”: Nature is wisdom; miracle is outside wisdom. Man should aspire to the spiritual level on which nature need not be miraculously changed for him. When man needs a miracle and receives it, his merits are diminished thereby. If he needs extra oxygen and receives it, it is a sign that he is very ill. Abraham desired no such spiritual sign, no change of nature on his behalf. “I am content with Ishmael.”

*Miracle that is needed indicates its recipient’s low spiritual level. Hence, Abraham strove not to need a miracle. Miracle that is not needed, but bestowed nonetheless, indicates its recipient’s high spiritual level. Hence, Sarah accepted her miracles receptively.*

[Even though Abraham desired no change of nature that would have Sarah yield him a child,] Abraham said, “let Ishmael live before You,” that is, “*in fear of You.*” Abraham was content with Ishmael, but not with Ishmael as he was. Abraham wanted Ishmael to “live” in the sense that God means by that term. God’s understanding of “life” and “death” are contained in this Talmudic statement: “The evil, while alive, are called dead.” To humanity, the evil person lives so long as he is capable of oppressing others and executing his designs; to God, he is already like a carcass, though he is strong. Abraham beseeched, “let Ishmael live before You.” *Real life.* The life of piety, of fear of God.

*When Sarah passed from being Sarai, Abraham’s master, to Sarah, mistress of the world, she relinquished her status as Abraham’s master. In acquiring her new name and power, she relinquished her old name and power. She stopped making requests of Abraham to help her overcome her infertility. She stopped being active.*

*It was now for Abraham to stop being active—to stop making requests of God to establish Ishmael as his heir. It was for Abraham not to be Sarah’s master; it was for both Abraham and Sarah to submit to God. Sarah saw this first because God upset her plan first; He rejected her scheme to earn the merit of bearing Abraham’s heir as a reward for taking Hagar into her household. God now made it clear to Abraham that his own plan—reforming Ishmael—also would not work. To Abraham’s plea, “let Ishmael live before You—God responded: “But Sarah your your wife will bear you a son . . . and I shall establish my covenant with him.”*

The chosen and holy nation, the nation of God, will spring only from Abraham and Sarah—from Isaac.

Not from Abraham and Hagar.

Not from Ishmael.

True, God will bless Ishmael (“I shall make him *fruitful*”), but not cut a covenant with him. Ishmael will father a *large* nation, but not *one* nation (“who is like unto Your people, one nation on earth?”).

The Patriarchs discovered and propagated the oneness of God. Through Jacob’s truth, Abraham’s kindness, and Isaac’s awe, the footstool of God was prepared on this earth. Through them the creation of the Jewish people was made ready—the one people, belonging to the One and Unique.

*In designating a son of Abraham and Sarah for the exclusive role of transmitting the teaching of God’s oneness, God made his sovereignty to Abraham and Sarah known. In rejecting their own plans for securing an heir, God made them understand the necessity of accepting His intervention—the necessity of receptivity, of restoring needed balance to their active pursuit of God.*

Thus says Isaiah: “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah your creator, because I have called him one and blessed and multiplied him.”

#### IV.

*I have called him one.*

One: the nature of God.

One: the critical adjective in Judaism.

One: Abraham, and, by extension, Sarah.

As a consequence of Hashem calling Abraham and Sarah one, Hashem blessed and multiplied them.

What is the meaning of this oneness? How does it sum up Rabbi Lipovitz’s presentation on Sarah?

The meaning of oneness, in Hashem or his people, is this:

The Jewish nation is told to look to Abraham as “father” and to Sarah as “creator” *because* Hashem called him one. Their oneness *derives* from their being father and creator of the Jewish nation.

Which they became, in part, *because* they saw the futility of their own schemes for bearing an heir; because they gave up their own ideas about insuring continuity.

Because Sarah’s idea of giving Hagar to Abraham, and Abraham’s idea of making Ishmael his heir, were unworkable.

Because, in other words, both Abraham and Sarah realized that active reaching out to Hashem was insufficient.

Activity in *kedushah* must include receptivity: submission before Hashem.

Ultimately, there is no balance between activity and receptivity in *kedushah*, since there is no balance between Hashem and humanity. Hashem is supreme. Human initiative must ultimately give way before Hashem. As a path to *kedushah*, human activity must be prepared to be corrected or rejected by Hashem.

This was the greatness of Sarah. Actively reaching out to Hashem, she could hear a contrary message. She did not get caught up in spiritual success and lose humility. For a person with her intensity of spiritual success, humility was no small thing. Successfully active in bringing women “under the wings of the Divine presence”; successfully active in retaining her fear of Heaven for 127 years; successfully receptive to miracles from Hashem; Sarah never took her *kedushah* for granted.

