"*Chayyei Sarah*: The psychology of Patriarchal relationships''

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The fraught inter-personal relationships of the members of our patriarchal families call for a psychological analysis of their circumstance.

The birth of Ishmael was truly a life-transforming Godsend to a profoundly dispirited Abraham. This state of mind explains his ungracious retort at God's promise of a great reward*'* (Gen. 15:1)— *Hashem Elokim mah titen li va'ani holech ariri*, 'Lord, God, what can You give me given that I shall die childless!' Note the word *holech,* literally, 'I walk; I wander about,' with its overtone of restlessness. Note also that *ariri* (with initial vowel, *ayin*) is evocative of the similar-sounding (with initial vowel, *aleph*), *arur* ('cursed'), the very antithesis of God's initial promise that he would be greatly 'blessed' (Gen. 12:2-3). Ironically, the latter promise repeats the verb *barech* no less than five times in the space of its two sentences!

That the *arur-ariri* word-association was intentional may be supported by the fact that the usual term, consistently employed to connote barrenness, is *akar*(*ah*), which occurs five times in the Pentateuch, as opposed to *ariri* which occurs only here.

From the moment he arrives in Canaan Abraham suffers a succession of personal traumas, leading up to the Akedah. These include a Bedouin-type nomadic existence around the Negev (Gen. 12:9), a flight to Egypt to escape famine (v. 10), the seizure of his wife by the Pharaoh (vv. 11-20), his estrangement from his nephew, Lot, who might have been expected to have become his mainstay and ultimately his heir (13:5-12); his embroilment in major local battles (ch.14); a further battle to rescue Lot who had been captured in that battle (vv.12-15); the emotional turbulence of Sarah in the face of her barrenness, leading up to her request that Abraham take Hagar to be a consort and surrogate mother (16:1-3); the on-going and bitter domestic strife between the two women, both before and after the birth of Ishmael (vv.4-16), leading, some years later, to Sarah's insistence that they be banished from the family home (21:9ff).

That banishment, we contend, was the final straw, and the key to the psychological barrier that Abraham raised to any normal relationship with both Sarah and Isaac. It also explains the emotional baggage that he bequeathed to Isaac. But more of that presently.

Abraham protests Sarah's decision, and his relationship with her was never the same again. Sarah surely knew how much Abraham loved Ishmael, and the extent to which his paternal instincts had been satisfied through their mutual bonding. She should surely have realised what an emotionally damaging effect on him her action would have.

That deep relationship with Ishmael accounts for Abraham's curious reaction when he is given the news that he and Sarah were about to be blessed with their own son, Isaac, who would receive God's blessing and be the agent of His mission to the world. Abraham retorts: *Lu Yishma'el yichyeh lefanecha* — '*O that Ishmael might live by Your favour!'* (17:18).

We contend that it was that outburst that illuminates Abraham's troubled relationship with Isaac, Isaac's strange behaviour both at and following the Akedah, and, some years later, the perplexity of Isaac's own cool relationship with Jacob, as contrasted with his love for Esau.

It was not what he said, but rather what he was clearly implying, namely, *'God*, I don't need another child; I've got Ishmael. He can serve both my paternal need and your spiritual requirement!'

This attitude was understandable: Abraham was old, physically and emotionally drained, battle-scarred, theologically troubled, plagued by self-doubts, and in no fit state to change diapers and to play with, educate, and deal with the swinging moods of, another child.

Now, imagine the effect of all that on the young Isaac, growing up with an aged father who was constantly brooding over, and distracted by, the loss of his banished firstborn, Ishmael; a father who did not hunt and fish like the other dads, who did not joke with Sarah and lighten the atmosphere around the home, but who was away most of the time engaging the Canaanites in talk about the one God; and who was forever bringing back strangers to eat with the family. It must have been hard for Isaac to grab private moments of his father's time and attention, so that, among other things, he might demystify life for him, listen to his hopes and fears, help him mature emotionally, develop his social and intellectual skills, and grow confidently into manhood. *So, inevitably, Isaac's development suffered accordingly!*

Against the background of his parents' troubled lives and the constant tension in the home, it is not surprising that Isaac, in turn, grows up socially uncommunicative, with an inability to read another's body language or emotions, and a tendency to withdraw more and more into himself. Hence his inability to distinguish between the qualities of the gentle and spiritual Jacob

and the rough and aggressive Esau. Hence, when Isaac is taken to the Akedah, he can address but seven words to his father, asking why no lamb had been provided for the burnt offering!

