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# Today's Torah

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## Mother's Day

## May 10, 2020 | 16 Iyar 5780

**By: Rabbi Gail Labovitz**
**Professor, Rabbinic Studies**
**Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies**
**American Jewish University**

## The Merit of our Mothers

Quick quiz: Who was the first Jew?

Be honest – was the name that popped into your head “Abraham”?

Certainly, when one reads the biblical account in Genesis, beginning in Chapter 12:1 when God commands Abram (who will later be renamed Abraham) "*Lekh l'kha*" – "Go forth," as it is translated in *Etz Hayim* (p. 71) – it can seem that way. And yet, the rabbis recognized that Abraham was not alone in this task. Of course, according to the biblical account, Abraham did not go forth by himself; in v. 5 we read, "Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot…" But then it adds an interesting detail: "and all the souls they acquired in Haran…" In Hebrew, the word translated here as "they acquired" is "*asu*," which derives from the root *a.s.h.* – a root that usually means "made." How does one "make" a soul? Can a human being create a soul? And so the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 39:14) comments:

> Rather, these are converts… And why [does the text say] "that they made"? Rather, it is to teach you that anyone who brings a stranger close [to God], it is as if one created [that person]… And why [does the text say] "that *they* made" (in the plural)? Rabbi Hunya said: Abraham converted the men, and Sarah the women.

Or in other words, Sarah (even when she was still known as Sarai) was very much a partner in Abraham's endeavor, and in commitment to the one God. As the commentary in *Etz Hayim* notes, "Although the women of Genesis seem to play a minor role in what are presented as patriarchal narratives, we find the Midrash pointing to the larger role they undoubtedly played. Sarah was every bit the pioneer and 'soul-maker' that Abraham was." She was also, according to the rabbis, a prophet just as her husband was.

This is the first time we "meet" Sarah in the Bible. But it is in this light that I also think of another midrash about the end of her life, and more particularly her advanced age the time of her death. Gen. 23:1 tells us (again following the translation in *Etz Hayim*): "Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years." From this flows this somewhat odd little story (Genesis Rabbah 58:3):

> Rabbi Akiva was sitting and lecturing, and the assembled people were becoming drowsy. He sought to stir them up. He said, "What was the reason that Esther merited to rule over 127 provinces (see Esther 1:1)? Let Esther, daughter's daughter of Sarah who was 127, come and rule over 127 provinces!"

Certainly, there's humor in this scene – Rabbi Akiva, the great Rabbi Akiva, can't keep the attention of his audience! Who among us who has ever taught a class, or presented a drash, or given a speech – or led a Zoom meeting – can't identify? We understand his impulse to say something that will surprise his audience and recapture their interest. But why this? What's so shocking about connecting Sarah's 127 years of life to the 127 provinces over which Esther ruled as queen to Ahashueros? After all, this is not the only thing that connects Sarah and Esther. Both are among the seven women whom the rabbis counted as prophets in the Talmud, Megillah 14a (for the curious, the full list is Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther).

The only answer I can come to for why this midrash would surprise and arouse Rabbi Akiva's audience, frankly, is because it involves women. The concept of *zechut avot*, the merit of the ancestors, is well-entrenched in Jewish tradition. This concept claims that even when we are unworthy and rebellious, we have some merit with God because of our ancestors and their loyalty.

Again and again in Torah, the merits of and Divine promises to the Patriarchs of our tradition in particular are recalled. The names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or Israel) appear together in the latter four books of Torah 18 times (and once in Gen. 50; also once each in I Kings, II Kings, and First Chronicles). Particularly striking is Deut. 9:27, in which Moses recalls his pleading before God not to destroy the people after the sin of the Golden Calf: “Give thought to Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and pay no heed to the stubbornness of this people, its wickedness, and its sinfulness.” Until very recent times, Jews prayed to “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,” echoing the way in which God self-identifies to Moses in Ex. 3:6, with no mention of the Matriarchs.

Rabbi Akiva’s midrash is indeed radical for its time, and perhaps even for ours. It is a reminder that our Matriarchs and our mothers bestow merit on us, their children and children’s children. A Jewish woman in Persia after the destruction of the first Temple may need, and receive, the merit of her foremother, the first Jewish woman. All Jews today may call on the merit of their mothers and foremothers, be they Sarah Imenu, or our own individual mothers, living and dead. May it be God’s will that when we need that merit, that like Esther, we will receive it.

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**Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD,** *is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School’s faculty advisor for “InterSem,” a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women’s Research Group, a project of the Women’s Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.*

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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Bel Air, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

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