Whenever I read Genesis, I am inspired by God’s challenge to the Patriarchs to be moral exemplars by whom “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” At the same time, I am troubled by the three embarrassing wife-sister stories in Genesis in which Abraham and Isaac lie about their wives’ identities in order to save their own lives. Even more embarrassing than the patriarchal lies is the realization that their ploys put their wives in danger of being seized and raped! How do the high moral expectations of patriarchal behavior accord with these acts of deception? My concern with this conundrum is not unique; it has been a kushyah for biblical commentators and scholars down through the ages. After many years of keeping my eyes and ears open to possible solutions, with the help of insights from Benno Jacob, a German rabbi and biblical scholar (1862–1945), and Chanan Brichto z”l, my revered teacher from HUC-JIR, I believe I have come to a well-founded positive response to the basic questions raised by these stories: Why are there three wife-sister stories in Genesis? What do they teach us? and How does the Torah help us come to terms with the embarrassing aspects of these stories?
Before addressing these questions directly, I believe it is important, with the aid of Rabbinic, medieval, and contemporary biblical commentators, to set forth a clear synopsis and explication of each of the three wife-sister stories.

The First Wife-Sister Story: Abraham and Sarah

Encounter Pharaoh (Genesis 12:10–20)

The first and most well-known occurrence of the wife-sister ruse appears in Genesis 12:10–20, where we read that soon after Abraham and Sarah arrive in Canaan, a severe famine compels them to flee to Egypt. Just before they enter Egypt, Abraham asks Sarah to say she is his sister, “so that it may go well with me because of you, and I may remain alive thanks to you.”

Umberto Cassuto, a twentieth-century Italian rabbi and biblical scholar (1883–1951), writes that some of his contemporary academicians, who are predisposed to think poorly of the Jewish people, have suggested that the phrase “that it may go well with me because of you,” indicates that not only is Abraham anxious to save his life, but he also seeks to enrich himself via Sarah. Cassuto counters by asserting that the succeeding phrase of the verse in question, “and I may remain alive thanks to you,” does not refer to a separate objective on the part of Abraham; rather, it is in apposition to the first phrase. Everett Fox’s translation supports Cassuto’s understanding: “Pray, say you are my sister that it may go well with me on your account, that I myself may live thanks to you.” Despite Cassuto’s concern about the charge of materialistic motives against Abraham, the patriarch’s eventual success in accruing wealth in Egypt and later in Gerar, must have been viewed in the days of the Tanach as a sign of success and divine favor.

Barry Eichler, a University of Pennsylvania biblical scholar, in an article entitled “On Reading Genesis 12:10–20,” seeks to elucidate the wife-sister story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt by pointing to parallels in ancient Mesopotamian legal sources, classical Greek literature, as well as anthropological material from the Bedouins and other cultures that speak of the unique role of the “guardian brother” in regard to the unprotected sister. Eichler posits that Abraham uses the stratagem of adopting the status of a “guardian brother” to save his life in the following manner: Abraham fears that if the inhabitants of Egypt believe the beautiful Sarah
is his wife, and therefore his exclusive property, lacking morality, they will kill him to take possession of her, but as Sarah’s guardian brother, Abraham hopes they will choose to negotiate with him to obtain her as a wife.\(^6\) Eichler is not the first to think of this, for medieval commentators Redak\(^7\) and Sforno\(^8\) as well as the nineteenth-century Italian scholar S. D. Luzzatto advance the idea that by pretending that Sarah is his sister, Abraham seeks to be in a position to prolong marriage negotiations with a potential Egyptian suitor until the famine in Canaan is over, when he and Sarah might return to the promised land with his life and Sarah’s honor intact. This understanding implies that even though Abraham lies out of his fear that the Egyptians might murder him in order to take possession of his beautiful wife, he believes that if they think she is his sister, they are sufficiently civilized to choose to negotiate with him for Sarah’s hand in marriage. Little does Abraham know that there will be no negotiations, because the head of the land, Pharaoh, will seize her for himself!

Nachmanides is rather critical of Abraham’s behavior on a number of points. Initially, he faults Abraham for leaving the promised land of Canaan. Abraham should have had faith that God would have saved him and his household from starvation. Nachmanides also comments that “Abraham committed a great sin, albeit unintentionally,” in that he placed Sarah in a very dangerous situation. He maintains that Abraham should not have lied, but should have trusted that God would have protected them from danger in Egypt. The punishment for Abraham’s lack of faith in God was that like him, his descendants would be exiles in the land of Egypt.

The Rabbis’ understanding of Abraham’s flight from famine and the events surrounding his wife-sister ruse is the exact opposite of Nachmanides’. In B’reishit Rabbah, they laud the first patriarch, because even in the face of a severe famine, he does not protest or abandon his faith in God.\(^9\) Similarly, in Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, we read that Abraham’s steadfast trust in God during the famine in Canaan and Sarah’s abduction in Egypt merits that these two trials are numbered among the ten rabbinic tests by which the Holy One finds Abraham worthy of being God’s covenantal partner.\(^10\)

After Pharaoh’s courtiers in Genesis 12:15 praise Sarah’s beauty to Pharaoh, she is taken into the royal court. The Torah then tells us that baavurah (on account of her),\(^11\) things go well with Abraham; he acquires sheep, oxen, asses, slaves, and camels. One could
certainly argue that after Sarah enters Pharaoh’s court, the animals and slaves that Pharaoh gives to Sarah’s “brother” constitute a bride price, or even gifts as an expression of Pharaoh’s physical satisfaction with Sarah. Moreover, Pharaoh’s statement to Abraham in Genesis 12:19, “Why did you say, ‘She is my sister so that I took her as a wife,’” can be construed as his having consummated their marriage.

The Rabbis, however, contend that Sarah’s marriage to Pharaoh is not consummated. They propose that in response to Sarah’s pleas to save herself from Pharaoh’s advances, God sends the “harsh plagues” mentioned in Genesis 12:17 on Pharaoh and his household. As part of the plagues, the Rabbis say that Pharaoh is struck with a severe skin disease. Rashi comments that this punishment is designed to make it next to impossible for Pharaoh to engage in sexual relations. The Rabbis also envision that with every move that Pharaoh makes to molest Sarah, the matriarch gives an order to a protecting angel to strike her attacker. Eventually, Sarah tells Pharaoh she is a married woman, but even then, he is loath to cease his attempts to overcome her resistance.

Another argument against the consummation of Pharaoh’s marriage to Sarah can be derived from the second wife-sister story involving Abraham in Genesis 20. There, after King Abimelech abducts Sarah, God stops him from having relations with her by warning Abimelech in a dream that he is subject to a death sentence because of what he has done and that he is not to touch Sarah because she is a married woman. As I intend to demonstrate, I am convinced that the editor of Genesis has crafted the three wife-sister stories as parallel accounts that when taken together impart a single lesson. Hence, what is true for one story in regard to the basic structure of the plot is likely to be the same for the other two stories. If this is correct, I would contend that since God protects Sarah from being raped in the court of Abimelech in Genesis 20, God must also protect her from the same fate in Pharaoh’s palace in Genesis 12.

