

## Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac in 5780/2019

### *Shabbat Vayeira 5780*

November 15, 2019

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Not all truisms are true. Take for example, this commonly-believed statement, “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an extension of a religious hatred that has persisted for thousands of years.” Most people would nod their heads upon hearing such a sentence, never contemplating that it’s false. The conflict between Israel and Palestinians has never been primarily a religious one, or even about ethnicity. Instead, the struggle is between two peoples’ legitimate national self-determination, each viewing the same land as its ancestral home.

Now, **that** problem is not new. Indeed, we read about it in this week’s Torah portion. Immediately after a celebration when Isaac is weaned, our matriarch Sarah demands that Abraham expel both Hagar and Ishmael from the family circle, in order to prevent Ishmael from inheriting alongside Isaac.<sup>i</sup> Ishmael is Isaac’s older half-brother, born to Abraham and Hagar, Sarah’s maid. Ironically, the idea for Abraham to father a child with Hagar was Sarah’s from the beginning, at a time when Sarah could not conceive.<sup>ii</sup>

Abraham is much aggrieved. After all, Ishmael is his son, too!<sup>iii</sup> God, though, instructs Abraham to go along with Sarah’s plan, promising to raise up descendants through Ishmael,<sup>iv</sup> not unlike Isaac. One could even conclude that God sets up today’s Mideast conflict by fulfilling the vow to Abraham, making him the progenitor of two nations in the same region.

Interestingly, though, the conflict, as presented in the Bible, is not two-sided. Only Sarah is eager to separate from Hagar and Ishmael, who are most reluctant to leave. Isaac, a baby, is not involved; and we already know where Abraham stands. Does the conflict really start there?

Our rabbis answer in the affirmative. They note that Sarah seems to be upset by Ishmael’s playing.<sup>v</sup> What about Ishmael’s games bothers her? Torah does not say. Centuries later, the sages accuse Ishmael of reprehensible behavior, justifying his expulsion with his mother. Our most important biblical commentator, Rashi, insists that “playing” is a euphemism for Ishmael’s wicked actions. Rashi offers biblical citations in which the same verb, “playing,” refers to idolatry, sexual immorality, and even murder.<sup>vi</sup> If Ishmael has been trying to lure baby Isaac into idol worship, or was sexually abusing him, or was trying to kill him, then Ishmael deserves what he gets, and his mother, too!

Anthropologist Ruth Behar suggests that we need not speculate about Ishmael's playing, for the roots of the conflict may best be found before his birth, with Sarah's reaction to her own inability to conceive. "In the language of the Biblical narrator," Behar writes, "I hear a judgment on Sarah's faithlessness, fickleness, and impatience, but no recognition of her rage, desperation, and fierce independence of spirit."<sup>vii</sup> Sarah, as Behar explains, is understandably ambivalent about her maid and the son born to him.

Compounding the problem, when Hagar bears a son, Behar observes, she "develops a new-found sense of self-esteem; she no longer sees herself in servile terms."<sup>viii</sup> The conflict between Sarah and Hagar, which manifests in Sarah's expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, may best be described as a natural result of their shared situation: Sarah has suffered through decades of infertility, with all its indignities, humiliations, and sadness. Hagar, asked to bear Abraham's child in Sarah's place, naturally develops into a confident and protective mother. Being Sarah's maid, though, they continue to share space. Sarah is still the boss—while the servant, Hagar, organically develops her own sense of self. Conflict is inevitable, but is nobody's fault!

Behar introduces us to African American *midrash*: "From an African American perspective," Behar writes, "Hagar's story is the story of 'a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was barren.'"<sup>ix</sup>

Behar is not writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Still, if she were, she now locates it beginning even before Sarah's infertility, in the act of slave-holding itself. Behar writes that African American *midrash* "allows us to better imagine the humiliation Hagar underwent in her position as servant and surrogate and, indeed, slave to Sarah and to understand how terribly alone she was, how terribly bereft of sympathy and support."<sup>x</sup>

Behar concludes by reminding us—and by us, I mean contemporary Jews—"We were slaves in Egypt, yes, but let us not forget that we also enslaved."<sup>xi</sup> She might have added: We were the victims of the Holocaust, and but the Palestinian people did not perpetrate that crime. Israel was repeatedly threatened with extinction, overcoming great military enemies, but Israel's arms have not always been pure, expelling thousands of Palestinians during the War of Independence. Yes, Israelis' lives are constantly threatened by terror—and this very week, by the rockets that fly from Islamic Jihad, Iran's surrogate in Gaza; but Israelis also subject Palestinians to harsh indignities under occupation—waiting hours at military checkpoints on the way to work each day, while Israelis from West Bank settlements speed by on segregated roads that are separate but not at all equal. We

are Sarah, with all of her suffering and sadness. We are Sarah, with all of her meanness, inflicting suffering upon Hagar. And Hagar and Ishmael remain in our midst, crying out for their own place within the camp. In the words of Rabbi Josh Weinberg, Union for Reform Judaism Vice President for Israel and Reform Zionism, “Sarah reminds us that we, the exiled, can in turn also become the ones who exile.”<sup>xii</sup>

Perhaps Isaac and Ishmael offer us hope. They interact in the Torah only once after that incident when Isaac is just a baby. When Abraham dies, they come together at the cave of Machpelah to lay their father to rest.<sup>xiii</sup> Perhaps that encounter seems small, but our tradition regards burial of the dead as *chesed shel emet*, the truest lovingkindness, and a great *mitzvah*, a religious obligation. Far from fighting over religion, these brothers, fathers of two nations, unite to perform a filial duty and religious act.

Perhaps one day—God willing, not because of a death, but because of a shared love for life—the descendants of Abraham and Hagar will unite with the progeny of Abraham and Sarah to perform acts of goodness together. First, Sarah’s sons and daughters will need to work through our own pain, resolving never to be the ones to inflict it, if we can possibly avoid it. First, Hagar’s children will need to accept that they are not the only victims of violence, and must stop the killing. Time is running out in 2019, but 5780 is still new. Let us never lose hope for peace.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 21:10.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 16:1-3.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 21:11.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 21:12-13.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 21:8-9.

<sup>vi</sup> Rashi to Genesis 21:9.

<sup>vii</sup> Ruth Behar, “Sarah and Hagar: The Heelprints upon Their Faces,” in *Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days*, Edited by Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates, New York: Touchstone Books (Simon & Schuster), 1997, p. 36.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>xii</sup> Rabbi Josh Weinberg, “There’s Only Room for One,” ARZA weekly email, November 15, 2019.

<sup>xiii</sup> Genesis 25:9.