

Avraham, Father of Multitudes

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Parashat Chaye Sara

What is the significance of Avraham's second and final family?

The Tora provides a strange coda for the symphony of Avraham's life. Just a few verses before we read of the death of the patriarch (Beraishit 25:7 ff.), we learn how Avraham marries a woman named Ketura (25:1 ff.) and fathers six children, who in turn produce seven grandchildren and three great grandchildren. It would appear that each of the accounts of the various episodes during Avraham's long and accomplished life, contribute to our understanding of the man's developing personality and contributions to the formation of the Jewish people and its religion. And it is also to be assumed that some things that happened to him during the course of his 175 years (25:7) have been omitted from the biblical account. If the Tora devotes six verses to Avraham's relationship with Ketura and their resulting progeny, it is appropriate to ask what does this final aspect of his life add to the tapestry that has already been drawn over the course of chapters 12-24?

Just how many wives did Avraham end up marrying?

An additional conundrum is trying to clearly understand the genealogies that appear to result from the union of Avraham and Ketura. The biblical text is confusing when it refers to this group of offspring as "B'nai HaPilagshim" (the children of the concubines) (25:6). Never before had the text mentioned that Avraham fathered children with anyone who was other than either a wife—Sara (21:1) and Ketura (25:1)—or a handmaiden—Hagar (16:2).¹ Even if one were to accept the position advanced by R. Yehuda in Beraishit Rabba 61:4, and accepted by the likes of RaShI, Da'at Zekeinim MiBa'alei Tosafot, Chizkuni and Keli Yakar, i.e., that Ketura is in fact another name for Hagar,² allowing for the possibility that her status was that of a concubine rather than a full-fledged wife,³ a further complication arises with the use of the plural form of the word, "HaPilagshIM." If the text is referring to Hagar/Ketura, then only a single concubine has previously been mentioned. The waters become even murkier when R. Yehuda, responding

¹ While 16:4 suggests that Hagar's status as Sara's servant never changed, since the text maintains that Hagar, upon conceiving, lost respect for "her mistress", if 16:3's terminology is taken literally, Hagar was given to Avraham "as a wife." While such language could be interpreted figuratively, i.e., for the purpose of childbearing, or since Sara viewed this arrangement as a means by which she may eventually come to bear children (16:2), verse 3 could be interpreted as Hagar being given to Avraham "for the sake of his already existing wife", the legal implications vis-à-vis Hagar are difficult to ignore. Yehuda Kihl, in Da'at Mikra (p. 432), says as much.

² RaShI on Shemot 4:18 invokes the Midrashic position that Yitro is referred to in the biblical text by no less than seven different names, reflecting an extreme instance of attributing different names to the same individual.

³ Several commentators, e.g., RaShI on 25:6, maintain that the difference between a concubine and a wife is merely technical, i.e., that the former is not given a Ketuba—the insurance policy that a financial settlement is forthcoming either in the event of the husband dying before his wife or divorce—while the latter does receive such a document. Consequently, in terms of all other responsibilities that a husband has towards a spouse, a wife and a concubine are equal.

to R. Nechemia's asking this very question in the Midrash, insists that the word is written "Chaser" (lacking, [not in its fully spelled form, necessitating a pronunciation that is not in accordance with the letters that appear in the text]). He claims that the next to the last letter of the word "HaPilagshim", "Yud" has been omitted in the Tora, resulting in "HaPilagshom", a singular rather than a plural form.⁴ Even if the existence of a "Ktiv/Keri" (where the text is written one way, but is to be pronounced in another) inconsistency is posited in this case, one still would have to account for the pronunciation of the word in a plural form, despite however it may be spelled.