The only explicit information that we have concerning Sarah’s role in Abraham’s ploy is that he specifically asks her to say that she is his sister. We can only imagine her remarkable courage and perseverance throughout this ordeal. First, she is to be admired for consenting to participate in Abraham’s deception, for she must have been aware of the risks involved. Second, once she is taken
into Pharaoh’s harem, there can be little doubt that she is terrified about the possibility of being violated. Pharaoh may not rush her to bed since he surely has a bevy of available sexual partners, but the threat is there and does not depart until the plagues (an obvious foreshadowing of the Ten Plagues of Egypt in Exodus) compel Pharaoh to reconsider his plan.

Although God afflicts Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues, Pharaoh remains unaware of the existence and power of the God of Abraham and Sarah. It would appear that he intuits from the plagues that Sarah is Abraham’s wife (or perhaps, as the Rabbis suggest, she herself informs him), and by taking her into his court, he has provoked an unknown power, which has let loose a terrible scourge upon him and his household. Pharaoh summons Abraham to explain why he said Sarah was his sister and tells the patriarch that had he known she was a married woman, he would not have abducted her. If taken at face value, Pharaoh’s words may indicate that he has a basic appreciation about the sanctity of marriage. It is more likely that he may just be trying to offer an excuse for his seizure of Sarah which has backfired. Even so, he does not express any qualms about his kidnapping of Sarah when he thought she was Abraham’s sister. Abraham does not offer a word in his own defense. Perhaps, he is embarrassed by the lie he felt he had to tell to save his life, or he may not have the courage to tell Pharaoh that he did not trust that Pharaoh’s subjects would let him live as soon as they saw his beautiful wife. Pharaoh, angered by the entire situation, and/or fearful of what else may happen if he does not release Sarah immediately, issues a brusque command to Abraham: “Now, here is your wife; kach valeich (take her and be gone)!" He then assigns guards to hastily escort Abraham, Sarah, and all their newfound wealth out of Egypt, another portent of the Exodus: the despoliation of the Egyptians by the Israelite slaves prior to their flight from Egypt.

The Second Wife-Sister Story: Abraham and Sarah Encounter Abimelech (Genesis 20:1–18)

The second wife-sister story, which is recorded in Genesis 20, takes place when the couple arrives in Gerar in the kingdom of Abimelech, following Abraham and Sarah’s expulsion from Egypt and a number of significant events in Canaan. After Abraham spreads
word that the beautiful Sarah is his sister, Abimelech abducts her, but God appears to the king in a dream to tell him that he is under a death sentence because he has seized a married woman. When the king learns that he was in danger of committing adultery, in words that are reminiscent of Abraham’s intercession with God on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom in Genesis 18, Abimelech pleads “Oh YHVH, will You slay people even though they are innocent?” The king goes on to assert his innocence by pointing out that he was unaware that Sarah was Abraham’s wife, because both Abraham and Sarah had told him she was his sister! God then says to Abimelech, “I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That was why I did not let you touch her.”18 (Tikva Frymer-Krensky points out that God’s prevention of Abimelech’s rape of Sarah also serves to assure us that Isaac, who is born in the very next chapter, is unquestionably Abraham’s issue.) Nonetheless, YHVH still holds Abimelech accountable because he abducted Sarah in the first place, and continues to hold her captive in his court. God goes on to insist that Abimelech must restore Sarah to her husband. If he obeys, Abraham, whom God identifies as a navi (prophet), will offer an intercessory prayer to save his life.20 If he does not obey, the death sentence against him and his household will be carried out. The next morning, after sharing the frightening news with his servants, Abimelech summons Abraham, and with a deep sense of anguish, demands to know why Abraham acted so deceitfully. “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done you that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done. What, then,” Abimelech demands of Abraham, “was your purpose in doing this thing?”21 Abraham confesses that he did it because he thought “surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.”22

The text then includes a verse wherein the patriarch claims that Sarah really is his sister, since he and Sarah share the same father but a different mother: “And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s; and she became my wife.”23 Abraham goes on to say that ever since “God made me wander from my father’s house” there has been an understanding between him and Sarah that she would identify him as her brother whenever they arrive at a foreign land.24 Because Sarah’s
parentage is never mentioned in the Tanach, there is no way to prove or disprove Abraham’s assertion that they are both the children of Terah. Four verses later, Abraham’s claim that Sarah is his half-sister is reinforced when Abimelech, in speaking to Sarah, refers to Abraham as “your brother.”

Since marriage to one’s half-sister is proscribed in Leviticus 18:9, 20:17, and Deuteronomy 27:22, how can Abraham openly assert that Sarah is both his wife and his half-sister? When we observe that Jacob marries sisters Leah and Rachel, which is also prohibited by the Levitical rules of marriage, we can surmise that the authors and editor of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis either were not aware of the Levitical strictures concerning marriage or assumed they were not in effect during the patriarchal period.

The Rabbis, however, are not comfortable with the idea of Abraham’s marriage to his half-sister. They therefore provide an explanation of the situation that fineses the transgression of the Levitical rules of consanguinity. Their argument begins with Genesis 11:26–28, where we learn that Terah had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran dies in Ur. Then we read: “Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram’s wife being Sarai and that of Nahor’s wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.” Since the Torah states that Nahor marries his niece Milcah, the daughter of his deceased brother Haran, the Rabbis propose that Abram marries the other niece Iscah, the second daughter of his brother Haran, whose name is paired with Milcah at the conclusion of Genesis 11:29. Earlier in the verse, however, it says that Abram takes Sarai as his wife! The Rabbis solve this apparent contradiction by declaring that Iscah and Sarai are one and the same. This reading allows the Rabbis to infer that when Abraham says to Abimelech in Genesis 20:12 that Sarah is achoti (a word that is most commonly understood as “my sister”), he is actually saying she is “my kinswoman.” According to the Rabbis, Abraham’s assertion achoti vat avi hi ach lo vat imi does not mean “she is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother” (i.e., she is my half-sister), but rather “she is my kinswoman (my niece) on my father’s side, but not on my mother’s side.” Rashi understands this to mean that Haran, the father of Sarai/Iscah, shares the same father with Abraham but has a different mother. Thus, the Rabbis, in an effort to sustain Abraham’s adherence to the Levitical laws
of marriage as well as his credibility, resort to the improbable sup-
position that Sarai and Iscah are the same person. In this vein, we
should be aware that for various reasons the Rabbis are not reticent
about identifying very disparate characters as the same individual,
as is the case with Hagar, who they say is both a daughter of Pha-
aoho (the Pharaoh who dismisses Abraham and Sarah in Genesis
12),32 and Keturah, a wife of Abraham.33 Against this Rabbinic ten-
dency to conflate biblical personalities, I would point out that in
regard to biblical characters who have two distinct names, the bib-
lical text usually specifies the individuals who bear two names. For
example, Jethro/Reul is explicitly identified as chotein mosheh (the
father-in-law of Moses) in connection with the separate appear-
ance of each name, Jethro or Reuel.34

Leaving the Rabbinical interpretation aside, I would also argue
that if the three wife-sister stories are parallel accounts, as I shall try
to demonstrate below, it is unlikely that what is operative for Isaac
does not apply to Abraham. Hence, since Rebekah is clearly not
Isaac’s half-sister because Rebekah and Isaac have different moth-
ers and fathers,35 it follows that Abraham and Sarah are also the
children of four different parents. My understanding of Abraham’s
last minute justification to Abimelech is that a late biblical editor
was so uncomfortable with Abraham’s lie, he felt compelled to try
to mitigate it by interpolating into the text a verse that indicates
that Abraham’s original claim that Sarah is his sister is not really a
falsehood because she is his half-sister.36 One could argue that the
absence of the same justification in the wife-sister story concerning
Pharaoh is because it is from a different documentary source.37 I
would suggest, however, that the editor who interpolated Abra-
ham’s half-sister rationale in his response to Abimelech but did not
chose to include it when Abraham stands before Pharaoh, prob-
ably understood that Abraham was so in awe of Pharaoh that he
was unable to say anything in his defense. Indeed, unlike the two
wife-sister accounts involving both Abimelech and Abraham, and
Abimelech and Isaac, Abraham does not utter a single word to
Pharaoh throughout the entire episode!

Following Abimelech’s agonized complaint to Abraham about
Abraham’s subterfuge, Abimelech decides to give Abraham many
sheep, oxen, and male and female slaves and restores Sarah to her
husband. Benno Jacob identifies these gifts as “compensation”38
for his offense. Abimelech also grants permission to Abraham to
settle wherever he chooses in his land.\textsuperscript{39} In addition, he tells Sarah he is presenting Abraham with a thousand pieces of silver, as a testament to the fact that her honor has not been sullied.\textsuperscript{40} The voluntary gifts that Abimelech bestows upon Abraham as well as the invitation to settle anywhere in his land provide strong indications that Abimelech is remorseful about abducting Sarah and wants to make amends. Abraham responds to Abimelech’s deeds of contrition by praying to God on behalf of the king. Abimelech’s life is spared and he is healed (perhaps of impotence),\textsuperscript{41} as are his wife and slave girls, who had ceased to bear children because God had barred their wombs as part of Abimelech’s punishment.\textsuperscript{42}

The Third Wife-Sister Story: Isaac and Rebekah
Encounter Abimelech (Genesis 26:1–11)

Like the second wife-sister story concerning Abraham and Sarah, the third story, featuring Isaac and Rebekah, takes place in Abimelech’s kingdom of Gerar. In both accounts involving Abimelech, this area is also referred to as the land of the Philistines.\textsuperscript{43} Nahum Sarna contends that the Abimelech whom Isaac meets “can hardly be the same king whom Abraham dealt with over seventy-five years earlier.”\textsuperscript{44} Sarna proposes that Abimelech may be a dynastic name,\textsuperscript{45} which suggests that this Abimelech is the son of the Abimelech of Abraham’s day. With the understanding that when Abraham and Sarah meet Abimelech, Isaac is yet to be born,\textsuperscript{46} Sarna probably derives his view of a minimum seventy-five-year gap between the two Abimelechs by comparing Abraham and Isaac’s ages at key junctures in their lives as recorded in the Genesis narrative.\textsuperscript{47} Contrary to Sarna’s opinion, I concur with W. Gunther Plaut, who proposes that the Abimelech whom Abraham met is the same king whom Isaac encounters.\textsuperscript{48} The most significant clue in this identification is that Phicol, the chief of Abimelech’s troops, appears in the narratives in both stories regarding the continuing controversy over wells of water: an initial argument between Abraham and Abimelech’s servants\textsuperscript{49} and a later disagreement, between Isaac and Abimelech’s herdsmen.\textsuperscript{50} It could be, as Sarna might argue, that Phicol serves as the head of the troops for King Abimelech, and after his death, for a son by the same name, similar to the situation of Abner, the chief of troops for King Saul and his son Ishbaal.\textsuperscript{51} If this were true, however, I would think that the author or editor would have identified the
second Abimelech as the son of the first king. I believe it is more likely that the Abimelech and Phicol of Abraham’s day are the same two leaders whom Isaac encounters. Considering the longevity of the Patriarchs—Abraham lives to the age of 175, Isaac 180, and Jacob 147—it is certainly possible for the editor of Genesis, if he was at all concerned about the time that elapsed between the two Abimelech episodes, to assume that non-Hebrew leaders in the days of the Patriarchs, such as Abimelech and Phicol, enjoyed the same kind of longevity as the Patriarchs.

With the understanding that Abimelech in stories two and three is the same individual, we are now ready to explicate the third wife-sister story concerning Isaac and Rebekah’s sojourn in the realm of Abimelech. When the men of Gerar ask Isaac about his wife, he repeats Abraham’s ploy by saying she is “my sister.” In sharp contrast to the previous two stories, Abimelech never considers kidnapping Rebekah. After an extended period of time, he happens to look out of his window and sees Isaac _m’tzacheik_ (laughing-and-loving) Rebekah, which he correctly interprets to mean that they are married. Abimelech has Isaac brought before him and asks him the same question that he put to Abraham: “Why did you then say: She is my sister?” Isaac responds that he feared for his life, but Abimelech points out that because of Isaac’s deceit, _achad haam_ (one of the people) in his kingdom might have had relations with Rebekah, which would have brought _asham_ (guilt) upon the entire community. Abimelech’s reference to “one of the people” is significant, because he is expressing the idea that while one of his subjects might have committed the sins of abduction and rape, there was no danger from him, for he has learned from previous experience not to kidnap a foreigner’s sister. Abimelech, perhaps out of fear that some of his subjects might be angry that Isaac impugned their standards of morality, goes on to proclaim that anyone in his kingdom who molests Isaac or Rebekah will be put to death. God then blesses Isaac so that he becomes a very successful farmer (Isaac is the only patriarch to take up husbandry) and herdsman.

The Unity of the Wife-Sister Stories
Having set forth my basic understanding of each of the three wife-sister narratives, I now want to demonstrate that these three stories in Genesis are interrelated analogous accounts, the work of a
A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THREE EMBARRASSING WIFE-SISTER . . .

single editor. While each story contains a number of distinguishing elements, the essential structure of each of the three wife-sister stories is comprised of parallel generic events that appear in the same order:

1. Upon arriving in a foreign country, a patriarch, out of fear for his life, decides to disseminate a lie that the beautiful wife accompanying him is his sister. (To mitigate or to attempt to explain away the patriarchal lies, as some scholars and commentators have done in the past, is contrary to the basic structure of the wife-sister motif.)

2. In the first two stories, the wife of the patriarch is kidnapped and brought into the court of the foreign ruler. This element is not present in the third story.

3. The foreign ruler becomes aware of the patriarchal ruse through divine chastisements, a divine dream, or his own observations.

4. The patriarch is summoned and interrogated by the ruler who is distraught because of divine punishments (actual or threatened) and/or because the sin of adultery has been narrowly avoided.

