

Yishmael

Sarai is barren. In a kind of precursor of modern, surrogacy (something practiced amongst priestly and aristocratic women in the ancient world) her maid Hagar gives birth "on her thighs" to a child fathered by Avram. Last week we read about the tensions between mistress and slave. She obviously believes that her pregnancy gives her rights. Sarah appears to be envious and takes it out on her. Hagar runs away.

At a well called Be'er LeChai Roi, (a well where I see life) she is reassured by a Divine messenger that her son, Yishmael, will survive and be a great man. But meanwhile she is told she should go back and accept her position.

Matters get worse. When Yitzchak is born, Yishmael makes fun of him. Sarai thinks he will be a bad influence and asks Avraham to send mother and child away. Avraham resists. Surprising, given his relationship with Sarai. But God tells him to do as she says.

Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. They wander in the desert. One is again surprised that Avraham did not set them up in a safe location or indeed make better provision for them. But one is also surprised that Hagar, thinking that Yishmael is dying, puts him under a bush and goes and sits further away to see what will happen. It reminds one very much like Miriam standing from afar to see what happens to baby Moshe. But here it sounds that Hagar is either bereft of feeling or so distressed that she is in a state of denial. On the other hand perhaps she knows from last time that something supernatural will happen.

And then she sees the well. The same well as before B'eer Lechai Roi . This too sounds strange. Did she not recall from last time where it was? Everything ends happily. They set up home there and Yishmael thrives. Not only, but later on this is the very place where Yitschak comes to live. They are reconciled and get on well together despite the rivalry of their mothers.

And so, the whole thing seems is staged. Hagar knew where she was going. Avraham knew she would be taken care of and it all ends happily. Until three and half thousand years later!!! Yet the message is that to forge good relationships one must overcome jealousy, competition and bad blood. With determination it is possible.