

#SheToo: Sarah and Hagar
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779
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Gen 12:10-20, 16:1-16; 17:15-22; 21:1-21

A Jewish grandmother went to the pharmacist and asked for birth control pills. A week later she came back for more. "I don't mean to be rude, ma'am," said the pharmacist, "but how old are you?" "Why, I'm 85!" beamed the lady. "In which case, why on earth do you need birth control pills?" "Ahh," she said. "To help me sleep." "But these aren't sleeping pills," said the pharmacist, getting more puzzled and a touch impatient. "No," she replied. "But every evening, I put one in my 16 year old grand-daughter's tea before she goes out, and then I can sleep like a baby."

This morning we will read about a ninety year old woman who does get pregnant as well as a younger woman, who also gets pregnant, and the bad feeling that erupts between them as a result. Those of you who were here last year may recall that we studied the sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob—the story that serves as the back story to how the state of Israel gets its name. This year we have another rivalry: that between Sarah and Hagar and even, we will argue, between Sarah and Abraham. Whereas last year we had the comfort to see that Esau and Jacob are able to reconcile their differences there in Torah, the relationship between Sarah and Hagar is left un-reconciled. That reconciliation will be up to us.

So, to begin we have to travel back some 3,800 years. Let's start slowly. First think back to a year ago. Note any significant changes. Now jump back about eighteen years—for those of you who have just dropped kids off to college, that must seem like a lifetime. Go back as many years as it takes to get to your own

childhood. How much has changed? Now draw on your history lessons. Think of life three hundred years ago, before any of our founding fathers were born and Virginia was still a colony. Now the huge leap: Some 3,580 years further back when our ancestors, Abraham, still known as Abram, and Sarah, still known as Sarai, have left their birth place to follow God's call to found a nation in Canaan. The climate has proven inclement and famine forces them to continue west to Egypt. (**Read: Gen 12:10-20**)

This is a disturbing text in many regards. Abram feels threatened as an outsider and asks Sarai to protect him by submitting to sexual favors, perhaps risking her *own* life. Here, commentators throughout the ages are disturbed by Abram's "seeming lack of concern about the fate of Sarah".ⁱ Hagar's situation can be found in a similar light. Her presence is hidden in verse 16. She is one of the female slaves that Abram acquires while in Egypt—a gift, if you will, gained through the sexual barter of Sarai. The key to the strife that will unfold and the reconciliation that is still to come, I believe, lies with this beginning.

To return to our story, on three different occasions, (12:2, 13:16, 15:5), Abram is promised offspring that would make him the founder of a great nation. After many years and tribulations later, Sarai and he still had not been able to conceive. Long before people understood the varied causes of infertility, Sarai assumed *she* was the reason Abram had no children. **Gen: Read 16:1-15**

Whew! A lot goes on in these verses and this is still the backstory to our Torah reading. We see here that Sarai, on her own initiative, turns to the commonly practiced custom of surrogate motherhood: let Abram sleep with her handmaid

Hagar and hopefully her handmaid would bear Abram a child on Sarai's behalf (16:2). Abram heeds Sarai's offer. This is the trigger for the cruel turn our story takes. And it hinges on a trade of sexual favors that Sarai herself was subjected to.

Hagar does conceive and, the Torah tells us, that once she realizes that she is pregnant when her mistress had not been able to get pregnant, Sarai becomes an object of scorn, literally "lightweight in Hagar's eyes" (Gen 16:4). From Sarai's perspective, the concubine solution has backfired. Sarai had expected to be bolstered by the prospect of Hagar's pregnancy, instead she is brought down.

But Sarai's first reaction is not to lash out at Hagar. That comes later. First she blames Abram! "The wrong done me is *your* fault!" she says. "I myself put my maid in your bosom/arms; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. Let Adonai judge between you and me!" (16:5).

Why would Sarai blame Abram unless she senses that he has betrayed her in some way? Did he say or do something that emboldened the young woman to disrespect Sarai? Are we simply witnessing a familiar drama, the Bible episode of Downton Abbey?

"Let Adonai judge between you and me!" says Sarai. Is she asking God to judge whom Hagar should serve, her or Abram? For what is it that Sarai and Abram share that Sarai is putting up for judgment? Is it Hagar, or more likely, is it the covenant?