5. In reaction to the situation, the ruler takes decisive action: Pharaoh’s abrupt expulsion of the couple; Abimelech’s attempt to expiate his offense via gifts as well as his invitation to Abraham and Sarah to settle in the land; and in the third story, Abimelech’s directive to his subjects not to molest Isaac and Rebekah.

In addition, although it does not occur in the same sequence in each story, all three accounts include a reference to the material enrichment of the two patriarchs by direct or indirect involvement of the foreign ruler. Thus, Pharaoh gifts Abraham with herds and slaves on account of Sarah, while Abimelech grants Abraham additional animals and slaves as compensation for his seizure of Sarah as well as a thousand pieces of silver as a testament that Sarah’s honor has not been compromised. In the third story, Abimelech’s directive to his subjects not to molest Isaac and Rebekah affords Isaac the space and security to become a wealthy farmer with the aid of God’s blessing.

Another significant factor indicating that these stories reveal the hand of a single editor is the reiteration of nearly the exact same
phrase in each account during the questioning of a patriarch by an indignant foreign ruler. Thus, in Genesis 12:18, Pharaoh says to Abraham המ-ואת נשית לה (“What is this that you have done to me!”). In Genesis 20:9, Abimelech cries out against Abraham, המ-ואת נשית לה (“What have you done to us?”). And in the third story, in Genesis 26:10, Abimelech exclaims, המ-ואת נשית לה (“What is this that you have done to us!”). The repetition of this phrase, along with the identical sequencing of the analogous events of each story and the parallel references to the material enrichment of the two patriarchs, makes it very likely that the three wife-sister stories have been shaped by a biblical editor to resemble each other. Their similarity draws our attention, but, as we shall see, it is by means of their differences that the biblical editor seeks to convey a lesson.

Explanations of the Wife-Sister Stories That Fall Short of Providing Satisfactory Answers to the Problem

When I was a rabbinical student in the 1960s, the most popular explanation of the wife-sister motif was that of E.A. Speiser of the University of Pennsylvania. Speiser contends that these stories were influenced by an ancient Hurrian marital convention. The city of Haran, which became the homeland of the Patriarchs following their migration from Ur, was a center of Hurrian settlement. Speiser asserts that fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C.E. texts from Nuzi indicate that among the upper-class Hurrians, “the bonds of marriage were strongest and most solemn” when a man would marry a woman and in a separate ceremony adopt her as his sister. He holds that a wife-sister marriage brought increased stature and was legally beneficial to both marriage partners. Speiser proposes that Abraham and Isaac adopted this unique wife-sister bond from their Hurrian neighbors, but the biblical authors of Genesis, who lived centuries later, did not comprehend the original import of the wife-sister marital status, so they recast it in a very different manner. Thus, according to Speiser, Abraham and Isaac did not lie when they declared that their wives were also their sisters.

David E. S. Stein, the editor of W. Gunther Plaut’s The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition, maintains that Speiser’s theory “is no longer held by regnant scholarly opinion.” Stein cites the article by Samuel Greengus, an Assyriologist at HUC-JIR,
entitled “Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the ‘Wife-Sister’ in Genesis,” as the source of convincing evidence against Speiser’s Hurrian thesis. While Speiser contends that the adoptive sister institution is unique to the Hurrians, Greengus demonstrates that it also occurs in Old Babylonian and Ur III societies. Furthermore, Greengus challenges Speiser’s analysis of the evidence from Nuzi. He points out that Speiser’s argument is based on material from just three documents involving a single married couple. He also questions Speiser’s claim that the dual legal bonds of wife-sister were characteristic of the top levels of Hurrian society. Greengus notes that the relevant Nuzi material that he examined, covering at least twenty-six texts, indicates that the “sister” convention was used primarily for women who were socially inferior, such as freed slaves. He asserts that in the vast majority of the adopted sister texts from Nuzi, the man who adopted a woman as his sister did not also make her his wife, but looked to marry her off in order to receive a bride price for her. In sum, Greengus argues that the adopted sister institution at Nuzi was not part of a regular marriage between an upper-class couple that adds special status to their relationship, rather, it “appears to have been a business arrangement . . . typically involving manumitted slaves or lonely, unattached women who needed familial protection. It was a lower class institution and was not practiced by the highest level of Nuzi society.” On the basis of material from other Ancient Near East societies, Greengus suggests that even the three texts relating to the single marital relationship used by Speiser to make a case for his wife-sister argument in Genesis were probably superseded by subsequent documents in which the marital provision of the original wife-sister transaction was nullified, leaving the adopting brother free to marry his adopted sister to another man. In light of Greengus’s convincing critique, I concur with Stein as well as Frymer-Krensky that Speiser’s Hurrian hypothesis is not tenable.

Umberto Cassuto’s approach to the problem as to why there are three versions of this troubling story is to suggest that the editor, being respectful of ancient oral and written traditions, decided that if there were three such stories that were popular with different groups of Israelites, it was important to include all of them, even if doing so seemed excessive. The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, states that Abraham and Sarah are
depicted as successful “tricksters” who outsmart Pharaoh and at the same time walk off with a handsome amount of the ruler’s wealth.77 Their commentary goes on to propose that Genesis 12 portrays Pharaoh as “a dupe and deals with the ‘us-them’ theme in a humorous and thoroughly traditional way,” and that “this passage is not a tale about unethical behavior, but a story of marginalized persons who succeed in roundabout, unorthodox ways.”78 At best, the “trickster” theory can only be applied to the story involving Pharaoh, for when we look at the second and third stories, having Abraham and Isaac devise a subterfuge that gains an advantage over a non-Hebrew monarch like Abimelech who seeks to behave in an ethical way does not fit the “us vs. them” trickster typology.

In my opinion, none of the above explanations sufficiently answer the question as to why there are three wife-sister stories or what the editor had in mind when these stories were shaped and included in the book of Genesis.

**Rashi, Benno Jacob, and Chanan Brichto Help Reveal the Lesson of the Three Wife-Sister Stories**

If I am correct in my understanding of the three wife-sister stories as the work of a single editor who sought to impart a unified teaching in three parts, what is the nature of that lesson? In his commentary on Genesis, Rashi points us in the right direction by comparing Pharaoh’s response to Abraham’s ruse with that of Abimelech. Rashi notes that in the initial wife-sister story, Pharaoh, in an effort to be rid of Abraham and Sarah as quickly as possible, says to Abraham “take her and be gone!”79 Rashi then cites Ezekiel 23:20, a verse that refers to the Kingdom of Judah’s attraction to the gross, whoring, pagan culture of the Egyptians.80 Behind Rashi’s use of the Ezekiel reference is an allusion to a midrashic tradition that Pharaoh wants to expel Sarah from Egypt as soon as possible, because he knows that his Egyptian subjects are lascivious and might be enticed to repeat his mistake by abducting Sarah, and thereby bring additional plagues upon Egypt.81 By contrast, Rashi points out that Abimelech says to Abraham, “Here, my land is before you, settle wherever you please.”82 By highlighting the difference between Abimelech’s generous invitation and Pharaoh’s hostile dismissal, Rashi implies that underlying the words of these
two monarchs is the reality that Gerar does not harbor the same kind of immoral society as Egypt.

