

## **MATRIARCHAL INFERTILITY, AND ADOPTION AS A PRELUDE TO CONCEPTION#**

*by*

**S. H. Blondheim\* and D. E. Blondheim\*\***

All the four biblical matriarchs suffered from infertility. Rebekah had primary infertility for which divine intervention was sought and she became pregnant, apparently within a biologically reasonable span of time. However, the other three despaired of becoming pregnant and resorted to adoption. They all offered their handmaidens to their respective husbands as concubines, so that they could adopt their husbands' offspring as their own children. Both Rachel and Leah subsequently became pregnant, the first after a period of primary infertility and the second after a period of secondary infertility.

According to folk wisdom, adoption may promote conception in infertile women. Scientific proof of this concept is lacking, possibly because the many studies have not included really appropriate control subjects. The pregnancy rates in

# Dedicated to the memory of our matriarch, Sarah bat Menahem Manya ל"ט.

\* M.D. Professor, Metabolic Clinic, Hadassah Hospital Center, Jerusalem, Israel.

\*\* Student, Depart. of Jewish Philosophy, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

women who have adopted a child should be compared with those in women who have applied for adoption but did not receive a child (Mai, F. M., *Psychosom. Med.* 33: 509, 1971).

Many women now adopt in the hope that it will actually promote pregnancy. It may be that this possible proconceptive measure was known as far back as early biblical times, and was a factor in the decision of three of the matriarchs to adopt their husbands' newborn children as their own. The case of Sarah fits the suggested control series: she decided to adopt but did not receive a child. Ishmael was rejected by her before birth because of his mother Hagar's conduct to her mistress. Sarah's postmenopausal pregnancy with Isaac occurred fourteen years later, and only when divine intervention set back the biological clock.

According to Rashi (1040-1105 CE) the matriarchs each expected to bear her own children as a divine reward for introducing a rival into her husband's family life so that at least he might have children. R. Levi b. Gershon (1288-1344), Rabenu Nissim (1310-1375) and R. Obadia Sforno (1475-1550) appear to suggest psychosomatic mechanisms: a change of 'temperament' (*lahaphokh mizgah*), a change in her 'system' (*yeshaneh ma'arekhet gevirtah*), or a stirring up of her 'nature' (*yit'orer hatevah*), respectively. However, almost all the other classical and modern commentators hold that the matriarchs merely expected to become adoptive mothers of the children of their husbands and their handmaidens. This would indicate ignorance of the possible causal relationship between adoption and conception by all except the three commentators quoted.