

Hagar

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Since I wrote about Abraham last week, it seems only right in this era of #MeToo, that I should write about a woman, Hagar. She too is far more complex and multi-faceted than a surface reading of the text would suggest.

Like the Handmaiden in the book by Margaret Atwood (and the TV series), Hagar was caught up in a world in which she was a pawn. A slave with everything that that implied. And she fought it, to the best of her ability and under very difficult circumstances. Most slaves then as now had little or no choice and only rarely a chance of freedom. Even today, in many parts of the world women, are treated as chattels to be abused or disposed of. And slavery or indentured employment means that men, women and children have no life of their own. Slaves were used for procreating. To provide more slaves.

What Hagar was asked to do was not uncommon in those days. Priestesses in Babylonia were expected to dedicate their bodies to which ever god (or king) was in power and not "deform" them by getting pregnant. But they did employ surrogates, usually, slaves, to produce children for them. And as in the Bible story, they gave birth, lying in their mistress's thighs, to enact a symbolic birth from them (as indeed they did on TV in Gilead). Hagar had no choice. Sara in her desperation was the one who suggested it and begged Abraham to agree which he did. She was perhaps unaware of the emotional consequences. And yet Abraham did actually make her a wife, even if of the second rank. He must have felt he had to do "the right thing." She could easily have remained a servant and indeed is described as such later.

Inevitably, once Hagar became pregnant, she felt she had the upper hand. She bridled at obeying Sara and resisted. Sara felt her position was being undermined and appealed to her husband. He listened to her. That is significant. In those times I don't think many husbands listened to their wives. He told her to do as she pleased. Sara was strict with Hagar and made her feel her subservience.

Hagar ran away into the desert where an Angel of God found her by a well. There he told her that she had a great future. She would be the progenitor of a might nation, beginning with a son, to be called *YishmaEl*, "God has heard you." He would become a strong, wild man, in conflict with all those around him but having the upper hand. But in the meantime, she should go back and humble herself and accept Sara's authority. She called the place where this happened *Be'er LeChai Roi*. Which could mean "the well of God (as the source of life)" or "the well where the Source of life saw me" or "I have seen the well of life." She went back, submitted herself to Sara's authority and gave birth. It is Abraham who then calls the child Ishmael. Did she tell Abraham what had happened? Did she say that God had appeared to her? We don't know. The text does not tell us.

Some years later Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Abraham had a celebration when

the child was weaned (not a celebration that has entered Jewish custom since). Sarah noticed Ishmael making fun. The word the Torah uses is *metzah* which has the same root as Isaac's name *Yitzhak*. It implies laughter which can sometimes be innocent, but also can have a tinge of ridicule. It is also the word used to describe the orgy at the Golden Calf (Exodus 32.6). Definitely negative, but was it any more than childish envy? Where did he get this from? Was it just childish envy of a rival? Or had he picked up something negative from his mother?

Sarah reacted against both of them. Assuming Hagar had instigated it. She insisted on driving Hagar and her son out. Abraham prevaricated. For the first time, he was not supportive. God told him in no uncertain words to listen to his wife. He sent Hagar and her son away with some water and bread. She wandered and got lost. The water and the food ran out. She feared her son was going to die and placed him under a bush and then went to sit far away, so that "she wouldn't see his slow death." An angel appeared to her. Opened her eyes so that she saw the well. The very same one she saw once before, *Be'er LeChai Roi*. And this is where she and Ishmael set up home and thrived. All's well that ends well.

Yet there are questions. When she ran away the first time, she found a well. And the second time she ended up at the same well. Was she so distraught she could not remember? Why did Abraham send Hagar away with so little? Couldn't he set up in an apartment in Paris or Miami or somewhere? And what mother would want to leave a dying son and go sit way off? A well was not necessarily just a hole in the ground. It more likely was an oasis. It will have been a well-known and well-appointed location. And Abraham might well have directed her to it. Was she being over dramatic? There are so many ways of looking at each narrative and we can choose the one that appeals most to us. The Torah is often unconcerned with the details we find fascinating. Its aim is to deal with larger themes and messages.

There are two interesting post-scripts to these narratives. In Chapter 26.62 Isaac went out to meet his incoming bride Rebecca. The text says he went from *Be'er LeChai Roi*. The very place where Ishmael was living. Is this because he had made peace with Ishmael and they were getting on and living in close proximity? Indeed, they were reconciled and came together to bury their father. Or was it simply that *Be'er LeChai Roi* had always been part of Abraham's estates. Isaac inherited it. As it implies in 25.11. And when Abraham sent Hagar out it was to somewhere that was under his purview and protection. One inevitably returns to the possibility that she was not fearing death so much as rejection. Perhaps even suicide.

After Sarah died, Abraham married again, a woman called Keturah in Chapter 25.1. Rashi quotes a Midrash saying that Keturah was Hagar. Her name in Hebrew resonates with sweet incense. Like incense smells good, she was a really good, sweet person. It might also imply that she withheld herself from other men. The Midrash suggests that she was so much in love with Abraham, she was willing to wait, a single woman, now presumably a free one, for some thirty years until Sarah's death, in order to resume her relationship with Abraham. To some of us, this is a very romantic idea. One wonders if the ancient rabbis realized what they were implying. Remaining silently in the shadows,

nursing her love for the man she could not marry, until finally, he is free. And her faithfulness is rewarded. It all works out in the end. How romantic.

Now back to #MeToo. The Torah and indeed Judaism are often accused of being patriarchal. And there is no doubt that the world in which the Torah emerged was male dominated. Yet in Biblical Judaism, women were judges, prophets, queens, important personalities, often independent and in control of their own destinies. But they were the exceptions. So that I think the rabbis, two thousand years ago, were conscious of the need to redress the balance. You see this in the way they introduced laws to protect women, such as the marriage contract, the Ketubah and their property and rights.

I think this is also why they chose the Haftarah that is read in conjunction with Hagar's story. It comes from Book of Kings 2 at the time of the great prophet Elisha. One of the pivotal women in the book is the anonymous woman of Shunem. She hosted Elisha and is the dominant figure in her family. She is the one who makes the decisions, goes to court to get back her stolen property. Her husband is a passive shadow. She controls the narrative and decides to go where she wants to go and when. She like Sara is barren. Elisha promises her a child. And the boy appears to die out in the field helping his father. Her story resonates with Sara's. But the choice of this narrative about a strong woman for the Haftarah, shows that they also had a sense that the scales needed balancing.

Of course, I think we have not gone far enough, now, thousands of years later. And much more needs to be done. But, as with every dramatic cause and call for change, a little nuance is very necessary. The Torah is telling us that things are rarely co