

Abraham's Blended Family

The relationship between Sarah and Hagar — and their two sons — is more complicated than you think.

BY ERIKA-DAVIS [Genesis 23:1 - 25:18](#)

The title of this week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sara*, is Hebrew for "the life of Sarah." That's in spite of the fact that it opens with Sarah's death and then proceeds to detail Abraham's mourning, him finding her a burial plot and then selecting a wife for their son, Isaac. But to understand what's happening here, I think it's best to look back.

Just prior to this Torah portion is the [binding of Isaac](#), when Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac. Two things happen after Isaac's life is spared by God. First, he flees to his mother's former handmaid, [Hagar](#), and older brother, Ishmael. Then, his mother, Sarah, dies. She dies, perhaps, of heartbreak at not only the potential loss of her son in the sacrifice but the physical loss of her son to Hagar, a woman with whom she has a strained relationship to say the least. It is at this juncture in the lives of our forebears that *Chayei Sara* opens.

In this Torah portion, which is so much more about Isaac than about Sarah, we don't actually see Isaac until after he's returned from Beer-lahai-roi, which the passage says he "settled in the region of the Negev." If you recall from earlier in [Genesis](#), Beer-lahai-roi roughly translated means "the well of he who sees me." This same place to which Hagar retreated after being cast out by Sarah is where Isaac goes to find comfort after the betrayal of his father and death of his mother.

I first noticed the complexity of the familial relationship of Isaac, Ishmael, Sarah, Hagar and Abraham while studying at Pardes, a coed pluralistic yeshiva in Jerusalem, in the summer of 2015. Our forebears lived in a time of complicated family structures. It was not unheard of for a man to have several wives, each with several children. These women and children often go unnamed.

Sarah and Hagar are different. These sister-wives not only are each beloved by God (he makes great nations, 12 chieftains from them both) and Abraham (he is twice distressed by Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael), but by the sons they share. I find it hard to believe that the strife we read about between Hagar and Sarah is ongoing; instead, I think the two Torah mentions of Sarah treating Hagar harshly are extreme events. It is through this lens that it makes sense for Isaac to seek refuge, safety and a piece of home with Hagar after these two terrible events — almost being murdered by his father and then losing his mother. He grew up with both these women as his caretakers, his mothers. He grew up with Ishmael as his playmate, his brother. With Hagar and Ishmael sent away and his mother dead, he was left alone.

It's only after Sarah has been buried and a wife, Rebecca, is selected for Isaac that we see him again. We read that Isaac loves Rebecca and takes her to his mother's tent, where he is finally comforted after Sarah's death. It seems that Abraham, too, finds comfort after his wife's death and his son's marriage, because in the next chapter we learn that Abraham takes a second wife called Keturah.

There are some scholars who believe that Keturah is a new figure, while others believe that Keturah is merely a new name for Hagar who returns to the family after the death of Sarah. I tend to place myself in this column. I have never viewed Hagar as a mere handmaiden or servant of Sarah, but rather a woman who Abraham loved as a wife. A woman who possibly loved Sarah with a complex intimacy because of their shared husband. A woman who loved her children, both the son she bore and the son she helped to raise. It may seem uncomfortable to reconcile, but if we look at the way the story plays out, Hagar is the Jewish people's stepmother and her son, Ishmael, our brother.

To me the connection of Hagar as Keturah is evident by the fact that the sons of Keturah are named as well as the names of their descendants. Naming of people in the Torah is often a sign of significance. The text tells us that children of Abraham's other concubines are given gifts while he is alive and sent to the east. But these children aren't named, indicating a lack of importance.

This idea of Keturah as Hagar is also supported by how the text ends, with the death of Abraham. When Abraham dies we read that both of his sons bury their father in the same cave where Sarah is buried. We close with a recitation of the 12 sons of Ishmael, the grandchildren of Hagar/Keturah and Abraham. Some pieces of Midrash argue that this recitation of Ishmael's children is proof of the promise that God makes to both Abraham and Sarah and Abraham and Hagar; that his descendants will be as numerous as grains of sand and stars in the sky. God fulfills his promise to Abraham not just through Isaac, but also through Ishmael. And therefore through Hagar.

These lessons of Torah push us to think beyond our comfort and encourage us to consider the nuances of identity, peoplehood and family. I think God's lesson is to lean into that complexity, because it's evident that we prosper only together.