Which son—other than one emotionally divorced from reality— would not have been able to read the signs of anguish on his father's face as they silently made their three-day journey to the Akedah? Which son, under such circumstances, would not have challenged his father, pleaded for mercy, put up resistance at his father's attempts to tie him down, and attempted to flee?

Imagine the deep-rooted trauma the Akedah must have inflicted on Isaac's sensitive spirit, a trauma soon to be intensified by the news that his beloved mother had died while he was away. He would inevitably have associated that with her shock at his and his father's sudden flight from the home at daybreak without explanation and without bidding her farewell. He would assuredly have blamed himself as well as his father!

In its description of Rebekah's arrival at Isaac's home to become his wife— *And Isaac went to meditate – lasu'ach – in the field towards evening* (Gen. 24:63), the Torah betrays the psychological effects of the Akedah on Isaac, compounded by all his other traumas. 'To meditate' is how most translations render it. The rabbis, however, offer the meaning '*to pray* in the field'. This infinitive occurs only once in the entire *Tanakh*, namely here; and hence the uncertainty as to its precise meaning.

One thing is sure: The objective of Isaac's wandering in that field that evening was *not* to meet his future wife's caravan. In that far-off era of slow trekking across deserts and unmade and dangerous tracks, neither the day, nor the week, nor, at certain seasons, even the month, of arrival from a distant country could be predicted. Furthermore, had the objective of his walk been to welcome her, we would have expected the Torah to have disclosed that fact.

Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that Isaac was particularly excited at the prospect of his forthcoming marriage to a total stranger, a girl chosen without consulting him or his father, but by Eliezer, director of his father's household. His indifference to marriage at this time may be explained by his very recent bereavement. Indeed, the weight of his grief was only gradually assuaged *after* he had married Rebekah (see 24:67). So, what was he doing in the field at that time?

It is our view that it is more than likely that Isaac had developed the practice of going there on a regular basis. This is supported by the fact that the verb *lasuach* connotes 'exaggerated behaviour

as a demonstration of complaint and angst.' Hence the noun *siach*, 'a complaint.' Thus, when the barren Hannah went up to the Sanctuary at Shilo to pray for a child, she chided the High Priest, Eli, for misinterpreting her agitated and exaggerated demeanour as a sign of drunkenness. She told him she had not touched a drop, but that her musings and bodily shaking were - *meirov* **sichi** *v'ka'asi - a result of the depth of my complaint and my anguish* (I Sam. 1:16).

Thus, that association of the verb *lasuach* may well reveal the precise nature of Isaac's regular evening visits to the fields. We may assume that those visits took place after the field hands had already left for the day, and that the fields offered a place not only a distance well away from the intrusive and uncomprehending looks of the members of his household, but also one out of earshot, where he could scream his 'complaint' to the heavens, rock his body, shake off his demons, shed his tears, attempt to purge himself both of his anguish over the loss of his mother and of his father's estrangement and readiness to kill him; a place where he might find some release and solace, and find some meaning in his existence.

In this way we may explain Rebekah's reaction as she espied Isaac walking towards her caravan. She is taken aback and alarmed by his strange and tormented demeanour. Her shock is reflected in the otherwise brazen query, *Mi ha-ish ha-lazeh*… 'Who is that man over there, coming towards us?' (Gen. 24:65). Surely a demure bride, on her way to meet her future husband for the first time, with no idea what he looked like, would not inquire about a random man walking along the way! After all, he might well have been just one of the estate workers! Her query can only be justified as an involuntary expression of alarm at the sight of a man behaving abnormally. And this may well explain the phrase *Vatipol me'al ha-gamal* ('she fell from off the camel'). A demure young woman does not 'fall'; she 'eases herself down.' Taking the phrase literally, however, we may understand that she was so startled by his behaviour that she, literally, 'fell down' in fright from her seat.

On being told that the strange man was, in fact, her husband-to-be —*vatikach ha-tza'if vatitkas*— 'she took a veil and covered herself up'. She was the only matriarch who did that at the first meeting with her fiancée! Still a single girl, there would have been no convention requiring such an act. It seems to have been instinctive on her part, therefore; and we may speculate that it was done simply to shut out what she had just witnessed and to hide the shock and embarrassment that she was experiencing.

Though Rebekah ultimately succeeded in healing Isaac's bereaved spirit, she effected no reconciliation between Abraham and Isaac. The silence between them continued forever.

And, as we have observed, Isaac's troubled spirit precluded any natural relationship from developing later with his own son, Jacob, and clouded his objectivity in relation to Esau.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey