



Photo: Caspar Netscher, 1673

Sarah: Our Matriarch of Faith

The nation of Israel traces its roots to exceptional men and women who we refer to as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The *Talmud*, Judaism's oral tradition, states: "There are only three Patriarchs and only four Matriarchs," referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. These four Matriarchs, or *imahot* (אמהות) in Hebrew, are recognized as co-founders of Israel.

But what makes a mother a Matriarch? When we speak about our Matriarchs, we are not speaking about biological mothers; we are referring to our spiritual mothers.

Sarah *Imeinu*, Sarah our mother, was the first of the Matriarchs. Even though she spent only 37 years as an actual mother to her only son, Isaac, she is the Matriarch of all the other Matriarchs, perhaps the most important woman in history.

Yet, who was Sarah really? How well do we know her? In addition, what can we learn from her? We will study Sarah's life in-depth and gain a greater understanding of this monumental figure in both the Jewish and Christian faiths.

How did Sarah come to know God? Jewish tradition teaches that Sarah was born a prophet. She had a profound relationship with God from the very beginning of her life.

And Sarah had unique challenges in her lifetime. Despite being barren until age 90, she remained steadfast in her faith, unwilling to give in to the doubts and disappointments that certainly must have plagued her. She would not relinquish her faith under any circumstance, and in doing so made it possible for each of us to do the same.

It is my hope and prayer that through this study, you will be encouraged in your faith and be inspired to persevere in whatever challenges may come your way.



Photo: Domenico Fiasella, 17th

I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

— GENESIS 17:16



A Faithful Partner

There are two “mothers” of the entire world. The first is Eve, the biological mother who gave life to every human being. The second is Sarah, the first of the Matriarchs, who gave spiritual life to humanity.

We often speak about how Abraham forged a connection with the One True God despite the idolatrous society in which he lived. According to Jewish tradition, Sarah, too, believed in God and developed a relationship of her own. In fact, when God told Abraham in Genesis 21:12, “*Listen to whatever Sarah tells you,*” Jewish scholars say that was because Sarah was an even greater prophet than Abraham!

When we first encounter Sarah in the Bible, her name is *Sarai* (Genesis 11:29). Abram called his wife *Sarai*, which means “my princess,” because he saw her not as an object of beauty, but as a woman to be honored and respected. In ancient times, women had no rights, little respect, and were largely perceived as less than their male counterparts. In this way, Sarah’s relationship with Abraham was completely revolutionary. The two were partners in every way—partners in faith and in teaching faith.

Scripture tells us that God instructed Abraham to leave his country and to go “*to the land I will show you*” (Genesis 12:1). Subsequently, we read: “*He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there*” (Genesis 12:5).

At first glance, it seems that Sarah is a passive player in this bold move. Yet a closer look reveals that Abraham and Sarah were on a joint mission. The verse mentions that the couple took with them “*the people they had acquired in Harran . . .*” A more literal translation of the original Hebrew reads “the souls they *made* in Harran,” prompting the Jewish sages to explain that these were the people that Abraham and Sarah brought close to God.

When God told Abraham to step out in faith with his followers, he did so together with his wife and partner who had played an equal role in acquiring those followers. Sarah and Abraham were a team, bound by love and mutual respect.

The words of Proverbs 12:4, “*A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown,*” are attributed to Sarah, implying that she played a major role in Abraham’s success.



He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

— GENESIS 12:5

Living in Faith

Of all the challenges of faith that Sarah encountered in her life—from following God to an unknown land, to being kidnapped not once, but twice by foreign kings because of her great beauty—the most challenging was being childless.

In a world in which childbearing was a badge of honor and barrenness a sign of divine disfavor, Sarah was a failure. She carried the additional burden of knowing that God had promised her and Abraham that together they would create a great nation through their offspring. But as the years went on, it seemed impossible that God's promise would be fulfilled.

In fact, one of the first things we learn about Sarah is her inability to have children. In many translations, we read, *“Now Sarai was barren; she had no child”* (ESV). Why is this fact repeated? The Jewish sages teach that Sarah not only was beyond childbearing age (Genesis 18:11), she had no womb. It was physically impossible for Sarah to have a child.

And yet, God had promised. So Sarah believed Him.

How did Sarah manage all those painful, difficult years? We find the answer in Habakkuk 2:4, *“... but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”* It was Sarah's deep and unshakable faith that kept her hopeful all those years. Sarah lived her faith daily, and her faith breathed life into her.

On the basis of her faith, Sarah was included in the Christian Bible's great roll call of heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews: *“And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise”* (Hebrews 11:11).

But Sarah's faith journey was not without its detours. About 50 years into marriage, still childless, Sarah had an idea. Perhaps God intended for her to be the spiritual mother of the nation, not the biological mother. So, she offered her handmaid, Hagar, to become a second wife to Abraham. It couldn't have been an easy decision. But trusting this was God's plan for Abraham to father a great nation, Sarah took this painful, fateful step.

