

CLEVER JEW

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There's a very, very lot of treachery and trickery in the Torah, especially in Genesis. And it usually pays off! One type of deceit occurs in three episodes – two with Avraham, and one with Yitzchak. It is the “passing off the wife as the sister” routine.

And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was severe in the land. It came to pass, when he came near to enter to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that you are a pretty woman to look upon; Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see you, that they shall say, This is his wife; and they will kill me, but you they will keep alive. Say, I beg you, that you are my sister; that it may be well with me for your sake; and my soul shall live because of you. (Genesis 12:10-13)

Avraham's strategy works as planned. Instead of killing him, the Egyptians shower him with gifts while taking his wife for Pharaoh.

Abarbanel pulls no punches in his formulation of the question. “What kind of noble person chooses to live via such a terrible disgrace, seeking advantage and benefit from his wife being taken by others?! It is more befitting to choose death rather than committing such a disgrace!” Cassuto notes that the approach of some Christian scholars was that Avraham did indeed commit a repulsive act. Avraham was the prototypical Jew, engaging in sneaky maneuvers for personal profit, at the cost of others. Christians saw this episode as providing a Biblical justification for the antisemitic stereotype of the “clever Jew.”

But it is not only Christians that condemn Avraham's behavior. Ramban writes that Avraham committed a grave error. According to Ramban, Avraham should have told the truth about Sarah being his wife and he should have trusted that God would protect them from harm. Ramban adds that Avraham likewise erred by leaving Israel during the famine; he should have relied upon God to (miraculously) provide for him. Radak, on the other hand, says that there was no reason for Avraham to be certain that he would merit God's help. Radak's approach seems reasonable; everyone goes to doctors, we don't rely on miracles.

But even if Avraham could not be certain that God would help, how could he proactively give over his wife for profit? If we look at the Torah, we see that Avraham himself gives his justification, with the parallel incident with Avimelech when Avraham likewise passes off his wife as his sister:

And Avimelech said to Avraham, What did you see, that you have done this thing? And Avraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you shall show to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother. (Genesis 20:11-13)

Avraham's justification is three-pronged:

1. “Surely the fear of God is not in this place.” This does not mean that the people were not religious, per se; it means that there was no ethical conduct. Avraham justly feared for his life, and was legitimately entitled to use even dishonest measures for self-protection.
2. “And yet indeed she is my sister.” This justification initially appears very difficult to understand. Even if what he had told Avimelech (and Pharaoh) was technically true, it was certainly utterly misleading. We shall return to this point later.
3. “At every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.” This strategy was apparently used on many occasions, without Sarah being taken. But why did it work?

In order to understand Avraham's justifications, we have to appreciate the difference between ancient and modern society. In ancient times, killing a man in order to take his wife was an acceptable and honorable course of action for many people, just like any battle launched to capture new resources. But taking a single girl was not acceptable without the permission of her father, or another guardian, such as her brother.

Avraham therefore had two choices. If Sarah admitted to being his wife, he would be killed, and she would be taken. But if she claimed to be his sister, people would not attempt to take her against her will. Instead, they would try to befriend Avraham in order to be able to take Sarah with his permission.

As we see from Avraham's words, this strategy was used on many occasions, to great success. Sarah was not taken by anyone else; there was no harm done. This strategy was also practiced by Yitzchak with great success; he was able to live in Gerar for "a long time" without any troubles (Genesis 26:6-11), and his wife was never taken. Egypt was the first of two places where this strategy failed to work. This happened because Sarah was considered so beautiful by the Egyptians that she was taken by Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh, as ruler of Egypt, could take Sarah by force, although he would still compensate her "brother" for this privilege. The same disaster happened with Avimelech.

Thus, when Avraham told Sarah to pretend to be his sister, his strategy was to both save his own life and prevent her from being taken – as opposed to telling the truth, which would result in his being killed and her being taken. Financial profit was not part of the goal; Radak explains that when Avraham states that his aim is that "that it may be well with me for your sake," he is not referring to receiving gifts, but rather to his immediately following clarification: "and my soul shall live because of you." Perhaps we can also now understand Avraham's explanation of the technical truth of his statement that she was his sister. The intent may have been that, even by their standards, he was indeed responsible for granting permission to people to take her, and they should have waited for him to grant this permission.

Avraham's strategy was therefore a way of protecting both Sarah and himself, not of profiting at Sarah's expense. This is the explanation given by Abarbanel, Ran, and Shadal. But why did Ramban not adopt this view? Why did he hold Avraham to an impossibly high standard of relying on God for miraculous salvation?

The answer is that Ramban was forced to reach this conclusion based upon his general philosophy of providence. Ramban takes the view that providence is always supernatural and miraculous. But it is therefore considerably limited in application; most people's lives are governed for most of the time by the ordinary way of the world and not by providence. Ramban takes the remarkable view that ideally, people who are sick should *not* go to doctors; they should trust in God for miraculous healing.¹ It is only because society is not on such an elevated spiritual level that doctors are necessary. Still, Ramban maintains that absolutely righteous people can expect entirely supernatural providence governing their lives and protecting them from any harm.² Thus, according to Ramban, Avraham should have relied upon supernatural intervention rather than present any opening for people to take Sarah.

Nevertheless, according to the predominant view that even an individual such as Avraham should not rely upon a miracle, his strategy was justifiable and there was every reason to think that it would succeed without causing any harm to anyone. Avraham was not merely a clever Jew, but a good Jew. ❧

¹ Commentary to Leviticus 26:11.

² Commentary to Job 36:7. For full discussion, see David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, R. Isadore Twersky ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), available online at <http://www.zootorah.com/books/MiraclesNahmanides.pdf>.