

Dvar and Meditation on Hagar

Genesis/Breishit 21:9–21

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1 Dvar on Hagar

Introduction

The story we, Yisrael “strugglers with God”, must hear (Shema Yisrael) in today’s section of Torah—the story which is always read on the first day of Rosh HaShanah—is the story about our cousin Yishma-el “God heard”.

Naturally I sought to find new ways to explore this ancient story—a story of our peoples’ “first family” as it were, of Avraham and Sarah, and the birth of Yitzhak, and the tale of Hagar, Sarah’s “shifchah” (handmaid), and the birth of Yishmael, her son. The word shifchah (handmaid) is related to mishpachah (family), both coming from the Hebrew root meaning “to join together”.

This story offers us a glimpse into the mythic origins of two peoples: our mythic narrative leading to the Hebrew nation that becomes the Jewish People through Yitzhak, and the Islamic mythic narrative leading to our cousins the Arabs, through Yishmael.

The story of the story is a tale that spans huge shifts in society and culture in the ancient world

- A tale of changing dominance of patriarchal and matriarchal perspectives;
- A tale of the clash between women in a world in which older matriarchal customs still survived.
- It is also a tale of barrenness and its consequences, of jealousy and rivalry, of Divine Revelation, and the ways in which those old conflicts sometimes resurface into history.

The Hagar story we read today is a tale of a family upheaval that is not yet resolved. The water skin was kicked down the road in the hope that someone in the future might deal with it.

The characters are:

- Hagar, the Egyptian shifchah (handmaid) of Sarah;
- Sarah, wife of Avraham, thought by some to have been a Mesopotamian priestess;
- Avraham, the quintessential ancestor of the Jewish people;
- Yishmael, son of Hagar and Avraham. Hagar was given by the childless Sarah to Avraham to produce an heir for Sarah and Avraham;
- Yitzhak, son of Sarah and Avraham, born 13 years after the birth of Yishmael.

Today's foreground story is that Sarah saw Yishmael m'tza-hek-ing with Yitzhak—a word play (m'tzahek and Yitzhak are both derived from the Hebrew root meaning laughter) that is understood to mean mocking insultingly—and therefore demanded that Hagar and Yishmael be cast out from the camp, perhaps towards the caravan route back to Egypt. Hagar and Yishmael depart for the wilderness, undergo one trial and tribulation—not enough water, then meet an angel who provides a well.

I wish to look at the foreground story through several lenses, each of which provides its own focus, which lead to teshuvah and tikkun issues for us today.

Lens 1: The Hero's Journey

A common theme in myths from many different cultures is the “Hero's Journey”.

The hero will

- go out to the wilderness,
- endure trials and tribulations,
- be aided by angels,
- discover a sacred gift,
- and return to his/her home community with the sacred gift.

Does Hagar and Yishmael's journey fall into the category of a Hero's Journey? Almost.

Wilderness. Yes.

Trials and Tribulations. Only one—lack of water.

Angel. Yes.

Sacred gift. Yes, “I will make him a great nation.”

Return with a sacred gift. No, in today's Genesis/Breishit Chapter 21 Hagar and Yishmael did not return.

What happened to the last step of the Hero's Journey? Might they have returned? And might the record of the return have been intentionally cut out of our story? By whom and for what reason?

Torah narratives do offer some references to descendants of Hagar and Yishmael.

In Genesis/Breishit,

Esav marries a daughter of Yishmael.

Yosef is sold by his brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelites.

Later, in the book of Chronicles, we learn that that

There was war with the Hagrites under Saul.

Several Ishmaelites and one Hagrite were in service with David.

Are these Hagrites descendants of Hagar?

But Hagar and Yishmael themselves do not return in our story, and therefore do not bring the sacred gift back to the community.

What might have happened to them?