Benno Jacob’s commentary on this passage specifically hones in on the distinctions between the two monarchs rather than their subjects when he writes, “The intention of the Bible is to demonstrate the different reactions of Pharaoh and Abimelech in the same situation.” With this comment, Jacob, like Rashi, shifts our focus away from Abraham’s deception to the contrasting behavior of the two foreign monarchs. Jacob sees “the Pharaoh of Abraham as a forerunner of the Pharaoh of Moses. [This Pharaoh] does not know of God [and] has no fear of God or sin. No deity appears to him because a Pharaoh regards himself as god.” Jacob points out that Abimelech’s religious and moral superiority to Pharaoh is expressed in several ways in Genesis 20. Abimelech is open to being “warned by the deity . . . He not only corrects his mistake, but beyond this gives Abraham compensation . . . he abhors sin and fears God.” Interestingly, Jacob does not extend his comparison of the two monarchs to the third story involving Abimelech, Isaac, and Rebekah.

Chanan Brichto, in his book *The Names of God* (published posthumously in 1998) concludes, as do I, that the “the three stories are one.” Brichto, provides us with a twenty-one-page discussion of the subject under the heading “Three Domestic Triangles” in which he makes an argument, similar to Jacob, for understanding the three wife-sister stories as a means of contrasting the moral and religious attitudes of the hostile, guarded, self-centered Pharaoh to the gracious, morally concerned Abimelech. Brichto sees the Abimelech of stories two and three as a monarch whose stellar qualities are accentuated by the editor’s use of the arrogant Pharaoh as “a counterfoil.” Brichto makes the astute observation that even though Pharaoh’s household has suffered from the plagues, Pharaoh sees his predicament only in terms of his own welfare when he says to Abraham, “What is this that have you done to me!” while Abimelech in the second story shows concern for his entire household by demanding of Abraham “What have you done to us?” I would add that the comparison holds true in the third story as well, when once more, Abimelech reveals his concern for his people when he cries out to Isaac “What is this that you have done to us!”

For Brichto, the moral of the stories arises from the deficiencies of the first two patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac: Both prejudge the
ethical standards of a foreign nation (the monarchs and citizens of Egypt and Gerar), a prejudice that leads them to make embarrassing and perhaps unnecessary lies. While I am aware that at different times in our history, Jews have had to lie about their identity or the identity of family members in order to survive, the experiences of Abraham and Isaac in Egypt and Gerar do not seem to be such a time. We cannot know for certain that in Egypt the inhabitants might have tried to murder Abraham if he had not initiated his ploy, but surely in Gerar, it was not necessary. If Abraham had introduced Sarah as his wife, Abimelech, as a leader with an awareness of God and a basic sense of ethics, would not have kidnapped her nor would he have allowed any of his subjects to do so. Difficult as it is, Brichto urges us to accept the idea that Abraham and Isaac are portrayed in the three wife-sister stories in a negative light for a reason, namely, to make a statement against prejudicial attitudes towards foreigners.

Brichto is aware of the problem that this negative lesson poses for us, Abraham and Isaac’s descendants. His primary response to this difficulty is to ask us to modify our vision of the Patriarchs as perfect exemplars. He points out that human flaws are to be found in our ancestors from “Abram and Sarah through Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Miriam, Gideon and Sampson, David and Solomon, and Jonah and Jeremiah.” He also is critical of the tendency to adopt the simplistic perception that non-Hebrews in the Bible are consistently inferior in regard to their religious and ethical practices. In accord with Brichto’s thinking on this subject, I would point out that Genesis, in particular, provides notable examples of characters who serve to counter the bias against non-Hebrews, such as Melchizedek, king and high priest of Salem, who blesses Abraham in the name of El Elyon; Abraham’s servant (assuming he is not a Hebrew), who prays to God to bless his mission to Haran to acquire a wife for Isaac; and Pharaoh, who demonstrates genuine hospitality when he invites Joseph’s family to settle “in the best part of the land.” Overall, Brichto argues for a more balanced biblical view of both the Hebrew and the foreigner: “Every moral hero, of the Abrahamic line or outside it, is a model for emulation . . . every antihero, of that line or outside it, embodies traits that are to be shunned; and the most meaningful of lessons for us . . . are in the deficiencies in the best of our ancestral heroes of faith.” By means of this rather novel approach, Brichto calls
on us to understand that our biblical ancestors who appear “so often [as] models for emulation . . . again and again [are] cast in antihero roles for our self-identification and moral correction.” In short, Brichto advocates that without losing sight of the virtues and strengths of our ancestors, the Torah is telling us that we also need to pay attention to the instructive value of their weaknesses.

Beyond Benno Jacob and Chanan Brichto’s Teachings about the Wife-Sister Stories

Benno Jacob appears to be the first modern scholar who concludes that the intent of the Torah in the wife-sister stories is to contrast the religious attitudes and behavior of Pharaoh and Abimelech. Jacob, however, draws no edifying conclusions from his insight. Chanan Brichto goes beyond the mere comparison of the two foreign monarchs to the thesis that the editor of Genesis has crafted the three wife-sister stories so as to afford the lesson that morality is not the exclusive domain of the early Hebrews; it exists among some foreign leaders and their subjects, and it should be expected of all of them; it is prejudicial to think otherwise.

While I agree with Brichto’s basic conclusion, I would suggest a few additions and criticisms. One addition is that the relationship between Abimelech and God in Genesis 20, as well as Abimelech’s effort to make amends for his offense, make Abimelech a unique exemplar among non-Hebrews in the Torah. Even though God reprimands and chastises Abimelech for abducting Sarah, there is a sense of familiarity about God’s conversation with this foreign king that gives the impression that God and Abimelech are old acquaintances who need no introduction. Thus, when Abimelech argues with God to dismiss his sin because it was done unwittingly, his manner and even his words are similar to those of Abraham in his chutzpadich debate with the Eternal before the wicked city of Sodom. Finally, all God asks of Abimelech is to return Sarah to Abraham, but Abimelech, on his own, goes above and beyond God’s expectation by showering Abraham with animals and servants, by providing a thousand pieces of silver as testimony to Sarah’s unsullied virtue, and by graciously inviting Abraham to settle wherever he chooses in his land. Even though Abimelech continues to suffer from divine chastisements until the end of the episode when Abraham offers a prayer to God on his
behalf, his generosity does not seem to stem from an effort to assuage God’s wrath; rather, he appears to be sincerely motivated to seek redemption for his sin.

While Brichto points out that in the third story, Abimelech, whose behavior is beyond reproach, represents the climactic counterpoint to the self-centered Pharaoh, Brichto neglects to delve into the specific differences between Abimelech in the second and third stories, a comparison that I believe offers some valuable inferences. When Isaac and his beautiful wife Rebekah enter Gerar and declare that they are brother and sister, Abimelech probably senses that he has seen this behavior before, but graciously accepts Isaac’s statement at face value. Having learned from his past experience with Abraham and Sarah that one should not abduct a stranger’s sister, let alone a stranger’s wife, the older and wiser Abimelech is now prepared to model the proper ethical behavior towards Rebekah. When Abimelech accidentally discovers Isaac’s ruse, he becomes angry with Isaac for exposing Rebekah to the possibility of abduction by one of his subjects, an offense that he believes would have brought divine punishment on his entire nation. Moreover, at the conclusion of the episode, Abimelech tries to ensure that his subjects behave properly by issuing a death sentence to anyone who might think of molesting Isaac or Rebekah. In sum, Abimelech in the third story, as compared to the same monarch in the second account, demonstrates moral growth and leadership that would appear to be a result of what he learned when Isaac’s father and mother entered Gerar many years previously.

