

Short Biographies of Important Archetypal Women in the Torah, Prophets and Chronicles

Sarai (Sarah)

Daughter of Haran, she married her uncle Abraham. As converts and the first matriarch and patriarch of the Jewish people, the couple rejected idol worship and devoted their lives to teaching about the oneness and formless God.

Sarah's Tent was known as the first spiritual gathering place, or Mishkan, where weary travellers, regardless of religion, were fed and given respite.

Sarah's treatment of Hagar, Abraham's concubine, was heartless. She demonstrated such cruel jealousy that God had to intervene by consoling Hagar with the promise of a great future for her son, Ishmael, from whom the Muslim faith originated.

Childless until old age, Sarah was blessed with Isaac after a difficult pregnancy. Upon hearing that God had tested Abraham's faith by commanding that he sacrifice Isaac, she died of a broken heart.

Sarah is upheld as a model of women's perseverance as wife, convert, community builder and mother.

Rebecca (Rivkah)

Daughter of Bethuel and sister of Laban, both men were scoundrels and idol worshippers. Rebecca remained loyal to the early Jewish faith and was known as a kind and generous person.

One day, while drawing water, Rebecca met Eliezer, a messenger of Abraham in search of a wife for his son, Isaac. As he tested her character, she generously provided food and water to him and his entourage.

Rebecca married Isaac and bore twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Rebecca favoured Jacob while Isaac favoured Esau. On his death bed, Isaac instructed his eldest son, Esau, to hunt and cook a meal for him. Overhearing the conversation, the cunning Rebecca decided to cook the dish and have Jacob deliver it to his father in the guise of Esau. As a result, Jacob received his father's blessing and, with it, the entire birthright.

Rebecca changed the course of Jewish history with her trickery. Jacob lived on to establish his sons as leaders of the 12 tribes that populated ancient Israel, including the Levites as high priests and the Davidic line of Kings.

Rebecca is remembered as a kind, beautiful and deceptive archetype.

Leah

Eldest daughter of Laban and Adina, Leah married Jacob through the trickery of her father.

Leah gave birth to six sons, including Levi who was to head the priestly clan in Judah and from whom the Davidic line is descended. Leah also gave birth to Jacob's only daughter, Dinah.

Leah might be described as woman of quiet resolve. She played a role in the establishment of eight of Jacob's twelve tribes. Despite a loveless marriage, her sons buried her next to Jacob in the Hebron cave with the other patriarchs and matriarchs.

Leah is remembered as the epitome of childbearing, motherhood and perseverance.

Rachel

Daughter of Laban and Adina and younger sister to Leah, Rachel was Jacob's first love. When Jacob was deceived into marrying Leah first, Rachel warned Leah of the deceit. Rachel and Leah continued to be supportive of each other throughout their lives. As Rachel was childless for many years, Leah gave her and Jacob a maidservant as surrogate who bore them two children.

Rachel then conceived Joseph, an influential figure in his own right. Sadly, she died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

Unlike all of the preceding patriarchs and matriarchs who were buried in Hebron, Rachel was buried in isolation at the side of the road.

Rachel is remembered for her youthful beauty and is the archetype of yearning for love and for motherhood.

Dinah

Daughter of Jacob and Leah, and sister to twelve brothers, Dinah received neither blessing nor land entitlement from her father.

Dinah, "went outside" when she left the Jewish encampment to mingle with the women of Shechem. She was seduced by a man called Shechem, who felt a deep attraction to her. After they had consummated their relationship, he asked for Dinah's hand in marriage. Her father and brothers initially agreed to the offer on the condition that the men of Shechem be circumcised. They did so and, while they were recovering, Dinah's brothers avenged their sister's honour by carrying out the slaughter of all the men of Shechem.

While Jacob wanted his daughter to return to the Jewish camp, Dinah felt that no man would now want to marry her. She consented to becoming the wife of Shechem, and later of Job.

Dinah is perceived as the survivor and the outsider.

Yocheved

Raised by her father, Levi, and her grandfather, Jacob, Yocheved was born at the moment when the seventy members of Joseph's brothers' families arrived in Egypt. Yocheved married her nephew, Amram, and have birth to Miriam, Aaron and Moses.

