

# A WRINKLE IN PARENTHOOD

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“**N**ow Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years; the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah. And Sarah laughed at herself saying, ‘After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin?’” (Genesis 18:11-12). Due to her advanced age, Sarah our matriarch, considered conception to be as great a miracle as the resurrection of the dead, which could only be accomplished by G-d. According to some commentaries, such as Radak and Sforno, she was postmenopausal. The Midrashic interpretation claimed that her menstrual cycle resumed after many years, telling of her ability to give birth; she thought this was a random occurrence, not a miracle, otherwise she would not have laughed. (Rashi). Sure enough, G-d granted her a child, as the verse says, “And Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him” (Genesis 21:2). According to the Ma’am Loez her menstrual cycle resumed allowing her to conceive. It seems that Sarah experienced backtracking; she had already been through menopause, but her period resumed allowing her to conceive.

Postmenopausal bleeding has a plethora of potential causes, including hormonal imbalance, nutrition and insulin resistance, weight loss, emotional stress; such bleeding could even be an indication of endometrial cancer. But none of the preceding are indications of what Sarah must have experienced as her menstrual tract resumed after years of menopause. There are instances of women who do not undergo menopause until later in life and surprisingly conceive at older ages. The oldest recorded natural mother, a British woman by name of Dawn Brooke, gave birth to her son in August of 1997 at the age of 59. She had not yet experienced menopause and naturally conceived [1]. There have been no recorded instances of women who experience such backtracking like Sarah experienced.

It is important to note that the Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, a Bible commentator, physicist, and physician of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, more commonly known as Ralbag, offered an alternative explanation. As opposed to other commentaries that focus on Sarah’s age and postmenopausal status, Ralbag explained that Sarah and Rachel’s infertility stemmed from their unhealthy medical con-

dition of obesity. Their husbands acquired concubines, and the wives lost weight out of their jealousy. Through weight loss, Sarah and Rachel were consequently able to become fertile and conceive [2]. Ralbag’s explanation is reminiscent of the modern Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, more commonly known as PCOS, a female endocrine disorder which is a cause of subfertility with obesity as a primary element [3].

**This backtracking that Sarah experienced defies the laws of nature. Such an event of backtracking has not been recorded in the history of medicine; it is a miracle unfathomable to the human mind.**

Sarah is not the only biblical personality to conceive at an older age. Rabbi Elie Munk cited Rashi who stated that Yocheved was 130 years of age when she gave birth to Moshe. Ibn Ezra noted that the text does not indicate the miracle of Yocheved’s conceiving Moshe even though Yocheved was quite elderly at that time. Ramban responds that Yocheved had already given birth to Miriam and Aharon before Moshe and there was no indication that she had been through menopause, as was the case with Sarah [4].

Yitzchack’s name, which was commanded by Hashem to Abraham, is indicative of the great marvel of his conception. Yitzchack stems from the word Schock, meaning laughter. Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch explains that this name is significant as by all the laws of nature the concept of his birth was “laughable.” As noted by Rabbi Nosson Scherman in the Stone Chumash, “The manner in which it happened that a woman who was infertile in her youth had a child at the age of ninety established the miraculous nature of God’s chosen people. G-d could just as easily have given a child to Sarah in her prime, but that would not have been perceived as demonstrating Divine intervention” [5].

There is no unanimous consensus for the cause of Sarah’s infertility. From the Ralbag’s interpretation, which suggests that

Sarah suffered from PCOS, Sarah, similarly to Rachel, was barren as a result of her obesity. As a result of participating in a polygamous marriage, Sarah lost weight out of jealousy; therefore, Sarah was able to become fertile and conceive, resulting in Yitzchack's birth. Ralbag's account teaches the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. On the contrary, the Radak, Sforno, Rashi, and the Ma'am Loez agree that Sarah was post-menopausal, and miraculously at the age of ninety she received her period, enabling

her to conceive and give birth to Yitzchack. This backtracking that Sarah experienced defies the laws of nature. Such an event of backtracking has not been recorded in the history of medicine; it is a miracle unfathomable to the human mind. Sarah becoming impregnated at the age of ninety, after years of menopause, and a history of infertility, is evidently a medical miracle conveying God's glory with His ability to perform on the supernatural level. ■

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