

Lech Lecha 5780  
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Parshat Lech Lecha contains two separate journeys, each encompassing both a spiritual and physical aspect.

The first is the story we all know so well. Abram leaves his native land to follow GD (Gen 12).

The second journey is more subtle, but still very powerful. It is the journey undertaken by Hagar, Sarah's handmaid and servant.

It is Hagar's journey, told in Genesis 16, which I always read with interest on Rosh Hashanah, which I wish to discuss this morning.

The text defines Hagar as an Egyptian maidservant to Sarai. I think of her somewhat like Anna, Lady Mary's maid on Downton Abbey, but much more servile.

She is the mother of Abraham's eldest son, Ishmael, and the matriarch of many Arab tribes. Revered by Islam, the Quran remembers Hagar as a princess. In the African-American community, Hagar is seen as a slave woman, impregnated by her master, and cast out into the desert.

A Christian nonprofit organization in the Boston area, dedicated to ending the cycle of domestic violence, has identified with the story of Hagar. They have named the organization "Hagar's Sisters."

First the meaning of the name: by the simple shift of vowels, Hagar becomes "Ha-ger", the stranger. (Note about 30 times in the Torah we are told to be kind to the stranger.)

In Arabic, the verb similar to her name means: to flee. Some commentators suggest that the Hagarites, a nomadic people, were descendants of Ishmael.

We are familiar with the story in Gen 16.

1. Sarai was unable to conceive a child so she gave her maidservant Hagar to Avram, in order that he may father a child. Hagar would act as a surrogate

for Sarai. This was the Near Eastern custom at the time, codified in the laws of Hammurabi.

2. Once Hagar becomes pregnant, however, difficulties develop between Sarai and Hagar as Hagar feels superior to Sarai.

3. As a result Avram gives Sarai the green light to deal with her maidservant Hagar “as you think good in your eyes: 16:6.”

This must have been a common problem at that time because the code of Hammurabi (146-147) contains a provision dealing with this very situation. According to the code, the mistress may not sell her, but put the mark of a slave on her. She would remain the property of Sarai and subject to Sarai’s authority.

4. We learn that Sarai oppressed her and treated her harshly. (Genesis 16:6) We know this because the terms used to describe her abuse are the same words used when the Israelites suffered at the hands of Egypt. (Deut 26:5-6) *avdut* (a slave) and *innui* (being oppressed). Instead of the Egyptians oppressing the Israelites, we have a role reversal where an Israeli mistress oppresses her Egyptian slave.

5. Hagar flees from Sarai to the wilderness of Shur, an ancient transit route between Egypt and Canaan.

6. Wilderness experience

While in the wilderness, Hagar has an encounter with the angel of the Lord. She is told to return to Sarai, with promises received directly and personally from GD.

She will have numerous offspring, too numerous to be counted, and her son Ishmael, named by GD, meaning “God who hears,” will be like a Syrian onager, (i.e. extinct wild ass) fearless, and never subject to anyone.

I am told that this is the first time in the Torah that a messenger of GD speaks to a woman and that woman is a non-Hebrew and an Egyptian.

What is remarkable is that Hagar gives GD a name. The first time and the only time in a divine encounter a human, a woman, names GD.

The importance of a name can't be underestimated: Abraham and Sarah fail to see Hagar as a whole person. They never call her by name. To them she is just a slave girl, an object to be used as a surrogate for the child Sarah is unable to conceive. So it is all the more striking that the very first word the angel of GD utters when he finds her in the wilderness is her name - Hagar; Gen 16:18.

Hagar in turn gives god a name "El Roi," the God of seeing, or the GD who sees me. The first time and the only time in a divine encounter a human, a woman, names GD. By literally calling GD who sees me, Hagar testifies to her personal spiritual experience. A mutual seeing for both Hagar and GD. This is an extraordinary moment. She claims to have been seen and understood by GD, a relationship with GD that even Sarah doesn't have.

Why in Genesis do we learn of an Egyptian slave being oppressed by an Israelite, and of all people Sarah?

Why do we need the story of Hagar at all? Isn't the story of Abram and Sarah enough? After all she does eventually conceive. Why do we hear of the blessings Hagar will receive?

Shai Held, in his book "The Heart of Torah", suggests it is to teach us that the roles of victim and victimizer aren't set in stone. Israelites are not always victims, just like anyone else they can become victimizers. Egyptians aren't always victimizers either.

Rachel Korazim last week at TE shared with us excerpts from a fictional novella Khirbet Khizeh by S. Yizhar, based on an actual event, which described the rounding up of children and women in a Palestinian village in 1948, herding them into trucks and sending them across the border, similar to deportations that occurred to Jewish people prior to 1944 in Europe.

The Torah warns us how easily roles can be reversed. Israel too can sin, and it too is held to account.

Genesis reminds us that the Israelites are not the only people GD cares about and that living a moral life requires vigilance. The Torah teaches us we need self-awareness lest we, like Sarah, end up victimizing others as one more tragic result of our own past victimization.