In Sarai's appeal to Adonai, she reproaches Abram and perhaps the entire patriarchal structure. Sarai is saying: "Whatever transpired behind closed tent flaps, my status is now being challenged. It seems you *will* have a child through Hagar.

You may have many children through her. But don't you ever forget that it is because I sacrificed myself for you in order to save your life, that Hagar even came to be with us. It is because of me, therefore, that you will have a child, and the child to inherit the covenant, that covenant we've been chasing for years now, if an heir is to come, they must come through you **and also me**. My role, my place, my person matters whether I'm able to conceive or not. No other woman can take my place. Now let it be up to God whether the heir to the covenant will come only through you or also through me." In this appeal, we Sarai's unapologetic sense of her indispensable role in our people's covenantal history.

Sarai has thrown down the gauntlet. God does not immediately respond. Abram backs off. He doesn't want a showdown. And then we witness Sarai's revenge—her pain in action.

This is not an admirable moment in the life of our ancestor Sarah. She seems to have behaved ruthlessly—so much so that Hagar chooses to flee. We could leave it at that—Sarai the mean girl, the bully, the corporate power player. But that wouldn't be fair.

By the time Sarai suggests that Hagar sleep with Abram, Hagar has been with Sarai at least ten years. We don't know the precise nature of their relationship. Up until that moment their relationship could have been formal: Sarai in her world of relative privilege and Hagar in hers of relative poverty. That kind of a class system would conjure the likes of a Jane Austin novel, where subtle gestures then assume outsized significance. Hagar expresses the injustice of her station either with a

single snub and Sarai feels threatened by this truth, or with a regular insolence, and Sarai feels threatened by Hagar's newfound sense of entitlement.

Alternatively, their relationship could have been loving and friendly within the constraints of their positions. It could have been like mother-daughter—the age difference certainly would have lent itself to that kind of relationship. It could have been radical—Sarai and Hagar working within the societal limitations to create a partnership that tried to defy the power differential—I think that's wishful thinking. But if the relationship included a genuine attachment, Hagar's insult may have felt like a deeply personal betrayal.

But betrayal can be argued from Hagar's side as well. Hagar would know well that she was acquired because Sarai was offered to Pharaoh for unwanted sexual advances. Sarai now years later subjects Hagar to what may very well have been unwanted sexual advances. That's the cruel symmetry but perfect logic within this institutional sexism and class system. Whichever the underlying causes, the entitlement that Hagar feels once pregnant suggests to Sarai that even if just for a moment, the two women are equal. It's this equality that Sarai can't bear—for only one of them can be the mother of the heir to the covenant.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks supports this by arguing that Hagar's superior attitude means that she is no longer content to be treated as a servant.ⁱⁱ This stance is easy for us to relate to—but it seems excessive given the context. That Hagar got pregnant when Sarai could not can be seen as an achievement of sorts, especially since a woman's worth was almost wholly tied to being able to bear children. But if getting pregnant was the source of Hagar's sense of accomplishment, her response

seems excessive because—after all, Hagar did what concubines for years were supposed to do; what Sarai had expected her to do. Then again, maybe Sarai secretly hoped that Hagar too would prove barren. In any case Sarai is having none of this.

It's kind of a no-win situation. Both women like all women of that time, and many still today, are locked in a hierarchical struggle not of their making, and barred from knowing their full potential and worth as human beings. Both women are fighting to be valued for more than their society allows: Sarai for an equal role in the covenant; Hagar for an equal role in the household. Their belittlement manifests through outbursts of insubordination, on the one hand, and disproportionate reactions, on the other that reflect their distorted sense of self; a distortion that occurs when the pressures of a society force you to be small, force you into a confining box.

If Hagar's smugness may be considered unwarranted—she served her intended purpose—Sarai's reaction seems excessive. She maltreats Hagar to the point that Hagar flees on her own into the desert, pregnant and without a plan or resources. What was the nature of the maltreatment? We cannot know. We do know that Hagar wouldn't tolerate it.

In the desert an angel of God appears to Hagar. This is an important detail. The God of Abraham and Sarah is proving to also be the God of Hagar. The angel of God appears and tells her to return to Sarai's ill treatment. Not the best news.

