There can be a situation where intentions are good, but there are unexpected consequences, and we are left trying to figure out what went wrong, and how to move forward.

In Lech L'cha, we learn that Avram and Sarai (as they are called at this point) are struggling with infertility. They have no children, and besides their personal desire to have a family, there is a second big question. God has blessed them that their descendants will be numerous, and without a single child, it's unclear how this will come to be.

Sarai says to Avram, "Look, the Eternal has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maidservant; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request.

There is a basis for this plan: in Hammurabi's Code, which was the law of the land in the culture around them, there was a provision allowing for this exact case.

Sarai wanted to make lemonade out of lemons, so by having Avram have a child with her servant, she would at least have some control over the child, and would be very present in its life. She thinks that perhaps this is part of God's plan, as it never specifies who the mother would be.

She is very sensitive in her approach, and wanting things to be done properly, has Avram take Hagar as an *isha*, which is often translated as concubine, but can also mean wife, in the plain Hebrew. Ramban points out that she doesn't want this to seem improper in any kind of way, but that out of her great love and respect for her husband, wants this to be legitimate.

Avram, on his part, never pressures her or insists that they take drastic measures to have a child. The Torah only has Sarai coming to him with this idea, and then it says that Avram heeded her request, or literally, heard her voice.

When I read this, I wonder, did Avram really think it through, or was he just swept up in it all. In public speaking, they talk about the 7 38 55 rule, which is that in a message, only 7% of what is received is the actual words a person is saying, 38% is from the voice, and 55% is other nonverbal communication, like body language. So it's possible that when it says that Avram heard her voice, he was hearing her anguish, her shame, and her desperation to make this right. So he agrees.

Avram and Sarai are on the same page, and they commence with the plan. The Torah doesn't overuse words when it comes to telling stories, so in the next one sentence, we get this: He cohabited with Hagar, she conceived, and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was held in lower esteem in her eyes. That's a lot of action in one sentence, so let's unpack it:

-They are successful on the first try – not very common. It certainly could be interpreted as sending a message of approval of the plan, that this was the missing link.

-Hagar! We finally hear from Hagar! I knew we forgot someone. In her status as a servant, it's not surprising that the entire arrangement is between Avram and Sarai, without any consent from her. And now, what we hear is that Hagar feels some sort of triumph, and that Sarai, who is supposed to hold the power, is seen as not so powerful anymore. Literally she is seen as kal – light – in her eyes. Diminished. As Hagar grows heavier in her pregnancy, Sarai is light.

In the next verse, Sarai sees this right away, and goes to Avram – "This is your fault!" Avram's heroic response is, "she's your servant, do whatever you want." So Sarai is cruel to her, and Hagar runs away.

Sarai blames Avram: this is your fault! Tough claim to make. Rashi shares two ideas – one is that when Avram prayed for a child, but didn't include Sarai in his prayers. The second is that Avram was silent

when things became tense between Sarai and Hagar. He could have intervened in Sarai's defense and reminded Hagar of her status. I remember learning something, which is that when Rashi gives two different explanations for something, it means that he isn't sure.

Why would it be Avram's fault? This whole plan was Sarai's idea, it was legal, and it worked. Avram wanted a child and wanted Sarai to be happy. Sarai wanted a child and wanted God's blessing to unfold as promised. And yet, they end up with a mess.

So what can we learn?

First, don't treat people like instruments for your use. Although legally acceptable because of Hagar's slave status, they use Hagar, they treat her like an object, and then are suddenly surprised when she has feelings. We too are guilty of thinking of certain people as pawns and fail to take into account their needs and their dignity. This story is a strong warning that just because we have power in a situation, we must be wary of abusing it.

Second, we must be careful when dealing with a loved one who is in pain. It can be tempting to appease them, no matter what they want, just to alleviate their suffering. But, think of how this situation might have been better if Avram had thought two steps ahead to what might happen if the plan worked? There are times that we need to be the rational ones in the room when another person is not able to do so, with the goal of preventing them from future pain. This is of course made more difficult when you have an emotional stake in the game, as did Avram, who wanted a child. But still, his lack of good judgment led to a tragic outcome.

Last, we learn that we have to be realistic about how much we can stretch ourselves emotionally, and we have to hold ourselves accountable for our moral commitments. In other words, despite their pure intentions and the respect for one another that informed this plan, where Sarai and Avram go astray is in taking on something this emotionally hard. Modern commentator Nechama Leibowitz suggests the following: "Before man undertakes a mission that will tax all his moral and spiritual powers he should ask himself first whether he can maintain those same high standards to the bitter end." Sarai and Avram either willfully neglected to do this kind of introspection, or they each had a blind spot in this area. The result of this scenario is much worse than the initial infertility that prompts it. Sarai and her servant are estranged, Avram is in an impossible position between two wives, and there is no way that Sarai will be enjoying vicarious motherhood through Hagar.

Though not in this scenario, we encounter the same problem in our lives when we commit to doing something virtuous, and then find that the task is a greater burden than we had imagined. I'm talking about when we offer to do someone a favor, and then they take us up on it, and we realize that it's actually kind of a pain, and we don't do as nice of a job. Like you offer to bring in your neighbor's mail while they are on vacation, and then you forget to do it on the way home, and then you put on your pajamas, and it's snowing, and you just decide it can wait another day. In Jewish law, it's not the thought that counts.

Rambam frequently weighs our personal limits against the impulse to do something good, and tries to prevent situations where we overreach with the best intentions and end up sinning instead. For example, in the laws of honoring one's parents, Rambam explains the obligation to provide for our parents' needs and to treat them with dignity and respect. If the son or daughter finds this too frustrating, he or she is obligated to appoint someone else to care for them, rather than risking losing their patience and acting in a disrespectful manner. You have to know your own limits, and there is no

concept where we can say “well I was trying to do the right thing, but it’s their fault that they are so difficult!” We are responsible for what we say and do.

Similarly, the Rambam famously has an eight-tiered hierarchical structure for giving tzedakah. All tzedakah is good, but factors such as generosity and anonymity mean that some ways are better than others. In this hierarchy, Rambam says that it is better to give less generously, but with a cheerful face, than to give more but to be scornful during the donation. Being mean is not justified because a person gives a lot of money. We have to be both generous and kind at the same time, period.

It is not the thought that counts, we are not praised for being ambitious, there are no points for trying. This is frustrating, as I am sure we have each said at one point that we meant well, and have used this as a justification for a situation that did not go as planned, perhaps when someone was emotionally bruised. But if you think of another person who has let you down, then maybe you don’t want them sitting there, patting themselves on the back because they meant well.

We don’t have it easy as the complex beings that we are. Our needs and desires are often in conflict, and our emotions can be very persuasive to ourselves and others. The key is to hold ourselves accountable and to be sensitive to the impact of our actions on other people. As humans, we can justify anything, but let us not miss the opportunity to challenge ourselves to be kinder, more generous, and more in control of ourselves.