

## Welcome to 10 Minute Topics

### This week's topic is: Patriarchs and Matriarchs

#### Patriarchs and Matriarchs

The history of the Jewish people begins with the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah). The Me'arat HaMachpela in Hebron, Israel is the burial place of all the patriarchs and all the matriarchs except Rachel whose tomb is located in Bet-Lechem (Bethlehem), Israel.

#### Abraham and Sarah

##### *Abraham*

*Abraham kept every detail of the Torah and taught it to his sons. (Bereishis Rabbah 95:3)*

Abraham was born under the name Abram in the city of Ur of the Chaldees to Terah, an idol merchant. From his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator, and he began to teach this belief to others.

*In the morning when he saw the sun rise in the east, he thought, "This is a great power. It must be the king who created me," That whole day he prayed to the sun. In the evening, upon seeing the sun set and the moon rise, he said, "Surely this one rules even that other power to which I prayed, for it no longer shines." All night he prayed to the moon. In the morning, upon seeing the darkness pass and the east light up, he said "Surely all these have a King and Ruler Who directs them." When G-d saw Abraham's longing for Him, He appeared to Abraham and spoke with him. (Zohar 1:86a)*

Abram attempted to convince his father of the folly of idol worship.

*Terah manufactured idols. Once he went on a trip and left Abraham to sell them in his place. When someone came to buy, Abraham would ask, "How old are you?" The customer would answer that he was fifty or sixty years old. Woe to this man!" Abraham would say. "He is sixty years old, yet he wants to bow down to a one-day old idol!" The man would go away in shame. A woman came in, carrying a bowl of flour. She said to Abraham, "Take this and offer it before the idols." He took a stick, broke all the idols, and placed the stick in the hand of the biggest one. When his father came, he asked, "Who did this to them?" "Why should I hide it from you?" replied Abraham. "A woman came in carrying a bowl of flour, and said to me, 'Offer this before the idols.' So I offered it before them. This one said, 'I will eat first!' and that one said, 'I will eat first!' The biggest one took a stick and broke the rest." "Why are you fooling me!" said Terah. "Do idols have understanding?" Abraham replied, "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying." ... (Bereishis Rabbah 38:8)*

Eventually, the one true Creator that Abram had worshipped called to him, and made him an offer: if Abram would leave his home and his family, then G-d would make him a great nation and bless him. Abram accepted this offer, and the b'rit (covenant) between G-d and the Jewish people was established.

It is believed that Abraham instituted the tradition of Shacharit (morning) prayers.

*Abraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem.  
(Genesis 19:27)*

*So Abraham woke up early in the morning and he saddled his donkey; he took his two young men with him and Isaac, his son; he split the wood for the offering, and stood up and went to the place of which G-d had spoken to him. On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while I and the lad will go yonder; we will worship and we will return to you." (Genesis 22:3-5)*

### Ten Trials of Abraham

Abraham hid underground for thirteen years from King Nimrod  
Nimrod flung Abraham into a burning furnace  
Abraham was commanded to leave his family and homeland  
Abraham was forced to escape a famine in Canaan  
Sarah was kidnapped by Pharaoh's officials  
Abraham was forced to go to war to rescue Lot  
G-d told Abraham that his offspring would suffer under four monarchies  
Abraham was commanded to circumcise his son  
Abraham was commanded to drive away Hagar and Ishmael  
Abraham was told to bind Isaac on the altar

### *Sarah*

*The Holy One, Blessed is He, spoke to all [other] righteous women through an angel, but to Sarah [He spoke] through Divine communication. (Lekach Tov, Bereishis 23:1)*

Sarah was the niece of Abraham, being the daughter of his brother Haran. She was called also Ischah (Genesis 11:29), because her beauty attracted general attention and admiration.<sup>1</sup> Even the hardships of her journey with Abraham did not affect her beauty. According to another explanation, she was called Ischah because she had prophetic vision.<sup>2</sup> She was superior to Abraham in the gift of prophecy and he obeyed her words because he recognized this superiority on her part.