Lens 2: Deliberate variations of the story

Here, in my investigation I turned to another source, feminist Biblical scholar Savina Teubal. Savina Teubal, in her book *Hagar the Egyptian*, steps outside the Biblical record. She compares the Biblical narrative to older pre-patriarchal stories from ancient Mesopotamia. She claims that the Torah text we read today was woven together by a Priestly editor in a patriarchal society (about 500 BCE) from stories that are probably much older, and that come from an earlier matriarchal oral tradition. Why were these pre-patriarchal tales adapted and included and not just left out? Some stories were so fundamentally engrained in people's mythic consciousness that they could not be just stricken from the record. BUT they could be, and likely were, greatly edited to change their emphasis.

There are two Torah stories of expulsions and the encounters Hagar has outside the camp, in the wilderness.

1. Today's Torah reading is from Chapter 21 when Yishmael is 16 years old. In today's story, Hagar and her son (the name Yishmael is not used in this section) have been expelled from the camp and sent towards the caravan route back to Egypt. But they get lost, run out of water, and fear death. God hears the voice of the lad. God then makes the well visible.

2. The earlier Torah expulsion in Chapter 16 happens before Yishmael is born. In the Chapter 16 story, Hagar is the only person in Chumash to name a God based on a personal encounter, “You are El-ro’i, the all-seeing God”. The miraculous well in Chapter 16 is called Beer-la-chai-ro’i, the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.

Savina Teubal interprets the tales of Hagar’s meetings with God and angels at a well through the lens of ancient Mesopotamian goddess myths. To her this is another example of a familiar ancient archetype: a sacred marriage contracted at a well. The traditional examples from Torah of such meetings are Yitzhak’s emissary and Rivkah, Yaakov and Rachel, and Zipporah and Moshe.

Savina Teubal believes the two Hagar stories that we have are redacted and conflated versions of two older independent stories.

3. She sees one older story to be about an unnamed Desert Matriarch who names God (El-ro’i, the all-seeing God) and bears a son (perhaps in a sacred marriage with the God at the Well). The God says their son will be named Yishmael. This is the ancestor of the Ishmaelites.
4. She sees the other older story to be about the woman we know as Hagar, and her unnamed son who was cast out by Avraham and Sarah. This is the ancestor of the Hagrites.

In these versions Yishmael and Hagar each return to a different tribe and bring the gift of the well to the new tribe.

Teubal claims that in the matriarchal story, it is the God of the Well who chose the name Yishmael. The later version we have includes a patriarchal insertion in which Avram names the son Yishmael.

Savina Teubal sees the seamless Genesis/Breishit story that we know in Torah as a splicing together of these two unrelated stories by patriarchal editing intended to include, but re-work, the older matriarchal story.

Lens 3. Suppressed Story

There is also another story.

5. The Islamic story has Avraham travel to Arabia with Hagar and Yishmael. They go to Mecca, at the site of the Kaaba (the black stone in the Mosque at the center of the Hajj), where the angel Gabriel reveals the well of ZamZam. Yishmael becomes the father of the Arab people.

In the Jewish story Hagar never returns. In the Islamic story, Hagar and her son Yishmael are central.

Conclusion of the Torah story

There is a glimmer of an uplifting ending. In Chapter 25 of our story, Yitzhak and Yishmael together bury their father Avraham. Thus we have evidence that some tasks can bring conflicting peoples together.

Issues for us today on the personal level

We must re-new re-view re-evaluate re-form and re-construct our stories.

We must listen to and see each other's stories.

Shema Yisrael, we need to listen.

Yishmael, God has heard.

We need to see humans as does El-ro'i, (the all-seeing God).

Together, we need to retell the human story with an expanded understanding of an all-inclusive definition of the human family. When we are open to viewing our own stories through other lenses, our vision expands, and new possibilities open. Today we must pick up and work with the empty water skin.

2 Questions for contemplation and Torah study

I invite you to reflect on your own story through the lenses I used here. What lens do you use to make sense of what is happening?

