

From Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2

For when the miracle happened, and Isaac was born unto his aged parents, the whole world repaired to Abraham and Sarah, and demanded to know what they had done that so great a thing should be accomplished for them. Abraham told them all that had happened between Nimrod and himself, how he had been ready to be burnt for the glory of God, and how the Lord had rescued him from the flames. In token of their admiration for Abraham and his teachings, they appointed him to be their king, and in commemoration of Isaac's wondrous birth, the money coined by Abraham bore the figures of an aged husband and wife on the obverse side, and of a young man and his wife on the reverse side, for Abraham and Sarah both were rejuvenated at the birth of Isaac, Abraham's white hair turned black, and the lines in Sarah's face were smoothed out.

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The covenant of the pieces, whereby the fortunes of his descendants were revealed to Abraham, was made at a time when he was still childless.[115] As long as Abraham and Sarah dwelt outside of the Holy Land, they looked upon their childlessness as a punishment for not abiding within it. But when a ten years' sojourn in Palestine found her barren as before, Sarah perceived that the fault lay with her.[116] Without a trace of jealousy she was ready to give her slave Hagar to Abraham as wife,[117] first making her a freed woman.[118] For Hagar was Sarah's property, not her husband's. She had received her from Pharaoh, the father of Hagar. Taught and bred by Sarah, she walked in the same path of righteousness as her mistress,[119] and thus was a suitable companion for Abraham, and, instructed by the holy spirit, he acceded to Sarah's proposal.

No sooner had Hagar's union with Abraham been consummated, and she felt that she was with child, than she began to treat her former mistress contemptuously, though Sarah was particularly tender toward her in the state in which she was. When noble matrons came to see Sarah, she was in the habit of urging them to pay a visit to "poor Hagar," too. The dames would comply with her suggestion, but Hagar would use the opportunity to disparage Sarah. "My lady Sarah," she would say, "is not inwardly what she appears to be outwardly. She makes the impression of a righteous, pious woman, but she is not, for if she were, how could her childlessness be explained after so many years of marriage, while I became pregnant at once?"

Sarah scorned to bicker with her slave, yet the rage she felt found vent in these words to Abraham:[120] "It is thou who art doing me wrong. Thou hearest the words of Hagar, and thou sayest naught to oppose them, and I hoped that thou wouldst take my part. For thy sake did I leave my native land and the house of my father, and I followed thee into a strange land with trust in God. In Egypt I pretended to be thy sister, that no harm might befall thee. When I saw that I should bear no children, I took the Egyptian woman, my slave Hagar, and gave her unto thee for wife, contenting myself with the thought that I would rear the children she would bear. Now she treats me disdainfully in thy presence. O that God might look upon the injustice which hath been done unto me, to judge between thee and me, and have mercy upon us, restore peace to our home, and grant us offspring, that we have no need of children from Hagar, the Egyptian bondwoman of the generation of the heathen that cast thee in the fiery furnace!"[121]

Abraham, modest and unassuming as he was, was ready to do justice to Sarah, and he conferred full

power upon her to dispose of Hagar according to her pleasure. He added but one caution, "Having once made her a mistress, we cannot again reduce her to the state of a bondwoman." Unmindful of this warning, Sarah exacted the services of a slave from Hagar. Not alone this, she tormented her, and finally she cast an evil eye upon her, so that the unborn child dropped from her, and she ran away. On her flight she was met by several angels, and they bade her return, at the same time making known to her that she would bear a son who should be called Ishmael--one of the six men who have been given a name by God before their birth, the others being Isaac, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and the Messiah.[122]

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael the command was issued to Abraham that he put the sign of the covenant upon his body and upon the bodies of the male members of his household. Abraham was reluctant at first to do the bidding of God, for he feared that the circumcision of his flesh would raise a barrier between himself and the rest of mankind. But God said unto him, "Let it suffice thee that I am thy God and thy Lord, as it sufficeth the world that I am its God and its Lord." [123]

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After the meal the angels asked after Sarah, though they knew that she was in retirement in her tent, but it was proper for them to pay their respects to the lady of the house and send her the cup of wine over which the blessing had been said.[146] Michael, the greatest of the angels, thereupon announced the birth of Isaac. He drew a line upon the wall, saying, "When the sun crosses this point, Sarah will be with child, and when he crosses the next point, she will give birth to a child." This communication, which was intended for Sarah and not for Abraham, to whom the promise had been revealed long before,[147] the angels made at the entrance to her tent, but Ishmael stood between the angel and Sarah, for it would not have been seemly to deliver the message in secret, with none other by. Yet, so radiant was the beauty of Sarah that a beam of it struck the angel, and made him look up. In the act of turning toward her, he heard her laugh within herself:[148] "Is it possible that these bowels can yet bring forth a child, these shrivelled breasts give suck? And though I should be able to bear, yet is not my lord Abraham old?"[149]

And the Lord said unto Abraham: "Am I too old to do wonders? And wherefore doth Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?"[150] The reproach made by God was directed against Abraham as well as against Sarah, for he, too, had showed himself of little faith when he was told that a son would be born unto him. But God mentioned only Sarah's incredulity, leaving Abraham to become conscious of his defect himself.[151]

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The birth of Isaac was a happy event, and not in the house of Abraham alone. The whole world rejoiced, for God remembered all barren women at the same time with Sarah. They all bore children. And all the blind were made to see, all the lame were made whole, the dumb were made to speak, and the mad were restored to reason. And a still greater miracle happened: on the day of Isaac's birth the sun shone with such splendor as had not been seen since the fall of man, and as he will shine again only in the future world.[203]

To silence those who asked significantly, "Can one a hundred years old beget a son?" God commanded the angel who has charge over the embryos, to give them form and shape, that he fashion Isaac precisely according to the model of Abraham, so that all seeing Isaac might exclaim, "Abraham begot Isaac." [204]

That Abraham and Sarah were blessed with offspring only after they had attained so great an age, had an important reason. It was necessary that Abraham should bear the sign of the covenant upon his body before he begot the son who was appointed to be the father of Israel.[205] And as Isaac was the first child born to Abraham after he was marked with the sign, he did not fail to celebrate his circumcision with much pomp and ceremony on the eighth day.[206] Shem, Eber, Abimelech king of the Philistines, and his whole retinue, Phicol the captain of his host in it—they all were present, and also Terah and his son Nahor, in a word, all the great ones round about.[207] On this occasion Abraham could at last put a stop to the talk of the people, who said, "Look at this old couple! They picked up a foundling on the highway, and they pretend he is their own son, and to make their statement seem credible, they arrange a feast in his honor." Abraham had invited not only men to the celebration, but also the wives of the magnates with their infants, and God permitted a miracle to be done. Sarah had enough milk in her breasts to suckle all the babes there,[208] and they who drew from her breasts had much to thank her for. Those whose mothers had harbored only pious thoughts in their minds when they let them drink the milk that flowed from the breasts of the pious Sarah, they became proselytes when they grew up; and those whose mothers let Sarah nurse them only in order to test her, they grew up to be powerful rulers, losing their dominion only at the revelation on Mount Sinai, because they would not accept the

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