Another interesting lesson that arises from the three stories is that foreigners display a full spectrum of religious awareness and moral behavior, just as one would expect of Hebrews. Some foreigners may be like Pharaoh: They do not recognize God, and even though they may give lip service to a basic code of right and wrong, they are loath to do anything that conflicts with their personal desires. Others may be like Abimelech when Abraham and Sarah enter his realm: They display an ongoing relationship with God and are anxious to adhere to God’s expectations of morality, but need divine guidance and discipline to gain insight into their own behavior so that they may ultimately do the right thing. And finally, there are those like Abimelech in the story of Isaac and Rebekah, who when faced with the same moral challenge that he previously failed, knows what is right and does it, and is determined to make sure that others do
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the same. I also believe that the editor of Genesis intentionally ar-
anged the order of these three stories from the least religious and
most deficient ethical sensitivity of Pharaoh in Genesis 12, to the
somewhat above average Abimelech in Genesis 20, and ultimately
to the best moral exemplar, the judicious Abimelech of Genesis 26.
This progression creates a crescendo that helps express the editor’s
sophisticated perception concerning the varying levels of awareness
of God and ethical behavior among foreigners.

My principal departure from Brichto’s analysis of the wife-sister
motif concerns his suggestion that “the most meaningful lessons
for us . . . are in the deficiencies of our ancestral heroes of faith.”
Such learning is not easy. As biological and spiritual descendants
who lovingly mention the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in daily
prayer, we are naturally disinclined to scrutinize the failings of our
forebears. Discomfort with the flaws of our biblical ancestors is not
new; it also appears in the writings of the Rabbis as well as some
contemporary scholars, some of whom, as previously mentioned,
have tried to rationalize or explain away Abraham and Isaac’s em-
troubling lies in the wife-sister stories. While I believe that we
learn best from our own failings, our deep-seated reverence for our
biblical progenitors may render us incapable of gaining personal
insights from their shortcomings.

Another reason that it is difficult to identify with the deficiencies
of Abraham and Isaac in these stories is the unique context of their
prejudice. When one thinks about historical prejudice, there is a
decided tendency to focus on disadvantaged individuals or groups
who suffer discrimination at the hands of a narrow-minded, pow-
erful ruler or majority group. In the Tanach we think of the enslave-
ment of the Hebrews by Pharaoh or the genocidal plot of Haman.
In more recent times, the persecution of European Jewry and the
eventual murder of six million of our Jewish brothers and sisters
by the Nazis as well as the treatment of African American slaves in
this country come to mind. The wife-sister accounts, however, fea-
ture a very different setting for historical prejudice: Abraham and
Isaac display prejudice against foreigners in whose homeland they
hope to find a temporary haven! This is the reverse of customary
historical prejudice, for here, disadvantaged individuals bear prej-
udice against those in power. As such, they are not in a position to
directly harm the objects of their prejudice. It is purely by chance
that the lies that Abraham broadcasts as a result of his prejudice
set off a chain of unforeseen detrimental events: the kidnapping of Sarah by Pharaoh and Abimelech, which is countered by the divine punishment of the two rulers. Perhaps, the subliminal lesson of the wife-sister stories is that prejudice, in one way or another, brings harm to its adherents as well as its targets in the world that God created.

In the two issues described above—our ingrained love for the founders of our faith and the peculiar context for patriarchal prejudicial behavior in the wife-sister stories—have probably contributed to the fact that most commentators and scholars over the centuries have failed to recognize the biblical editor’s lesson about prejudice that emerges from Abraham and Isaac’s deceptions. In this vein, we should also note that since Pharaoh, in the first and most famous wife-sister story, is such an unsympathetic character, Abraham’s prejudice against him and his people seems justified. All of these factors contribute to a lack of clarity and efficacy in regard to the editor’s lesson about prejudice, and leads me to believe that there must be other elements of the wife-sister story that have engendered an appeal to readers of the Tanach. Nahum Sarna points out that the kidnapping of a beautiful wife is a popular theme in ancient folklore. As examples, he cites the Ugaritic legend in which King Keret mounts a military campaign to recover Hurrai, his stolen wife, as well as the mythic story in the Greek tradition of the abduction of the beautiful Helen (of Troy), the wife of King Meneleus of Sparta. Sarna, therefore, proposes that the wife-sister stories, which recount the remarkable beauty of the first two matriarchs, their abduction, and their redemption, must have been popular among the Israelites and thereby found their way into the Torah. I would add that the wife-sister motif has a number of other dramatic elements that create an aura of suspense that holds the reader’s interest. Among them are: How should we view the lies of Abraham and Isaac? Will Sarah survive being kidnapped without being raped? What is God going to do about the situation? Will Pharaoh or Abimelech uncover the ruse, and if they do, how will they react? All of these suspenseful elements in the plot dynamics of the three wife-sister stories probably contributed to their appeal in biblical times and continue to do so down to this day.

The overall moral objective of the wife-sister stories of instructing prejudiced Israelites who were inclined to think of themselves as ethnically and religiously superior to foreign peoples resembles
that of some other passages in the Tanach. I would point to aspects of the books of Jonah \(^{108}\) and Ruth \(^{109}\) and the passage from the last chapter in Amos, “To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians . . . ,” \(^{110}\) all of which seek to counteract prejudice against foreigners. I would liken this kind of biblical prejudice against foreigners to the biases of many Americans who tend to stereotype most adherents of Islam, particularly in the Middle East, as zealous fanatics and terrorists.

Finally, when I ask myself, “Do the prejudicial approach of Abraham and Isaac to foreigners and their acts of deception that threaten to compromise the safety and virtue of their wives still disturb me?” I have to say, “Yes!” I want to believe that the Patriarchs are steadfast moral exemplars, so I continue to experience discomfort when they do not live up to my expectations. And even though, with the help of Chanan Brichto, I have come to understand that in the wife-sister stories, Abraham and Isaac are momentarily cast as antiheroes whose trials teach us not to prejudge foreigners, my awareness of this lesson is not sufficient to prevent me from being upset by our founders’ embarrassing behavior.

In order to lessen my unease with patriarchal conduct in the wife-sister stories, I need to fully accept the truth that the Tanach in its wisdom intentionally portrays the founding fathers and mothers of our people, as well as almost all other illustrious biblical heroes such as Moses and David, as real human beings with flaws and weaknesses, so that we, their descendants, might identify with them. \(^{111}\) We also need to remember that, to some extent, our biblical ancestors are heroes, because in spite of their human errors, they succeed in advancing their covenant with God. In conclusion, I believe that because we experience our founders in the Torah as true to life human beings, we can challenge ourselves to emulate their most admirable qualities. At the same time, because of our profound veneration for our ancestors, learning from their weaknesses, as Brichto advocates, is a much harder task, which each of us can only try to do according to our individual willingness to confront the flaws in our founders and ourselves.