Of course, Sarah's plan was a disaster. It was clear that she would not be able to raise Hagar's son Ishmael to be the heir to Abraham and her legacy. She knew immediately that she had made a mistake after Hagar had become pregnant and began insulting Sarah (Genesis 16:4-5). Sarah's plot may have been unsuccessful, but her faith stood strong.

When Sarah was 89, God changed her name—and her life. *“God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her’”* (Genesis 17:15-16).

In changing her name from Sarai, meaning “my princess,” to Sarah, which means “the princess of all (nations),” God reaffirmed His promise to Sarah, and the miraculous happened.

At the ages of 100 and 90, Abraham and Sarah, at long last, had a son named Isaac, meaning “laughter” or “joy.” Sarah's faith gave way to Sarah's joy. But even as the promise of a child came to pass, the faith that Sarah developed through the decades remained—as a lasting resource for her and as a legacy for all her descendants.



Photo: Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, 1726

Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

— GENESIS 11:30

A Lasting Legacy

Sarah passed away at the age of 127. Curiously, the section in the *Torah* that relates Sarah's death, the purchase of her burial site at the Cave of Machpelah, and the search for a wife for Isaac, is called *Chayei Sarah*, which means "the life of Sarah." This seems strange since this portion of Scripture deals not with Sarah's life, but her death, and then the life of Isaac.

The Jewish sages explain that when a righteous person has passed on, it is considered as though that person is still alive. The good deeds that the person did in his or her lifetime remain, a lasting legacy to all generations, thereby perpetuating the "life" of the deceased.

Sarah's life goal was to have a son who would continue the work she and Abraham began of bringing worship of the One True God and spreading godliness throughout the world. There is no greater testament to the life of Sarah than her son, Isaac, and his wife Rebekah.

The Jewish oral tradition, which Jesus would have been taught in the synagogue, teaches that while Sarah was alive, three miracles were always present in her tent. First, her Sabbath candles remained lit from one Sabbath eve to the next. Second, there was a blessing in the dough of her bread. Third, a divine cloud continually rested over her tent. These were all signs of the godliness that Sarah brought into her home, into her life, and into the lives of others.

These three elements were later mirrored in the Tabernacle and the Temple as the lampstand (Leviticus 24:3-4), the bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:30), and the Cloud of Glory, representing God's presence (Exodus 40:34-35).

When Sarah died, the three miracles disappeared. However, when Rebekah married Isaac and moved into Sarah's tent, all three miracles returned, signaling that Isaac and Rebekah were worthy successors of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah's life goal had been achieved. The torch had been passed successfully to the next generation.

Despite many disappointments, obstacles, mistakes, and miscues, Sarah's faith in God never waned. While others may become jaded or bitter through a life of difficulties, Sarah remained confident that all was for the best. As a small child trusts a parent unquestionably, Sarah continued to have faith in her Father in heaven until her last breath.

Sarah's quiet beauty, her steadfast loyalty, and obedience to her husband, Abraham, have served as models for women throughout the ages. In the Christian Bible, the apostle Peter advised women to follow Sarah's example in how she honored Abraham (1 Peter 3:6).

Inner beauty, partnership, godliness, and obedience—all with a steadfast faith in the One True God of Israel. These are the legacies for us today from Sarah, our true spiritual Matriarch.



Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old.

— GENESIS 23:1

Think About It

1. **What spiritual lessons and values did you receive from your parents?** What one lesson would you want to pass on to others?
2. **Sarah waited decades for God's promise of a child to come to fruition.** What promise from God are you waiting to happen? How might Sarah's faithful waiting encourage you?
3. **For 2,000 years, like Sarah, the Jewish people waited for the fulfillment of God's promise to return His people to Israel.** They never gave up and never stopped praying God's promise to be fulfilled—and it was. What biblical promises have you seen fulfilled in your lifetime? How does that deepen your faith?
4. **What aspect of Sarah's life has encouraged you the most?** Share that with someone you know who is in need of encouragement today.
5. **The Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, is closely related to the word *emunim*, which means "training" in Hebrew.** From this we learn that faith must be practiced. How can you "practice" your faith each day?



Apply It

1. **Encourage others.** Faith is contagious! Think of a time in your life when you overcame a challenge through faith. Share your story with others. (Psalm 40:10; Acts 20:20, 27)
2. **Let faith guide you.** During these uncertain times in our world and in our lives, cling to your faith in God, as Abraham and Sarah did. Trust He is guiding you. (Proverbs 3:5-6; John 16:13)
3. **Reach out to a person in need.** Just as Sarah was a spiritual mother to many, think of how you can serve as a spiritual mentor to someone you know. (Psalm 34:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)
4. **Believe the impossible.** When Sarah wondered if she could indeed give birth to a child at the age of 90, God responded: *"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"* (Genesis 18:14). Believe that anything is possible with God. (Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:26)
5. **Be patient.** Sometimes our prayers are answered immediately; sometimes, we must wait years, even decades. As we learn from Sarah, never give up and never stop praying. (Isaiah 40:31; Luke 18:1)

