

THE TROUBLING FAMILY TRIANGLE: SARAI, AVRAM AND HAGAR

Filling in the Gaps

Genesis 16:

Prologue:

1 Now Sarai, Avram's wife bore him no children and she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

Initiative – Complication:

2- And Sarai said to Avram, Look now, God has stopped me from giving birth. I pray you, come [in]to my maid-servant. Perhaps I will be built up through her'

Consider possible reactions that Avram could have chosen in the circumstances:

To refuse politely.

To tell Sarai off for a most ridiculous idea.

To become angry with her either for her lack of faith or because the idea is humiliating to her or to both of them.

To comfort Sarai in the way that Elkana comforts Chana, saying that she has a good life and she should not be bothered by the absence of a child.

To strengthen Sarai's faith that God would provide her with a child.

To propose that the two of them turn to God and ask for a child for Sarai.

To suggest that the two of them should think about it some more and talk again tomorrow.

To accept the offer on principle but to delay or postpone acting on it.

To agree with the suggestion showing his pleasure.

To agree with the suggestion without showing any pleasure.

To agree with the suggestion while showing displeasure.

2- And Avram listened to the voice of Sarai

3 -And Sarai, Avram's wife took Hagar, her maid, the Egyptian, after Avram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband for a wife.

4 And he went into Hagar and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

5- And Sarai said to Avram, you are responsible for my suffering: I have given my maid into your lap and when she saw that she had conceived I was despised in her eyes. May the Lord judge between me and you.

She jeered: Barrenness has no place beside pregnancy, nor old age beside youth. A woman is only for child-bearing, whereas you are a sterile mule, a useless vessel! He [Avraham] does not desire you.

Midrash Or HaAfeleh

[She said]: "It is you who are doing me wrong. You hear the words of Hagar, and you say nothing against them. And I hoped that you would take my side. For your sake, I left my native land and my father's house and I followed you into a strange land with trust in God. In Egypt, I pretended to be your sister, so that no harm would come to you. When I saw that I would have no children, I took the Egyptian woman, my slave Hagar, and gave her to you for a wife, contenting myself with the thought that I would rear the children she would bear. Now she treats me with disdain in your presence. I hope that God sees the injustice that has been done to me and judges between you and me and has mercy upon us, restoring peace to our home and granting us children so that we have no need of children from Hagar.

H.L. Ginsburg, Legends of the Jews

6- But Avram said to Sarai, look, your maid is in your hand, do with her as you think best. And when Sarai mistreated her she fled from her.

Genesis 16: 7-14 Hagar's Chosen People

And an angel of the Lord found her by a fountain in the wilderness, by the fountain on the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, where did you come from? And where will you go to?

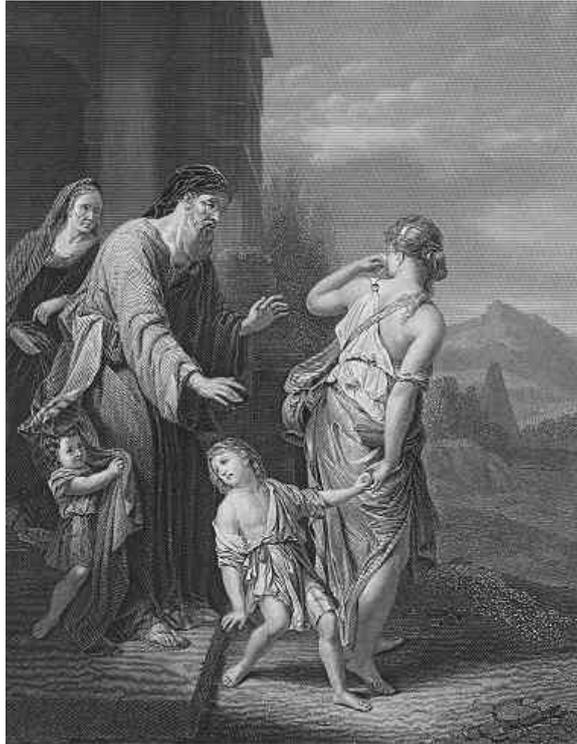
And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her hand. And the angel of the Lord said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

And she called the name of the Lord that spoke to her, You God see me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that sees me? Therefore the well was called *Be'er-Lahay-Ro'i*: behold, it is between Qadesh and Bered.

Genesis 16, 7-14

*Avraham had three sons and not just two.
Avraham had three sons, Yishma'el,[God will hear] Yitzchak [he will
laugh] and Yivkeh [he will weep].
No one ever hear of Yivkeh...he was the smallest and most loved...
Avraham had three sons,
Yishma, Yitzchak, Yivkeh [He will hear, he will laugh, he will weep].
Yishma-el, Yitzchak-el, Yivkeh-el. [God will hear, God will laugh, God will
weep].*

Yehudah Amichai



Genesis 21:20-21 Leaving the Story with a Happy Ending?