Sarah was also born to idolaters but accepted the yoke of Torah along with her marriage to Abraham. Sarah was a righteous person who is considered one of the seven prophetesses.<sup>1</sup> She is called one of the "women in the tent"<sup>3</sup> because she conducted herself with modesty even in the privacy of her tent. The hymn (Proverbs 31) was about the matriarch Sarah (*Shocher Tov* 112:1)

## Isaac and Rebecca

### *Isaac*

*After the Patriarch Abraham died, the Holy One, Blessed is He, appeared to Isaac and blessed him. (Bereishis Rabbah 61:6)*

Isaac was born on Passover to Abraham and Sarah and was circumcised according to the law given to Abraham from G-d. From his early childhood, he was taught Torah by his father Abraham and Uncle Shem.

*Where was Isaac? [Abraham] had sent him to Shem to study Torah, for Abraham said, "All that I possess is only because I engaged in Torah and mitzvot. Therefore, I do not want it ever to depart from my seed." (Bereishis Rabbah 56:11)*

For Abraham's tenth test of faith, G-d told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. This test is known in Jewish tradition as the Akeidah (the Binding, a reference to the fact that Isaac was bound on the altar). This test also demonstrated Isaac's own faith for he knew that he was to be sacrificed yet he did not resist his father. At the last moment, G-d sent an angel to stop the sacrifice. This story is used to show that G-d fiercely dislikes human sacrifice and forbids it for all peoples.

Isaac was the only patriarch who stayed in Canaan during his whole life and though once he tried to leave, God told him not to do so (Genesis 26:2). Rabbinic tradition gave the explanation that Isaac was almost sacrificed and anything dedicated as a sacrifice may not leave the Land of Israel. Isaac is the longest-lived of the patriarchs, and the only biblical patriarch whose name was not changed.

It is believed that Isaac instituted the tradition of Minchah (afternoon) prayers.

*Isaac went out to supplicate in the field towards evening and he raised his eyes and saw, and behold! camels were coming. (Genesis 24:63)*

### *Rebecca*

*Before the Holy One, Blessed is He, caused Sarah's sun to set, he caused Rebecca's sun to rise. (Bereishis Rabbah 58:2)*

She is called one of the "women in the tent"<sup>3</sup> because she conducted herself with modesty even in the privacy of her tent. Rebecca was born into a family of idolaters but was in the image of Sarah.<sup>4</sup> When Rebecca was fourteen years of age she married Isaac and accepted the yoke of Torah. According to Rashi, the three miracles that characterized Sarah's tent while she was alive, and that disappeared with her death, reappeared when Rebecca entered the tent upon her marriage. These were: A lamp burned in her tent from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve, there was a blessing in her dough, and a cloud hovered over her tent.<sup>5</sup>

Rebecca knew that Jacob must be the one to carry forth the teaching of Torah and become the father of the nation of Israel. She therefore instructed Jacob how to trick his father into giving him Esau's blessing and birthright.

*Each one agitated to kill the other. When she stood by synagogues and study halls, Jacob would struggle to emerge, and when she passed by temples of idolatry, Esau struggled to emerge. ... (Bereishis Rabbah 63:6)*

### Jacob (Israel) and Rachel and Leah

#### *Jacob*

*No one ever toiled in Torah like the Patriarch Jacob. He would go from Shem's house of study to Eber's, and from Eber's house of study to Abraham's. (Tanchuma, ed. Buber, Vayishlach 9) Isaac taught Jacob Torah and gave him rebuke in his house of study. (Shemos Rabbah 1:1)*

Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebecca. From his early childhood, he was taught Torah by his father, his grandfather Abraham, and his uncles Shem and Eber.

