

בס"ט Yona Newman, Emunah Group, Parshat Lech-Lecha 5765 (20th October).

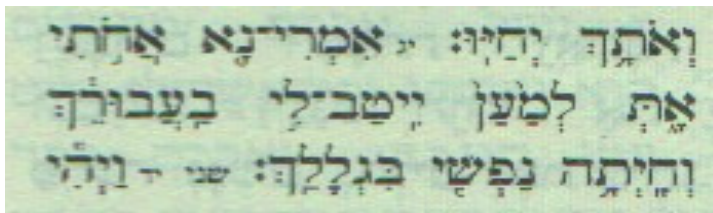
Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

In Pirkei Avot (Ch. 5 Mishna 25) Ben Bag-Bag said:

“Turn and turn about in it (the Torah) for everything is in it; and within it you shall look, and grow old and gray over it, and do not stir from it; for there is no better portion for you than this.”

I would like to share with you tonight an example of what we can find when we follow his advice and “turn and turn about in it”.

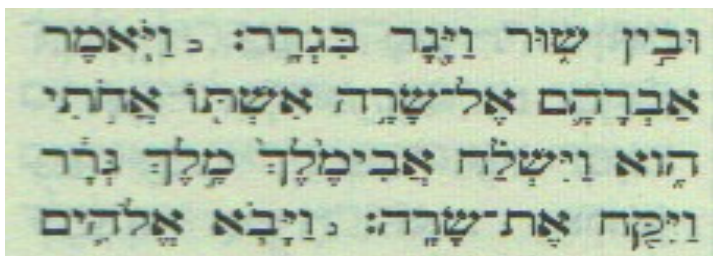
In our parsha this week, Lech-Lecha (Go for yourself), we learn that there was famine in land, and Avraham goes down to Egypt. He makes a strange request of his wife Sara. (Chap. 12 v13)



“Please say, **you are my sister**, so that it may be well with me for your sake and my soul shall live because of you.”

Hazal says that perhaps he thought that as a brother, whoever wanted to marry Sara, would be nice to him and give them presents to make them look favorably on the marriage. However, this doesn't make much sense; if you are afraid they will kill you and take your wife, even more so would they get rid of a brother who is a possible obstacle to getting the woman they want.

He then repeats the same apparent mistake with Avimelech in Gerar (Ch. 20 v2):



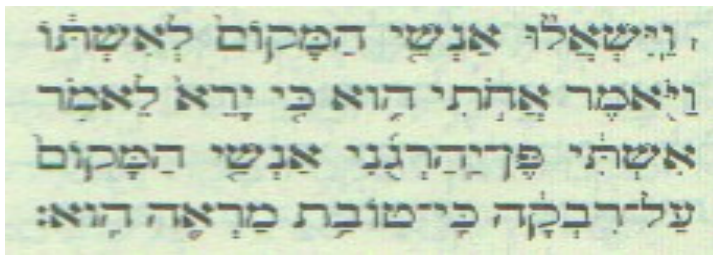
“And Avraham said of Sara his wife, **she is my sister**, and Avimelech the king of Gerar sent, and took Sara.”

When Avimelech reproves him, Avraham tells him (Ch.20 v12):

“she is indeed my sister, she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and then she became my wife”.

Hazal explains here that Avraham means Sara is the granddaughter of his grandfather Nahor, and they quote a verse from Noah (Ch.9 v24) to prove that the Torah uses daughter (or son) when it means granddaughter (or grandson).

However, this explanation does not hold up because Avraham's son Yizhak copies his father. (Chap. 26 v7)



“And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, **she is my sister**: for he feared to say, She is my wife; lest, said he, the men of the place should kill me on account of Rivka; because she was fair to look upon.”

Now Rivka is the granddaughter of Avraham’s brother Nahor, making her Yizhak’s second cousin. So the previous explanation doesn’t work and we have to look for another explanation.

Could Avraham have been using a relationship well known to the Egyptians and the Canaanites, that of **sister-wife**, in order to give Sara a higher status and so try to protect her, and later on Yizhak copied this practice ?