A brief side bar for this story reminded me of the time I ran away from home. I must have been around ten. Feeling persecuted, I stuffed some clothes in a paper bag

and put on my rain hat and stomped out of the house, walked down the street and around the corner—as far as my indignation could take me—before I realized I didn't know where to go next. I sat on the familiar low slate wall that demarcated Alan Pinchook's front yard—I walked on that wall to and from school each day. I was fuming, indignant and at a loss for what should be my next steps. I just sat there as a light rain fell until at some point my mother drove by and picked me up. Our families are the first “societies” we live within that teach us lessons about justice and mercy. For whatever reason, which I can't recall, I needed an “out,” but I also needed a “back in.” Our families may not always teach us healthy ways to express anger and assert independence, but they can offer opportunities for forgiveness and second chances.

So, Hagar, pregnant and alone, having gone as far as her indignation could take her, is moved to return. She has God's promise of many offspring , one of them a son to be named Ishmael, meaning “God has heard.” And we presume that Sarai accepts her back. As we'll see in the next scene, wouldn't it have been preferable for Sarai to have kept her competitor far away? Thirteen more years will pass before Sarah will become pregnant with Isaac. That's a long time. Does the ill-treatment continue? We don't know. One wonders if there was the possibility for forgiveness between the two women. But the story hasn't finished. **Read 17:15-22**

Here God states clearly that the heir to the covenant will come through Sarah. Though she is not privy to this promise yet—that happens in the next parashah (18:10-12), this is the moment that Sarai becomes Sarah and every Jewish girl afterward is welcomed into the covenant—increasingly with covenant ceremonies called a brit bat or a simchat bat. Abraham, whose name was changed just a few

verses earlier (17:23-27), is unsure what this means for Ishmael and pleads on his behalf. God responds reassuringly but emphatically, “Yes, don’t worry—your other family will be protected, but your spiritual inheritance will pass through Sarah.”

This is an amazing declaration for two reasons. First, it redeems and confirms Sarah as an arguably equal partner in the covenant. Second, it makes eminently clear that rather than a vision of universal dominion, the Jewish people is to be one people among many whom Adonai blesses and wishes to protect. Only the nature of the relationships will be different. Hagar is honored as the first matriarch of Islam. Sarah, the mother of Judaism. The Jewish people, the heirs of Abraham and Sarah, will be blessed with land and a distinct path to follow—the path of Torah—that gives shape and content to the covenant.

While all that is amazing, the question of a spiritual heir remains a matter of faith—because it doesn’t escape Abraham, now one hundred, nor Sarah in subsequent verses, by now ninety, that to conceive at such a late age must literally take an act of God. And finally, we get to this morning’s Torah reading: **Read 21:1-21**

Some thirteen years after Ishmael is born, Sarah conceives. Isaac is born and during the weaning celebration, usually when the child is around three years old, Sarah sees Ishmael, now around sixteen or seventeen, “playing” as translated here, mocking or in some way *mitzacheiking*, “Isaac’ing”, behaving in some way that provokes another intense, even ruthless, response from Sarah. Again, we are dismayed by her harshness. Here she’s miraculously given birth at age ninety, she has a healthy heir to the covenant—what is causing her to feel so threatened?

What we do know is that Abraham is again distressed by the treatment dealt his son, Ishmael. We also know that God appears and takes Sarah's side. And we also know that God appears again and takes Hagar's side as well, promising to watch over her and Ishmael and to make Ishmael a nation.

Note that there is a disconnect here in the desert story. Ishmael would be a sophomore or junior in high school, not an infant. Any parent of teenagers knows that Hagar wouldn't be setting Ishmael down under a tree—dropping him off at the mall, maybe, or at a practice, but not setting him down, like a helpless infant.

Looking at the Sarah-Hagar cycle, two times Sarah persecutes Hagar: first to secure *her* place in the covenant and second to secure Isaac's place in the covenant. But how much of her insecurity was due to Abraham's behavior? Had he behaved differently; had he reassured Sarah that his loyalty was first to her, would she have felt more openhearted? Could she have tolerated even the arrogances of this young servant and eventual mother in her household? And is Hagar completely innocent? Did she have a part in Ishmael's "Isaac'ing" that seemed so threatening? Was she behind the scenes still angling for a share of the inheritance? In any family, inheritance can cause tension and strife between siblings and in-laws. Torah fails to be explicit about what provokes Sarah's harsh response. Without more specifics to defend her, we expect Sarah's faith to be stronger and her character to be nobler.

