

Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends
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The Higgledy-Piggledy Palace

Sarah, the wife of the patriarch Abraham, and the great mother of the Jewish people, was the most beautiful woman who ever lived. Everybody who saw her marveled at the dazzling radiance of her countenance; they stood spellbound before the glorious light that shone in her eyes and the wondrous clearness of her complexion. This greatly troubled Abraham when he fled from Canaan to Egypt. It was disconcerting to have crowds of travelers gazing at his wife as if she were something more than human. Besides, he feared that the Egyptians would seize Sarah for the king's harem.

So, after much meditation, he concealed his wife in a big box. When he arrived at the Egyptian frontier, the customs officials asked him what it contained.

"Barley," he replied.

"You say that because the duty on barley is the lowest," they said. "The box must surely be packed with wheat."

"I will pay the duty on wheat," said Abraham, who was most anxious they should not open the box.

The officials were surprised, for, as a rule, people endeavored to avoid paying the duties.

"If you are so ready to pay the higher tax," they said, "the box must contain something of greater value. Perhaps it contains spices."

Abraham intimated his readiness to pay the duty on spices.

"Oh, Oh!" laughed the officers. "Here is a strange person ready to pay heavy dues. He must be anxious to conceal something--gold, perchance."

"I will pay the duty on gold," said Abraham, quietly.

The officers were now completely bewildered.

"Our highest duty," said their chief, "is on precious stones, and since you decline to open the box, we must demand the tax on the costliest gems."

"I will pay it," said Abraham, simply.

The officers could not understand this at all, and after consulting among themselves, they decided that the box must be opened.

"It may contain something highly dangerous," they argued.

Abraham protested, but he was arrested by the guards and the box forced open. When Sarah was revealed, the officials stepped back in amazement and admiration.

"Indeed, a rare jewel," said the chief.

It was immediately decided to send Sarah to the king. When Pharaoh beheld her, he was enraptured. She was simply dressed in the garments of a peasant woman, with no adornment and no jewels, and yet the king thought he had never seen a woman so entrancingly beautiful. When he saw Abraham, however, his brow clouded.

"Who is this man?" he demanded of Sarah.

Fearing that he might be imprisoned, or even put to death if she acknowledged him as her husband, Sarah replied that he was her brother.

Pharaoh felt relieved. He smiled on Abraham and greeted him pleasantly.

"Thy sister is exceeding fair to gaze upon," he said, "and comely of form. She hath bewitched me by her matchless charm. She shall become the favorite of my harem. I will recompense thee well for thy loss of her. Thou shalt be loaded with gifts."

Abraham was too wise to betray the anger that surged in his heart.

"Courage, my beloved," he whispered to Sarah. "The good God will not forsake us."

He made pretense of agreeing to Pharaoh's suggestion, and the chief steward of the king gave him an abundant store of gold and silver and jewels, also sheep and oxen and camels. Abraham was conducted to a beautiful palace, where many slaves attended him and bowed before him, for one on whom the monarch had showered favors was a great man in the land of Pharaoh. Left alone, Abraham began to pray most devoutly.

Meanwhile, Sarah was led into a gorgeous apartment where the queen's own attendants were ordered to array her in the richest of the royal garments. Then she was brought before Pharaoh who dismissed all the attendants.

"I desire to be alone with thee," said the king to Sarah. "I have much to say to thee, and I long to feast my eyes on those features of beauty rare."

But Sarah shrank from him. To her, he appeared ugly and loathsome. His smile was a vicious leer, and his voice sounded like a harsh croak.

"Fear not," he said, trying to speak tenderly and kindly. "I will do thee no harm. Nay, I will load thee with honors. I will grant any request that thou makest."

"Then let me go hence," said Sarah, quickly. "I desire naught but that thou shouldst permit me to depart with my brother."

"Thou jestest," said Pharaoh. "That cannot be. I will make thee queen," he cried, passionately and he made a move toward her.