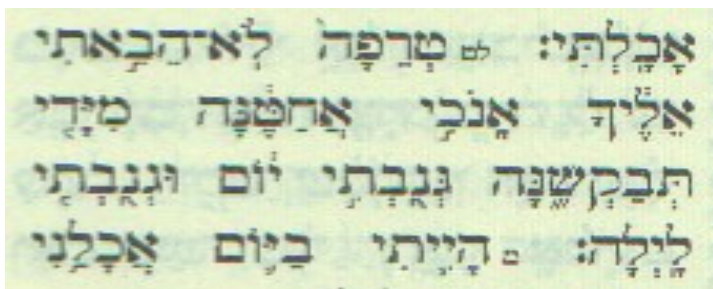
In Egyptian mythology, we have the story of Osiris and Isis where Osiris succeeded Ra as king of the earth, helped by Isis, his **sister-wife**.

Many Pharaohs had this relationship as well: Ahmose (1550-1525 BCE), founder of the 18th Dynasty and his sister-wife Nefertari, and Ptolemy XII who was married to his **sister-wife**, Cleopatra V.

Similarly, the Canaanite’s had the story of the god of rain and storm, Baal and his **sister-wife** Anat.

However, if we dig even further and wider into the text, we can come up with yet another possible explanation of why both Avraham (twice), and his son Yizhak, thought that calling their wife their sister gave them extra protection, even though it obviously did not.

Let’s jump forward to Yacov, Avraham’s grandson. He is complaining to Lavan about working for him for twenty years without pay, and suddenly the normally very quiet Yacov explodes in anger and makes a very strange statement (Chap. 31 v39).



“That which **was torn of beasts** I brought not to you; **I bore the loss of it.**”

Now **what** is he talking about ?

Listen to this quote:

“There were many herds and flocks. The flocks were committed to a shepherd who gave receipt for them and took them out to pasture. **The Code** fixed him a wage. **He was responsible for all care, must restore ox for ox, sheep for sheep, must breed them satisfactorily.** Any dishonest use of the flock had to be repaid ten-fold, **but loss by disease or wild beasts fell on the owner.**”

This is from the **Code of Hammurabi**, who ruled in Babylon (1795-1750 BCE). We can see now that Yacov’s complaint to Lavan (“**I bore the loss of it**”) had to be based on this rule in the code. Now Yacov could have learnt these laws from Yizhak, who learnt them from his father Avraham (who came from this area). In fact, some think that Avraham was Hammurabi and wrote the code himself.

Once we assume that Avraham and Yizhak were familiar with the Code of Hammurabi and went by it, what can we learn from this Code about “**sister**” as wife?

From the Encyclopaedia Britannica - “The Code deals with a class of persons **devoted to the service of a god, as vestals The vestals were vowed to chastity...were forbidden to open or enter a tavern,** and together with other votaries **had many privileges... Vestal virgins** were not supposed to have children, yet **they could and often did marry.**”

The “**vestals**” were also termed “**sisters of god**” as we learn from the following two laws from the Code.

“110. If a “**sister of a god**” open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.” (remember — vestals were forbidden to open or enter a tavern).

127. If any one “point the finger” (slander) at a **sister of a god** or the wife of any one, and can not prove it, this man shall be taken before the judges and his brow shall be marked. (by cutting the skin, or perhaps hair.)

In conclusion, we can answer our original question by suggesting that both Avraham and Yizhak considered they were giving their wives **greater status and protection** by calling them “sister”-wives, and this was probably based on their knowledge of the **Code of Hammurabi**.

We have arrived at the end of our little journey and have, indeed, “turned and turned about in it” as Ben Bag-Bag said. During our journey we looked at both the Torah text, Egyptian and Canaanite mythology, and ancient Babylonian and Egyptian history. As Ben Bag-Bag said “and within it you shall look, for everything is in it.”

May we all be granted the privilege of health and an honorable living so that, as Ben Bag-Bag said, we may all “grow old and gray over it, and not stir from it; for there is no better portion for us than this.”

Thank you.