By way of conclusion, Sarah and Hagar need a #Metoo movement. Both women are compelled by their societies to make themselves sexually available. Their value is defined by their beauty, attractiveness and possible fertility—all objects of the male gaze, as they say in academia. But despite this, there is actually

the seed of a #metoo or maybe a #shetoo, movement here. Anyone who lives with a lesser status for whatever reason learns to accommodate to this smallness to some degree, but the feeling of constraint is never too far from the surface. When Hagar gets pregnant, she taps into her well of self-esteem that's been long repressed. She acts out her pent up indignation at Sarah.

Hagar's snub, in turn, pierces the skin of Sarai's smallness. *She too* has a deep well of unrecognized value. Hagar's insult makes Sarai feel more acutely the injustice she suffers as well motivating her to proclaim her value, and her entitlement to the covenant. But she also acts out her indignation at Hagar and has more power to cause harm. But God doesn't allow it.

It is the appearance of God on behalf of both women that signals and confirms the fuller humanity of both Hagar and Sarah, the #shetoo movement within these stories. God firmly stands with Sarah as an equal partner in the covenant. God clearly stands with Hagar in acknowledging her affliction and promising her a future. While the social mores of the times: the patriarchy, the slave and servant class, worked to constrain women's humanity and contribute to the penchant for conflict, for a flashing moment in God's presence, men and women, master and servant all stand as equals in their inherent value as human beings. It's like a ray of sun from the future made its way into this ancient text illuminating the promise of the time when such mutual respect and equality would become the norm.

Like the double rainbow on a recent rainy evening—these redemptive moments in Torah can be wispy, fleeting and rare. Yet *they* are the source of our

faith. These redemptive moments are the transcendent truths of Torah. And we can be inspired by them to seek out rays of divinity *in our world*. The world wasn't nor is perfect. Our ancestors are our heroes not because they were perfect. Yet Torah shows us that redemption is still possible. They are our heroes because despite all the reasons to abandon this covenant, this unique understanding of holiness, they didn't. Though Hagar wanted status and respect and a healthy future for her and her son, never did she ask to be part of the covenant. That was never overtly at issue. Even Abraham seems agnostic about his covenantal heir so long as there is one. Sarah is the one who is concerned about the covenant. She is the one who was with Abram when he first heard that call to go forth to a land that God would show him. Could she have received it as well? It's belated, but Torah tells us yes. Could we have received it also? Even more belatedly, yes. We also are privy to this call. We are part of this story and it is our faith, our character, our choices that will or will not bring in that divine light.

Sarah and Hagar never meet again—at least not that we know of. After Sarah dies, Abraham marries another woman named Keturah, whom the rabbis believe is really Hagar. Thus the rabbis envisioned a happy resolution to their story. And at Abraham's grave, both Ishmael and Isaac gather—another happy reunion of sorts. Only Sarah and Hagar's relationship remains open-ended and in need of healing.

This is what it looks like when we don't see a reconciliation. When we can't find teshuvah in the text, and when two women are fighting each other for the self-worth they are both denied. It looks alternately cruel and petty; righteous and self-righteous. Even its redemptive aspects are clouded by shame and regret. And so we

are called to look at our own lives from this 30,000 feet perspective (or 3800 year perspective)—what shame and regret cloud the relationships in your lives? What liberation struggles remain incomplete? We are part of a historical chain. The righteousness of our ancestors gives us merit. Our teshuvah gives them merit.

The lives that we lead will write the next chapters of our Jewish story. And let's hope that the future generations, who look back upon these chapters, are able to redeem *our* meanness and cruelty and immaturity, our jealousy and insecurity and inequality, and be able to point to rays of noble striving and generosity. Let's hope that they will see in and through us, despite us and because of us, moments of divine truth staring back at them like a rainbow: the myriad efforts of ordinary people with integrity and good character, performing civic duties and acts of kindness; they will see our hope and even our despair and maybe what we cannot see in our midst: God's presence and blessing, clouded, but right within our reach.

Keyn y'hi razton. May this be God's will. L'shanah tovah tikatevu v'tichatemu. May we be inscribed and sealed for a year of good life.

ⁱ Ramban cited in The Stone Edition Chumash, commentary p. 57.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, p. 107.