Notes

1. This Messianic challenge is issued by God to Abraham in Gen. 12:3, to Isaac in Gen. 26:4 (here the word goyoi [nations] replaces mishpachot [families]), and to Jacob in Gen. 28:14.
2. In Gen. 11:31 the first patriarch and matriarch are introduced by the names Abram and Sarai. In Genesis 17, God blesses them and changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. For the sake of consistency, excluding my discussion of the Rabbis’ identification of Sarai as Iscah in Gen. 11:29, I will use the names Abraham and Sarah.


6. Barry Eichler, “On Reading Genesis 12:10–20,” Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 23–38. In Genesis 24, we encounter a clear example of the role of the guardian brother in regard to marital negotiations, when Laban takes the lead in precedence over his father Bethuel in dealing with the offer of Abraham’s servant to have Laban’s sister, Rebekah, marry Isaac.

7. Rabbi David Kimchi from Narbonne (1160–1235).

8. Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaakov from Italy (1475–1550).


10. In Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 26–31, the ten trials of Abraham include (1) the threat of death to the infant and child Abraham by King Nimrod; (2) imprisonment and trial by fire by Nimrod; (3) leaving his father’s house and native land; (4) famine in Canaan; (5) Sarah’s being taken into Pharaoh’s court; (6) the war vs. the kings; (7) the covenant between the pieces; (8) the covenant of circumcision; (9) banishment of Ishmael; and (10) the binding of Isaac. Slightly differing lists of the ten trials of Abraham appear in Jubilees 17:17 and 19:8; Avot D’Rabbi Natan, chap. 33; and Midrash T’hillim 18:25. See also Lewis M. Barth, “Lection for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah: A Homily Containing the Legend of the Ten Trials of Abraham” published in Hebrew in HUC Annual 58 (1987): 13; Pirkei Avot 5:3 refers to the ten trials of Abraham without delineating them.


13. Rather than “on account of Sarai,” the Rabbis understand al d’var Sarai in Gen. 12:17 to mean that YHVH afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues “at the word of Sarai” in the form of prayers to God or appeals for protection to a protecting angel. Tanchuma, Lech L’cha 3:8; B’reishit Rabbah 41:2.

14. Although the Torah says that Abraham asks Sarah to say that she is his sister (Gen.12:13), apparently Abraham also participates in
the process of disseminating this deceit, for in Gen. 12:19, Pharaoh accuses him of spreading the lie, “Why did you say ‘She is my sister’?” (Gen. 12:19).

17. This exclamation in Gen. 20:4 echoes Abraham’s words of protest before God at Sodom in Gen. 18:25: “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that the innocent and guilty fare alike.”


20. Gen. 20:7. A common role of a prophet is to intercede for the people, as in the examples of Moses (Exod. 32:11–14) and Jeremiah (7:6; 14:11; 15:11; 18:20). In this case, Abraham offers a prayer for an individual, Abimelech. Moses also offers an intercessory prayer for an individual, his sister Miriam, who was stricken with leprosy because she spoke out against him (Num. 12:13).


26. Lev. 18:18 prohibits a husband from marrying his wife’s sister. It is presumed that one may marry the sister of a deceased wife, since there is no explicit prohibition against it.

27. Even though marriage to a half-sister was not considered appropriate, such marriages apparently took place, since after Amnon rapes Tamar, she pleads with him to retain her implying that she wants him to marry her (II Sam. 13:16).

29. BT Sanhedrin 69b.

30. Another biblical context in which the word achot does not refer to an actual sister is the Song of Songs, where it is used in a poetic sense, e.g., Song of Songs 4:9: “You have ravished my heart achoti chalah (my sister, my bride).” See also Song of Songs 4:10, 12; 5:1, 2.

31. My translation of the verse is based on the discussion in BT Sanhedrin 58b.

32. B’reishit Rabbah 45:1. The midrash says that when Pharaoh saw what God did for Sarah, he gave his daughter as a maid to Sarah, saying “Better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another house.”
33. *B’reishit Rabbah* 61:4. The Rabbis identify Hagar as Keturah because they do not want the reader to think that after the miracle in which Abraham had a child with Sarah at the age of 100 (Gen. 21:5), at a much older age he had six more children with Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). Rather, if Keturah is Hagar, these children, along with Ishmael, were born to Abraham and Hagar/Keturah, before the miraculous birth of Isaac.

34. Exod. 18:1: ”Jethro, priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law” and Num. 10:29: “Reuel the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moses.” Some other explicit examples of individuals with two names are Jacob/Israel, Jerubbaal/Gideon (Judges 7:1) and Solomon/Jedidiah (II Sam. 12:24).

35. Isaac’s parents are Abraham and Sarah. Rebekah’s father is Bethuel and her mother, although not named in the Torah, participates in Rebekah’s marriage negotiations after Sarah’s death (Gen. 24:55).

36. He also may be responsible for removing any information about Sarah’s parentage in Gen. 11:29, where we might have expected to find it. Indeed, in that same verse we are told that Nahor’s wife, Milcah, is the daughter of Haran, but in regard to the wife of Abram, Sarai, no father is mentioned.

37. See E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 89, 147, who identifies the first story as a J document and the second as coming from E.


40. The text is difficult, but NJPS suggests the following translation for Gen. 20:16: “I (Abimelech) herewith give your brother a thousand pieces of silver; this will serve you (Sarah) as vindication before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone.”

41. See *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 26.

42. Herbert Chanan Brichto, in *The Names of God: The Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 264, proposes that the sign of their affliction had to be immediately visible if they were to understand it as a divine punishment for the kidnapping of Sarah, which had only recently taken place. He suggests that the women of Abimelech’s court developed swollen bellies but did not give birth, a sign of false pregnancy.

43. In the third wife-sister story, the Philistines are referenced four times: Gen. 26:1, 8, 14, 15. In the second story, there are two references to the Philistines: The first occurs after the conclusion of a peace covenant between Abimelech and Abraham, when Abimelech and his chief of troops, Phicol, return to “Philistine
country” (Gen. 21:32); the second appears two verses later: “And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time” (Gen. 21:34). The references to Philistines in both stories would seem to be anachronistic, because the Philistines, who originated in the Greek islands, did not gain control of the southern coastal area of Canaan until the time of the Judges and Samuel. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 390, claims these Philistine references are not a mistake; rather, he believes there may have been an earlier settlement of Philistines who were part of “a minor wave of Aegean invaders.” He also suggests that they differed significantly from the classical Philistines described in Judges and Samuel who were organized in a five-city confederation: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gaza, and Gath. The later Philistines were inveterate enemies of the Israelites and were not inclined to make peace treaties with their Israelite neighbors. The Philistines of Abraham and Isaac’s day lived more inland in the area of Gerar. These early Philistines had adopted the Canaanite culture as may be evidenced from their use of Semitic names (Abimelech, Ahuzzath), and unlike the second wave of Philistines, they were open to making peace treaties with their Semitic neighbors, in this case, the Patriarchs. See Gen. 21:22 and Gen. 26:28.

