



Biblical Women

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HAGAR - BLESSINGS OF OTHERNESS

Background

Sara is the spouse of Avraham; they are the first Jewish couple. Concerned about their aging and infertility, Sara devises a plan to hasten the fulfillment of the divine promise of progeny. Sara instructs Avraham to "consort" with Hagar, an Egyptian maidservant, intending that Hagar will be a surrogate mother for her child. Hagar is treated as an inferior foreigner, a signification to which her name alludes. Bringing forth Avraham's first child, Ishmael, Hagar is insubordinate to her "mistress", Sara, who deals harshly with her and exiles her into the wilderness. Along with these hardships, she is the first person in the Torah to merit the visit of an angel, the first woman to be informed of her forthcoming birth, and the first human to name God. Hagar is also the first person to have revealed to her the source of underground water, a sublime symbol of Torah and divine blessing.

While in the Book of Exodus the biblical narrative recounts how the Jews are enslaved by Egypt, Hagar suffers the inversion of the relationship of oppressor-oppressed; she is an Egyptian oppressed by Jews. As the mother of Ishmael, Hagar is also at the nexus of Judaism and Islam. We read her story on Rosh haShanah, the Jewish New Year. Her character and relationships are worthy of sensitive consideration.

Biblical Sources

I Hagar Conceiving

1 Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request. 3 So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. 4 He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!" 6 Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

7 An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, 8 and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

9 And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment." 10 And the angel of the Lord said to her,

"I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count."

11 The angel of the Lord said to her further,

"Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering. 12 He shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen."

13 And she called the Lord who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered. 15 Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Genesis 16)

א וְשָׂרָי אִשְׁתֵּי אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ; וְלֵאָה שִׁפְחָה מִצְרַיִם וְשָׂמָה הָגָר. ב וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָי אֶל-אַבְרָם הֲנֵה-נָא עֲצַרְנִי יְהוָה מִלְדֹת--בֶּן-נָא אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָה מִמֶּנָּה; וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרָי. ג וַתִּקַּח שָׂרָי אִשְׁתֵּי-אַבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרַיִת שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִקֶּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשִׁבְתֵּי אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן; וַתֵּתֶן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁה לֹא-אִשָּׁה. ד וַיָּבֵא אֶל-הָגָר וַתְּהַר; וַתֵּרָא פִי הָרְחֵמָה וַתִּקַּל גְּבֵרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ. ה וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ--אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקָךָ וַתֵּרָא פִי הָרְחֵמָה וַאֲקַל בְּעֵינֶיהָ; יִשְׁפֹט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ. ו וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרָי הֲנֵה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ--עֲשִׂי-לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ; וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרָי וַתִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵיהָ. ז וַיִּמְצְאָהּ מְלֹאךְ יְהוָה עַל-עֵין הַמַּיִם--בְּמִדְבָּר: עַל-הָעַיִן בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר. ח וַיֹּאמֶר הָגָר שִׁפְחָתִי שָׂרָי אִי-מִזֶּה בָאת--וְאֵנָה תִלְכִי; וַתֹּאמֶר--מִפְּנֵי שָׂרָי גְבֵרָתִי אֲנֹכִי בְרַחֲתִי. ט וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מְלֹאךְ יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל-גְּבֵרָתְךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַחַת יְדֶיהָ. י וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מְלֹאךְ יְהוָה הֲרֵבָה אֲרֵבָה אֶת-זַרְעֲךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מֵרֵב. יא וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מְלֹאךְ יְהוָה הֲנֵה הִנֵּה הָרָה וְיִלְדֶת בֶּן וְקִרְיַת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמַעְאֵל כִּי-שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל-עֲנָוָהּ. יב וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פְרָא אָדָם--יָדוּ בְכָל יוֹם לֹא בּוֹ; וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-אֲחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן. יג וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם-יְהוָה הַדּוֹבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אֵתְהָ אֵל כְּאִי: כִּי אָמְרָה הַגֵּם הַלֵּם כְּאִתִּי--אֲחָרֵי רְאִי. יד עַל-כֵּן קִרְא לְבָאָר בְּאֵר לְחַי-רְאִי--הֲנֵה בֵּן-קִדְשׁ וּבֵן בְּרֵד. טו וַתֵּלֶד הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן; וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָם שֵׁם-בְּנוֹ אִשְׁרָי-יְלֵה הָגָר יִשְׁמַעְאֵל. טז וַאֲבָרָם בֶּן-שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וַיִּשָּׂא שְׁנַיִם בְּלֶדְתֵי-הָגָר אֶת-יִשְׁמַעְאֵל לְאַבְרָם. (בר' טז)

II Hagar's Revelation

9 Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Avraham playing. 10 She said to Avraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." 11 The matter distressed Avraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. 12 But God said to Avraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. 13 As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

14 Early next morning Avraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, 16 and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she said, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she raises up her voice and cries out.