"Stop!" cried Sarah. "If thou approachest one step nearer. . ."

Pharaoh interrupted with a laugh. To threaten a king was so funny that he could not refrain from a hoarse cackle. But Sarah had become suddenly silent. She was looking not at him, but behind him. Pharaoh turned, but observed nothing. He could not see what Sarah saw--a figure, a spirit, clutching a big stick.

"Come," said the king, "be not foolish. I cannot be angry with a creature so fair as thou art. But it is not meet--nay, it is not wise--to utter threats to one who wears a crown."

Sarah made no reply. She was no longer afraid. She knew that her prayers, and those of Abraham, had been answered, and that no harm would befall her. Pharaoh mistook her silence and advanced toward her. As he did so, however, he felt a tremendous blow on the head. He was stunned for a moment. On recovering himself he looked all round the room, but could see nothing. Sarah continued to stand motionless.

"Strange," muttered Pharaoh. "I--I thought some one had entered the room."

Again he moved toward Sarah, and once more he received a staggering blow--this time on the shoulder. It was only by a great effort of will that he did not cry out in pain. He concluded he must have been seized by some sudden illness, but after a moment he felt better and bravely tried to smile at Sarah.

"I--I just thought of something most important," said he, attempting to offer some explanation for nearly toppling over in an undignified manner. He stood nearer to Sarah and began to raise his hand to touch her.

"If thou layest but a finger on me, it will be at thy peril," exclaimed Sarah, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Pshaw!" he cried, losing patience, and he raised his hand.

This time the cudgel of the spirit invisible to Pharaoh did not strike him: it came down gently and rested lightly on the king's outstretched arm. And Pharaoh could not move it. He grew pale and trembled.

"Art thou a witch?" he gasped, at last.

Sarah was so angry when she heard this insult that she flashed a signal with her eyes to the spirit, and the latter plied his cudgel lustily about the king's head and shoulders, making the monarch break out in most unkingly howls of pain.

"Thy pardon, thy pardon, I crave," he managed to scream. "I mean not what I said. I am ill--very ill. My body aches. My arm is paralyzed."

The cudgeling ceased and Pharaoh was able to move his arm. He writhed in agony, for he was bruised all over. He rushed hastily away, saying he would return on the morrow. Sarah found herself locked in, but she was not again disturbed.

Pharaoh, however, had further adventures. The spirit was in merry mood and had a night's entertainment at the king's expense. No sooner did the king lie down upon his bed than the spirit tilted it and sent him sprawling on the floor. Whenever Pharaoh tried to lie down the same thing happened. He went from one room to another, but all efforts at rest were unavailing. Every bed rejected him and every chair and couch did the same, although when he commanded others to lie down they did so quite comfortably. He tried lying down with one of his attendants, but while the latter was able to remain undisturbed, Pharaoh found himself bodily lifted, stood upon his head, spun around and then rolled over on the ground.

His physicians could provide no remedy, his magicians--hastily summoned from their own slumbers--could afford no explanation, and Pharaoh spent a terrible night wandering from room to room and up and down the corridors, where the corners seemed to go out of their way to bump against him and the stairs seemed to go down when he wanted to walk up, and vice-versa. Such a higgledy-piggledy palace was never seen. Worse still, with the first streak of dawn he noticed that he was smitten with leprosy.

Hastily he sent for Abraham and said: "Who and what thou art I know not. Thou and thy sister have brought a plague upon me. I desired to make her my queen, but now I say to you: Rid me of this leprosy and get thee hence with thy sister. I will bestow riches on ye, but get ye gone, and speedily."

With a magic jewel which he wore on his breast, Abraham restored Pharaoh to health, and then departed with Sarah. These final words he said to Pharaoh:

"Sarah is not my sister, but my wife. I give thee this warning. Should thy descendants at any time seek to persecute our descendants, then will our God, He, the One God of the universe, surely punish the king with plague again."

And, many years afterward, as you read in the Bible, the prediction came true.