44. Sarna, *JPS Genesis*, 183.
45. Ibid., 183.
46. If Isaac was present during Abraham and Sarah’s encounter with Abimelech, Abraham could not have concealed that they were husband and wife. Isaac is born in the next chapter, Genesis 21.
47. I would surmise that Sarna calculates a seventy-five-year gap between the second and third wife-sister stories in the following manner: immediately after we read of Abraham and Sarah’s encounter with Abimelech in Genesis 20, we learn of Isaac’s birth when Abraham is 100 (Gen. 21:1–5); Abraham’s death at 175 is recorded in Genesis 25, the chapter preceding the episode with Isaac and Abimelech (Genesis 26). Assuming the chapters are in chronological order, one could conclude that at least seventy-five years (the time between Isaac’s birth and Abraham’s death) separates the occasions when first Abraham, and later Isaac, attempt to deceive the King of Gerar about the identity of their wives.
50. Gen. 26:12–33. In the account with Abraham and Abimelech, Phicol is mentioned in Gen. 21:22, 32. In the story concerning Isaac and Abimelech, Phicol’s name occurs in Gen. 26:26.
51. I Sam. 14:50 states that Abner serves as the head of the troops for Saul, while the reference regarding his position as chief of the troops for Saul’s son Ishbaal occurs in II Sam. 3:1–11.


57. Gen. 26:10.


60. Gen. 26:12–14.


63. Gen. 20:16.

64. Gen. 26:11–14.

65. Nuzi was a provincial town where over five thousand tablets have been unearthed dating from the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C.E., when Hurrians controlled the area. The tablets deal with administrative and legal issues of the society as a whole, as well as the legal concerns of individuals and families. Today, the site of ancient Nuzi is in Iraq.


67. Ibid., 91, 93.

68. Plaut, The Torah, 104.


70. Ibid., 8–9.

71. Ibid., 12.

72. Ibid., 13–14.

73. Ibid., 18.

74. Ibid., 12. Greengus notes that in the case of Speiser’s three wife-sister texts, which deal with a single marriage, documentary evidence from Nuzi of later superseding legal procedures is absent. Nevertheless, he claims that other Mesopotamian societies feature a number of texts that nullify the marital clause of a previous wife-sister bond so that the adopted sister may be married off.
He therefore suspects that documents annulling Speiser’s single wife-sister case have been lost. Greengus also cites other texts (Ibid., 13–14, 23) in which a wife adopts a lower-class women as her sister with the intent that the adopted sister might become a second wife to her husband and produce children, a situation that is strikingly similar to Sarah’s relationship with Hagar, and Rachel and Leah’s relationship with Bilhah and Zilpah.

75. Frymer-Krensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 94.
77. Tamara Cohn Eshkenazi and Andrea L. Weiss eds., The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 63.
78. Ibid., 63.
80. See Ezek. 23:19–21: “But she (Israel) whored still more, remembering how in her youth she had played the whore in Egypt; she lusted for concubinage with them, whose members were like those of asses and whose organs were like those of stallions. Thus you reverted to the wantonness of your youth, remembering your youthful breasts, when the men of Egypt handled your nipples.” In the Jewish Study Bible (New York: Oxford, 1999), 1084, Marvin Sweeney comments that the dalliance with Egypt in this passage from Ezekiel may refer to Solomon’s early alliance with Egypt (I Kings 3:1) and/or Jehoiakim’s reliance on Pharaoh Necco before he turned to Babylonia (II Kings 23:21–24:7).
81. See Midrash Aggadah (twelfth century) on Gen. 12:19: “Because Pharaoh was aware that there were evil people [in his realm], and if Abraham remained in the land [of Egypt], others would fall [by seizing the beautiful Sarah], he therefore said ‘Take her and be gone!’” See also Midrash Tanchuma 3:8, which cites the same passage from Ezekiel 23 in reference to Abraham’s understanding of the lustful nature of the Egyptians so that he sealed Sarah in a box to conceal her beauty from the Egyptians. Eventually, they opened the box, and when they saw how beautiful she was, they reported it to Pharaoh.
82. Gen. 20:15.
83. Jacob, Genesis, 133.
84. Ibid., 133–34.
85. Ibid., 134.
86. Even in his original German commentary, Das Erste Buch der Tora Genesis, Übersetz und Erklart (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934), Jacob does not venture to compare Abimelech in wife-sister stories two and three.
87. Brichto, Names of God, 274.
88. Ibid., 259–79.
89. Ibid., 274.
94. Ibid., 274.
95. Ibid., 274–76.
98. Gen. 47:6. In Gen. 39:22, however, the same Pharaoh displays his capacity for cruelty when he executes his baker for no apparent reason.
100. Ibid., 274.
101. My colleague Rabbi Kenneth J. Weiss has suggested that the presence of three wife-sister stories follows a proven pedagogical approach on the part of the editor of Genesis. The effectiveness of the three-part lesson is attested in many other traditional contexts such as the first chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, where most of the rabbinic teachings are arranged in sets of three, as in Hillel’s famous aphorism “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?” This tripartite structure renders the sayings readily understandable and easy to memorize. Also, having been a steadfast practitioner of the three-part sermon for forty-five years, I believe that there is something about a three-part argument that is especially comprehensible to the listener.
102. See note 17 above, where I point out that Abimelech’s words in Gen. 20:4 are very close to those of Abraham (Gen. 18:15) in the course of his argument with God.
104. Ibid., 276.
105. As noted in this article, the Rabbis absolve Abraham from any wrongdoing in the wife-sister stories.
106. While Sarah is abducted twice, we should be mindful that in the third story, involving Isaac and Rebekah, Rebekah’s abduction is only a potential threat that never takes place.
108. Jonah’s reluctance to deliver a prophetic warning to the Ninevites concerning their impending doom casts him, like Abraham in the wife-sister stories, as an antihero. As we are challenged to refrain from the kind of prejudice Abraham displayed against
the foreigner in the wife-sister stories, so too, from Jonah’s failure to care about the lives of citizens of a foreign city, we are challenged to care for the foreigner.

109. Deuteronomy prohibits Moabites from joining the community of Israel (Deut. 23:4–5) because they did not help the Israelites in the wilderness, and their king, Balak, hired a prophet, Balaam, to curse them. The book of Ruth counters that prohibition by means of the character of Ruth, the Moabitess, who shows loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law, marries two Israelites (first Chilion, and after his death, Boaz) and becomes the great-grandmother of King David.


111. Ruth is the only important biblical character whom I can think of who displays no failings. It is also important to note that Abraham’s flaws are not limited to his dubious behavior in the wife-sister stories. I would also include his callous decision in Gen. 16:6 to allow Sarah to do with Hagar as she thinks best after Hagar has flaunted her pregnancy, a decision that permits Sarah to treat Hagar so harshly that the Egyptian maid flees alone into the desert.