She was able to hear a contrary message.

She became the “creator” of the Jewish people because she changed her approach when Hashem made her failure with Hagar apparent. She became “Sarah,” mistress of the universe, when she saw that activity must always acknowledge Hashem’s control.

Likewise, Abraham became “father” of the Jewish people when he heard a contrary message—when he acknowledged Hashem’s unwillingness to make Ishmael his heir.

Sarah and Abraham became one when they submitted to Hashem fully.

Such is the meaning of oneness: Hashem in His rulership, Abraham and Sarah in their submission.

In this, their oneness is the root cause of *kedushah*, extending to and embracing the entire Jewish people, unto all generations—*who is like unto Your people, one nation on earth?*

## SOURCES

Rabbi Yosef Zev Lipovitz was born in 1889 in Trastina (near Bialistock), and died in 1962—8 Nisan, 5722—in Tel Aviv. Biography: Hillel Goldberg, “Between Berlin and Slobodka: The Life and Writings of Rabbi Yosef Zev Lipovitz,” *Tradition* (Summer, 1986) (this article includes translations of a few of Rabbi Lipovitz’s writings); *idem*, *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures from Eastern Europe* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1989), Chapter 7, and bibliography there.

### *I. Sarah’s Activity*

“And Sarai, wife of Abraham”: Genesis 16:3.

Abraham promised continuity in the “covenant between the pieces” (*brit ben ha-betarim*): Genesis 15:4.

“Perhaps I shall be built from Hagar”: Genesis 16:2.

“Prince of God in our midst”: Genesis 23:6.

“What could you possibly give me?”: Genesis 15:2.

God’s promise tied to Abraham: Genesis 15:4.

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Sarah offers another wife: Genesis 16:2.

“And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai”: Genesis 16:2.

“And her mistress became insignificant in her eyes”: Genesis 16:4. Rashi comments that Hagar mocked Sarah obscenely: “Hagar said: This woman Sarai is a hypocrite. She fancies herself a righteous woman, but she is not. She could not conceive with Abraham all these years, while I conceived with him the first night!”

“*Hamasi alekha*”: Rashi’s on Genesis 16:5. “The injustice being perpetrated against me”: Rashi’s first comment. “You withhold your words of defesne of me”: Rashi’s second comment.

“And Sarai oppressed her”: Genesis 16:6.

### II. Sarah’s Misjudgement

Nachmanides: Genesis 16:6. Chavel cites the *Tosefta* as constituting an objection to Nachmanides’s startling comment, but then defends Nachmanides by citing the *Zohar* as constituting a defense of Nachmanides, and notes that Radak follows Nachmanides. See Chaim Dov Chavel, *Perushei ha-Torah le-Ramban* (Jerusalem, 1962), vol. 1, note on Genesis 16:6, p. 97.

*Ispaklaryah ha-mei’rah*: The meaning of this term and Rabbi Lipovitz’s use of it spur a separate terminological and theological discussion, too large for inclusion here, with which I deal in the second volume of *The Fire Within* (New York: Mesorah, 1991).

“Your wives will become widows”: Exodus 22:23.

“God has listened to your oppression”: Genesis 16:11.

“Hagar, maidservant of Sarai”: Genesis 16:8.

Seforno: Genesis 16:8.

### III. Sarah’s Receptivity

Sarai becomes Sarah: Genesis 17:15.

“Kings of nations will come from her”: Genesis 17:16.

“Let Ishmael live before You”: Genesis 17:18.

“I am not worthy of such a reward”: Rashi on Genesis 17:18. Rabbi Lipovitz reads Rashi to mean: “I am not worthy of such a reward as a child from Sarah. Let Ishmael suffice.” But note that *Siftei Hakhamim* reads Rashi in an opposite way: “Not that Abraham was not desirous of *besorat Yitzhak*.”

“Let Ishmael live before You,” that is, “in fear of You”: Rashi on Genesis 17:18.

Incident in the Talmud: *Shabbat* 53b.

“Miracle that is needed”: This is my distinction.

“With wisdom, God founded nature”: Proverbs 3:19.

“The evil, while alive, are called dead”: *Berakhot* 18b.

“When Sarah passed”: This is my understanding of Rabbi Lipovitz’s elliptical presentation.

“But Sarah your wife will bear you a son”: Genesis 17:19.

“And I shall make him fruitful”: Genesis 17:20.

“Who is like unto you, one nation on earth”: I Chronicles 17:21 (cf. II Samuel 7:23); Jewish prayer book, *Shemoneh Esrei*, *Shabbat minhah*.

“In designating”: This is my understanding of Rabbi Lipovitz’s elliptical presentation.

“Look to Abraham your father”: Isaiah 51:2.