17 God heard the cry of the child, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. 20 God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen. 21)

ט ותרא שרה את-בן-הגר המצרית אשר-ילדה לאברהם--מצחק. י ותאמר לאברהם גרש האמה הזאת ואת-בנה: כי לא ירש בן-האמה הזאת עם-בני עם-יצחק. יא וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם על אודת בנו. יב ויאמר אלהים אל-אברהם אל-ירע בעיניך על-הנער ועל-אמתך --כל אשר תאמר אליך שרה שמע בקולה: כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע. יג וגם את-בן-האמה לגוי אשימו: כי זרעה הוא. יד וישכם אברהם בבקר ויקח-לחס וחסמת מים ויתן אל-הגר שם על-שכמה ואת-הילד--וישלחה; ותלך ותתע במדבר באר שבע. טו ויכלו המים מן-החסמת; ותשלך את-הילד תחת אחד השיחים. טז ותלך ותשב לה מנגד הרחק כמטחי קשת כי אמרה אל-ארה במות הילד; ותשב מנגד ותשא את-קלה ותבך. יז וישמע אלהים את-קול הנער ויקרא מלאך אלהים אל-הגר מן-השמים ויאמר לה מה-לך הגר; אל-תיראי כי-שמע אלהים אל-קול הנער באשר הוא-שם. יח קומי שאי את-הנער והחזיקי את-ידך בו: כי-לגוי גדול אשימנו. יט ויפקח אלהים את-עיניה ותרא באר מים; ותלך ותמלא את-החסמת מים ותשק את-הנער. כ ויהי אלהים את-הנער ויגדל; וישב במדבר ויהי רבה קשת. כא וישב במדבר פארן; ותקח-לו אמו אשה מארץ מצרים. (בר' כא)

Questions for Discussion

There is a range of possible interpretations of Hagar's experience. Does Hagar feel herself to be Sara's chattel, a servant whose fertile body is subject to use according to her mistress's discretion? Notwithstanding the class and gender differences, Avraham is also subject to Sara's instruction to perform his sexual function, to impregnate Hagar. How do you understand the meanings and nuances of procreation in this biblical context?

How might Hagar interpret the fact that Sara achieves both Avraham's and the angel's acquiescence to the cruel treatment that she endures. How do you evaluate the class, power, and personality issues in these complex interactions?

How do you understand the parallel between the *akeda* and the exile of Hagar with her young son? What is the significance of the fact that Sara is responsible for the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael *before* the *akeda*?

Hagar expresses herself sparingly and poignantly. In the first scene, she responds to the angel's query that she is fleeing her mistress; she spontaneously names the divine who appears to her, "El-roi", God who sees me. In the second scene, the text records her anguish, both her intention to avoid witnessing the imminent death of her child and her crying out. What is the significance of the Torah articulating Hagar's feelings against the grain of the dominant interest of the text?

Links for Inquiry

For an assortment of (unreferenced) midrashim, rabbinic elaborations about Hagar,

http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=419

See the parallel version of the scene with Hagar and her child in the wilderness in the Koran:

<http://www.angelfire.com/on/ummiby1/ishmael.html>

For an alternative view of Sara's and Hagar's relationship as a collaboration,

<http://www.bethaverim.org/erevrosh.htm>

Judith Brin Ingber has created a hopeful dance performance piece based on the biblical story of Hagar,

<http://ourworld.cs.com/jbriningber/images/newspaper.htm>

Summary of Issues

Access to the voices and perspectives of people who are designated "others" in society, the less powerful, marginal characters, is precious. At the moments of the exercise of privilege and the enforcement of submission, Hagar makes the framework of power and the priorities of value more visible, more transparent. Her character also reveals divine engagement with the underprivileged that, while it alleviates suffering and promises opportunities, does not upset the structure and authority of the dominant biblical narrative. From this text, an alternative narrative emerges, the Muslim canon that centers the marginal characters, Hagar and her child, Ishmael as the progenitors of the Arab people.

The tremendous preoccupation of the text with matters of progeny challenges the association of childbearing and nurture with the female gender. Questions about the inheritance of the legacy of the first generations of Jewish families are at the core of the biblical narrative, for both parents. What is the significance of affiliating procreation with both, one, or the other gender? How is it the same or different in contemporary society compared with the Torah?

Methodology Matters

After Sara dies, Avraham marries Ketura who gives birth to six progenitors of nations. Rabbi Judah expresses a contended view: "She [Ketura] is Hagar" (*Bereshit Rabba* 61, 4). In the rabbinic imagination, this emendation revises Hagar's formal status to render her a wedded partner with Avraham. What are some limits to *adding* meaning to the biblical text? According to what criteria is this appropriate?

Contact

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