Ishmael the Survivor

*And God was with the lad;
and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.
And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran;
and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Mizrayim.*

Genesis 21: 20-21

Did Abraham Forget his exiled Second Wife?

Rashi quotes the tradition that **Keturah, Avraham's third wife is really Hagar.**

KETURAH: Gen. 25:1

*This is Hagar. She was named Keturah because her deeds were beautiful
as incense (Ketoreth).*

Rashi

Brotherly Reconciliation at their Father's Funeral

The Rabbis also seize, quite logically, on the biblical hint of reconciliation between the brothers at Avraham's funeral. They see this as proof that Ishmael had undergone a total changed of heart and had repented in relation to his father. Rashi, for example, makes the comment on Chapter 25 verse 9.

*Then Avraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of
years; and was gathered to his people. And his sons Yitzchak and Ishmael
buried him in the cave of Makhpela, in the field of Efron the son of Zohar
the Hittite, which is before Mamre. Genesis 25: 8-9*

ISAAC AND ISHMAEL: *From this we see that Ishmael repented and
yielded the precedence to Yitzchak. This is what is meant by the words "a
good old age" [applied in the verse to Avraham].*

Rashi

The Original Twelve tribes

*Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Avraham's son, whom
Hagar the Egyptian, Sara's handmaid, bore to Avraham; and these
are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to
their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nevayot; and Qedar, and
Abde'el, and Mivsam, and Mishma, and Duma, and Massa, Hadad
and Tema, Yetur, Nafish, and Qedema. These are the son of Ishmael,
and these are their names, by their towns, and by their encampments;
twelve princes according to their nations. And these are the years of
the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty seven years; and he expired*

and died; and was gathered to his people. And they dwelt from Havila to Shur, that is before Mizrayim, as you go toward Asshur; and he dwelt in the presence of all his brothers.

Genesis 25:12-18

Feminist Midrash: A Happy Ending?

Ahti by Lyn Gottlieb

(from *She Who Dwells Within*, p. 89)

Ahti,
I am pained I did not call you
By the name your mother gave you.
I cast you aside,
Cursed you with my barrenness and rage,
Called you "stranger"/ *Ha-ger*,
As if it were a sin to be from another place.

Ahti
They used me to steal your womb,
Claim your child,
As if I owned your body and your labor.
I, whom they call "See Far Woman" / *Sarah*,
Could not witness my own blindness.
But you, my sister,
You beheld angels,
Made miracles in the desert,
Received divine blessings from a god,
Who stopped talking to me.
Only at the end,
When I witnessed my young son screaming under his father's knife,
Only then
Did I realize our common suffering.
And I called out, "Avraham, Avraham, hold back your knife!"
My voice trumpeted into the silence
of my sin.

Forgive me, Ahti
For the sin of neglect
For the sin of abuse
For the sin of arrogance
Forgive me, Ahti,
For the sin of not knowing your name.

Sarah's Teshuva

by Marsha Pravder Mirkin (*Beginning Anew*, p. 68-69)

But what about Sarah? What was her experience of teshuva?

After Sarah tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, we never hear another word from her. I imagine a lonely, jealous, loving, wise, and sometimes shortsighted woman waking up the next morning and discovering that Hagar and Ishmael are gone, that Abraham took literally the words she meant figuratively. I imagine her horror when she realized that her words led to the abandonment and possible death of the boy she had wanted for a son and the woman who served her for so many years. I imagine that she felt so guilty that her words ...wronged others so severely, she vowed never again to hurt another with her words. Then she silenced herself. Tragically, her silence precluded a final movement toward teshuva, toward speaking words that by authentically reflecting our inner experience allow us to move , closer to each other and to God.



Sarah's Choice: Some Advice on Brotherhood for my son Isaac
by Elinor Wilner (a selection)

"But mother," said Isaac, "if we were not God's chosen people, what then should we be? I am afraid of being nothing:" And Sarah laughed.

Then she reached out her hand. "Isaac, I am going now, before Abraham awakes, before the sun, to find Hagar the Egyptian and her son whom I cast out, drunk on pride, God's promises, the seed of Abraham in my own late-blooming loins."

"But Ishmael," said Isaac, "how should I greet him?"
"As you greet yourself," she said, "when you bend over the well to draw water and see your image, not knowing it reversed. You must know your brother now, or you will see your own face looking back the day you're at each other's throats.": ..