Yocheved was the chief Jewish nurse and midwife in Egypt. She defied the Pharaoh's order to kill all male first-born babies to Jewish women. Yocheved taught her daughter, Miriam, not to fear Pharaoh. Mother and daughter continued to preserve the lives of Jewish girls and boys.

When Yocheved gave birth to Moses, the Israelites were in peril. She placed Moses in a basket on the Nile in the hopes that he would be taken in by someone who could keep him safe. Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and Yocheved continued to nurse the child even after the adoption. Yocheved and her three adult children were instrumental in preparing a healthy population for Moses to lead out of slavery.

Yocheved is remembered as a woman of faith, a midwife and a healer.

Miriam

Daughter of Yocheved and Amram, Miriam was born into slavery and followed in her mother's footsteps as a midwife and healer. When Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam became the go-between the two mothers. Miriam brought baby Moses to Yocheved until he was weaned.

Scripture describes her, on equal footing alongside Moses and Aaron, as a prophet and a leader. She led the Israelites in song and dance when they left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea.

Miriam is remembered as a leader, healer and poet who is associated with "Living Water".

Batya

Batya was the daughter of Pharaoh, who decreed enslavement of Jews in Egypt. While bathing in the Nile to sooth her leprosy, she saw the basket that held baby Moses. When she touched the basket, her leprosy disappeared. In quiet defiance of her father, she adopted baby Moses, even though she knew he was Jewish. She shared the care for Moses with his birth mother, Yocheved.

Batya, the daughter of God, converted to Judaism. She joined the Jews in the Exodus, led by Moses.

She is remembered as a rebel, a transformer and seeker of justice.

Ziphorah

An Ishmaelite who became the wife of Moses while he was in exile in Midian. She returned with him to Egypt on his quest to free the Israelites from slavery. She converted to Judaism and remained loyal to Moses. Ziphorah was the subject of Miriam's (Moses's sister) racial slur against her dark skin. As a result, God punished Miriam with leprosy, indicating to us God's instruction for tolerance and inclusiveness.

Devorah

Devorah was the sole woman who served in a group of twelve advisors who succeeded Joshua in Israel, following the death of Moses. She was a judge, prophetess and military leader before the time of the Kings, when the Canaanite threatened invasion of the land of Israel. When she chose General Barak to lead the invasion against the Canaanites, Barak insisted that Devorah lead with him. Together, they devised a military strategy to allow the land of Israel to be at peace for the next 40 years.

In a military dominated by men, Devorah is often compared to Golda Meir and other strong women leaders.

Ruth

Born a Moabite princess, Ruth was disenchanted with idol worship and her life of privilege. Ruth came to marry a son of Naomi, whose Jewish family had migrated from Judah to Moab, during a famine. When Naomi's husband and two sons died, she told her daughters-in-law that they were free to return to their families. However, Ruth and Naomi shared strong bond. Ruth chose to remain with her, "*Wherever you go, I will go ... your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.*" This story of kinship and loyalty is read at Shavuot. Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, where Ruth married Boaz. Their great grandson was King David.

Ruth symbolizes loyalty and commitment.

Huldah

A prophetess, she worked in close cooperation with Jeremiah, leading prophet of his time and with King Josiah (640-610BCE) of Judah. At the time, Judea was in turmoil, both from outside and within. Judea was surrounded and threatened by invasion by nearby Egypt and Assyria. Huldah encouraged King Josiah to place his trust in the one God, the God of Israel, as a strategy to overcome external threat. She acted as a conduit between God and King Josiah. As advisor, she reinforced Judaic Laws, especially against idol worship, which Josiah's father and grandfather had reintroduced to the kingdom. Priests and kings listened to Huldah.

Huldah is remembered as a prophetic oracle and preacher.

Esther

She was raised by her Uncle Mordechai in Persia sometime during the occupation of Judea (500 to 350BC). Esther and Mordechai lived in obscurity in Shusham during a particularly perilous time for the Jews, ruled by King Achashverosh and his cruel chief advisor Haman. The King executed his wife, Vashti, when she refused to pose unclothed to his drunken group of cronies. Mordechai devised a plan for modest Esther to marry King Achashverosh and to inform the King of the persecution and to convince him to protect the Jews from Haman and annihilation. Esther and Vashti can be said to have worked in parallel to advance the integrity of women and to defy royal authority.

Esther is remembered as a seductress and a spy who worked on behalf of the greater good –the protection and continuity of the Jewish people.