Today's Torah portion Genesis/Breishit 21:1–21

Yitzhak's birth through weaning,
Sarah's casting out of Hagar and her son Yishmael,
Hagar and the lad in the wilderness with a soon-empty water skin,
the hearing by Elohim of the lad's cry,
and the promise that the lad will be made a great nation.

The Dvar today focused on Hagar and Yishmael in Genesis/Breishit 21:9–21.

The Lenses to exploring the story used in the Dvar are

Lens 1: The Hero's Journey

The hero will
go out to the wilderness,
endure trials and tribulations,
be aided by angels,
discover a sacred gift,
and return to his/her home community with the sacred gift.

When we look at our own lives, and the lives of our family members, do we see a Hero's Journey?

- Many of us have ancestors within our memories who did take a physical journey half-way across the world, through trials and tribulation, to bring their home to a new location and to bring sacred gifts to that new home. Many of these journeys involved conflict within families and loss of some family members before or during the journey.
- Many of us have had metaphorical journeys where we have gone out from our childhood homes and into a "wilderness" and discovered there a new world with new sacred gifts.

Lens 2: Alternate Story

When we look at our own lives, and the lives of our family members, do we see alternate tellings of a story?

- Can we detect the remnants of an original story? Was the original story lost in a game of “telephone” where each person in the line repeats a story based on the one they think they heard?
- Was there ever deliberate over-writing of a family story with the intent to change the message?
Were there different perceptions of the same set of events by the different people involved?

Lens 3. Suppressed Story

When we look at our own lives, and the lives of our family members, do we see missing stories?

- Are there relatives or friends who vanished from our sight?
Might they have continued to grow and thrive in their own communities?
- What would it look like if we reached out and brought their stories back in?

Reflection

We invite you to sit quietly for a moment and reflect. Try more than one lens. They might give different insights.

We invite you to partner with someone else in hevruta and discuss these questions in the context of *t'shuvah*, spiritual return.

3 Aliyot

3.1 Our FIRST aliyah will be to honor the hero's journey

Remember what this is: The hero or heroine
goes out to the wilderness,
endures trials and tribulations,
is aided by angels, or unanticipated helpers
discovers a sacred gift,
and returns to his/her home community with the sacred gift.

You might never have thought about your life in this way. But you ARE the hero of your life.

When were you in the wilderness?
Were you ever lost. Figuratively or literally?
Were there trials and tribulations? What were they?
Who helped you?
What gift did you discover?
How did you bring that gift back into your life??

If this framing speaks to you, then please come up.

[Torah reading]

May the one who blessed all of our ancestors, bless all of us who have come up in honor of Torah and in honor of this holy day. May you be blessed with
a sense of direction,
strength to bear and get beyond tribulations,
ability to recognize helpers and gifts,
and success at bringing the gifts home.

3.2 Our SECOND aliyah will honor Sabina Teubal's insight

Sometimes there is an overdub or an over-write of an older story. Historically we know that ancient matriarchal stories were overwritten by later patriarchal stories. But the older layer is still there.

What relevance does this insight have for you?

Is there any older story in your world or your life that got re-written to serve a different purpose?

Was the older story never entirely scrubbed?

Is the evidence of another way of understanding what had happened still there, even though hidden?

Come up to bear witness that this has happened and that the older story still is alive in its own way.

[Torah reading]

May the one who blessed all of our ancestors, bless all of us who have come up in honor of Torah and in honor of this holy day. May you be blessed with
ability to recall or discover the older story,
knowledge from the full story,
compassion for the revisionist,
joy from the sense of completion.

3.3 Our THIRD aliyah will honor anyone who was written out of a story

and wants to affirm that your place in the story is just as important. We are all the main character in our own story. It is only when the story is written by someone else that we may wind up being somehow “written out”.

If you want to honor those who are written out in any way, whether yourself, someone you know, or any group of people, come up.

[Torah reading]

May the one who blessed all of our ancestors, bless all of us who have come up in honor of Torah and in honor of this holy day. May you be blessed with writing back in,
a sense of fullness and completeness,
friendship with those who are newly discovered.