Ketura's exact identity is difficult to ascertain

The difficulty generated by the term "HaPilagshim" causes many commentators (e.g., RaShBaM, Ibn Ezra, RaDaK) to posit that Hagar and Ketura are not different names for the same individual, but rather two separate women. However, while such an approach accounts for the "HaPilagshim" problem, it raises another issue, perhaps inherently even more problematic. Whereas if Ketura really was Hagar, there would be no need for additional information about her, since we already know that she was Egyptian (16:1), that she was familiar with Avraham's lifestyle and beliefs since she had been a member of Avraham and Sara's entourage for some time in the capacity of Sara's servant, that she was sufficiently spiritual to merit having an Angel save her on two separate occasions (16:7 ff.; 21:17 ff.), and that by providing an Egyptian woman for her son Yishmael to marry (21:21), she may have returned to Egypt at least temporarily following being banished by Avraham and Sara (21:14), we are given no information regarding Ketura's identity or background. While it is most likely that she was a Canaanite, would Avraham have considered marrying such a woman, even within the context of her being a concubine, when he was so insistent that his son Yitzchak, do nothing of the kind (24:3)?

A solution to the textual ambiguity that leads to an evocative approach to international relations

It appears that ShaDaL (Shmuel David Luzatto, Peirush ShaDaL Al Chamisha Chumshai Tora, Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1965, p. 102), understands this curious passage concerning Ketura and her children in a manner that serves to add to Avraham's universal as opposed to his particularistic significance. The commentator writes,

"The only reason this is written is in order to make known that God Blessed Avraham with multiple offspring, and that the blessing, 'I Have Made you into a father of a multitude of nations' (17:5) was (literally) fulfilled, for in addition to Israel, other nations emerged from him as well."

Indeed, when one looks at the names of the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, one recognizes the names Midyan (25:2) and Ashur (25:3). Yehuda Kihl (pp. 202-4) connects some of the other names with particular Arab tribes. ShaDaL notes that this could be the explanation for going into detail about Yishmael's descendents (25:12 ff.), i.e., that among other

⁴ Aside from the oddity of the word "HaPilagsham" from a grammatical perspective, commentators like RaDaK note that in our Sifrei Tora, the spelling is the full word, or "HaPilagshim". Does this suggest that our Sefer Tora has changed? RaShI quotes R. Yehuda's Midrashic answer verbatim, casting doubt on the spelling in the Sifrei Tora of RaShI's day as well.

things, they also deserve being counted among Avraham's progeny, as for that matter should the generations of Eisav (36:1 ff.)! Such an approach is in stark contrast to the Midrashic comment conveyed by RaShI on 37:1, where everyone but the Jewish people are quickly passed over until we come to those whom God Truly Values and therefore Goes into detail about their lives and leadership. The question raised by these two extremely polar approaches is whether the non-Jewish nations ought to be viewed as mere foils for the Jewish story (RaShI on 37:1,) or do they have some inherent importance and validity of their own, and for this reason deserve attention, however fleeting (ShaDaL)? While the achievements and accomplishments of these peoples may not all be exemplary, yet they share a singular ancestor,⁵ who at least potentially could provide the common denominator that helps these various groups be able to emphasize their similarities and parallel interests rather than their differences.⁶ A Midrashic comment that expands this idea even further appears in Midrash Yelamdeinu:⁷ Three wives did Avraham marry; Sara, the daughter of Shem, Ketura, the daughter of Yafet, and Hagar, the daughter of Cham (the three sons of Noach, as in e.g., 6:10.)⁸ The Midrash is then not satisfied to include only the direct line of Shem, i.e., Semites, as the nations whom Avraham biologically fathered, but rather all peoples in the world, since everyone, in one way or another, descends from those who survived the storied flood of 7:6 ff. If only such interrelationships could lead to a sense of brotherhood, rather than protracted and violent sibling rivalries.

⁵ A Rabbinic source that makes the same point, only focusing on an earlier ancestor, is found in the Mishna:

SANHEDRIN: CHAPTER 4: MISHNAH 5

...Therefore man was created singly (from a single ancestor, i.e., Adam), to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul...Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul...Scripture accounts it as if he had saved a full world. And for the sake of peace among men, that one should not say to his fellow, "My father is greater than yours"...

⁶This is the hypothesis of Bruce Feiler, in his recent book, *Abraham, a Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (William Morrow, New York, 2002.)

⁷R. Menachem Kasher, *Tora Shleima*, Parshat Chaye Sara, Beit Tora Shleima, Jerusalem, 5752, p. 991.

⁸ It could be understood that these women were not the literal daughters of the three sons of Noach, but rather descendents of the peoples that derived from each of them.