Jacob and his brother Esau struggled within Rebecca's womb. Esau had little regard for the spiritual heritage of his forefathers, and sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. After Isaac was tricked by Rebecca into giving Jacob a blessing meant for Esau, Esau became very angry, so Jacob fled to live with his uncle. While living with his uncle, Jacob was deceived into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah, but later married Rachel and Rachel's and Leah's maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob fathered 12 sons (the twelve tribes of Israel) and one daughter.

After many years living with and working for his uncle/father-in-law, Jacob returned to his homeland and sought reconciliation with his brother Esau. He prayed to G-d and gave his brother gifts. The night before he went to meet his brother he wrestled with a man until the break of day. As the dawn broke, Jacob demanded a blessing from the man, and the man revealed himself to be an angel. He blessed Jacob and gave him the name "Israel" (Yisrael), meaning "the one who wrestled with G-d" or "the Champion of G-d." The Jewish people are generally referred to as the Children of Israel, signifying their descent from Jacob.

It is believed that Jacob instituted the tradition of Maariv (evening) prayers.

*He encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set; he took from the stones of the place which he arranged around his head, and lay down in that place. (Genesis 28:11) [In other words, he contemplated G-d at nighttime.]*

## Rachel

*The Matriarch Rachel was one of the first prophetesses. (Yerushalmi Berachos 9:3)*

She is called one of the "women in the tent"<sup>3</sup> because she conducted herself with modesty even in the privacy of her tent. Rachel was a righteous person who is considered one of the seven prophetesses.<sup>1</sup> When Rachel saw that she was unable to conceive, she offered her handmaid Bilah to her husband in marriage, and named the two sons that Bilah bore, Dan and Naphtali. Rachel eventually gave birth to two sons: Joseph and Benjamin.

Rachel wept for the children of Israel of they were sent into exile and pleaded with G-d for their return to the Land of Israel.

*Thus said Hashem: A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. (Jeremiah 31:14)*

*... said [Jacob], "for I buried her [on the road] by Divine command. In the future my children will go into exile. When they pass Rachel's tomb, they will embrace it. She will stand and pray for mercy on their behalf, and the Holy One, Blessed is He, will accept her prayer." (Pesikta Rabbasi 3:69)*

*"I performed an act of kindness for her [Leah], was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame. I, who am flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my rival and did not expose her to shame. You, O Eternal, Merciful King – why were You jealous of idolatry, which has no substance? [Why did] You exile my children and [let] the enemies slaughter them and do with them as they pleased?" At once, the compassion of the Holy One, Blessed is He, was aroused and He said, "For Rachel I will return the people of Israel to their place." (Pesikta Eichah Rabbasi 24)*

## Leah

*For it had been agreed that Jacob was to marry Leah, and Esau [was to marry] Rachel. What saved Rachel? "For the sake of the many who were with me" (Psalms 55:9) – Jacob and Leah prayed for her. (Shocheh Tov 55:4)*

She is called one of the "women in the tent"<sup>3</sup> because she conducted herself with modesty even in the privacy of her tent. Leah is the twin sister of Rachel who married Jacob first through trickery. Leah also bore Jacob's first child (Reuben). Her primary goal was to produce tribal ancestors through Jacob. Leah also bears three more sons (Simeon, Levi, and Judah) and then gives her maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob as a fourth wife. Zilpah bears two sons (Gad and Asher) whom Leah raises as her own. Leah eventually bears two more sons (Issachar and Zebulun) and one daughter (Dinah).

When she died she earned the right to be buried alongside Jacob.

*All her life [until her marriage] Leah stood at the crossroads and wept because of Jacob, whom she had heard was righteous, [whereas] Rachel never went out on the road. Therefore Leah merited to be buried with Jacob, while Rachel's tomb stands at the crossroads. (Zohar 1:223a).*

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<sup>1</sup>Megillah 14a

<sup>2</sup>Megillah 50c

<sup>3</sup>Horios 10b

<sup>4</sup>Zohar 1:133a

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 60:16