

STUDY GUIDE FOR WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15 FROM RABBI NANUS

ABRAHAM, SARAH, and HAGAR

PART ONE: GENESIS 16:1-13

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

6 "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

7 The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

9 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her."

10 The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

11 The angel of the LORD also said to her:

"You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to a son.
You shall name him Ishmael,^[a]
for the LORD has heard of your misery.

12 He will be a wild donkey of a man;

**his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward^[b] all his brothers."**

**13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me,"
for she said, "I have now seen^[c] the One who sees me." 14 That is why the well was
called Beer Lahai Roi^[d]; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.**

**15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had
borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.**

What is going on with each person in this story emotionally and psychologically?
Analyze the family dynamics. What are the relationships between – Sari and Avram. Sarai
and Hagar, Hagar and Avram?
What is your analysis of their characters?
Is anyone's behavior acceptable, in your opinion?
Interpret God's blessing to Hagar.

PART TWO: GENESIS 21: 9-21

**Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she bore to Abraham playing.
She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son. For the son of that
slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac. This matter distressed
Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be
distressed over the boy or your slave. Everything that Sarah says to you, heed her
voice, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son
of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."**

**Early the next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water and
gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder together with the child and
sent them away. And she wandered about the wilderness of Beersheba. When the
water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes and went
and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away. For she thought, "Let me not look on as
the child dies." And she sat at a distance, raised her voice and wept.**

God heard the voice of the lad and an angel of God called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Rise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand for I will make him a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad to drink. God was with the lad and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became a bowsman. He lived in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt. “

Our story begins with a blended family after Sarah instructed Abraham to take her longtime handmaid Hagar as a second wife and have a child with her. Hagar is from Egypt and her name has the same Hebrew spelling as the word *ha-ger*, the stranger or foreigner or the Other.

As a side note, there is a foreshadowing of the Jewish experience of being a foreigner in connection to Hagar. It is no coincidence that Hagar, the Other, is from Egypt. The Torah frequently tells us to remember our experience of being *gerim* in Egypt and to learn from that experience how we must treat others:

וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

And you must lovingly treat the *ger* for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:19). This week’s reading shows some of the ways we can easily fail in the fulfilling of this commandment.

We learn in the previous parasha that Ishmael, Hagar’s son, is given his name by an angel of God, with the meaning of his name explained that God has heard Hagar’s suffering. Today’s verses subtly dehumanizes Hagar and Ishmael with Ishmael becoming nameless, referred to as simply the boy or Hagar’s son. With the disappearance of his name, we hear a hint of the deafening of the ears to her suffering.

Hagar too has a shift in names which signal a diminishing of her status. Previously she was called the *shifcha*, handmaid, and was connected to Sarah, or *ha-isha*, the woman, now she gets called the *amah* – a slave or servant with no indication of a relationship with Sarah.

Something happens that upsets Sarah. We don’t know what. And Sarah demands that Hagar and her son, be banished from their joint household. All we are told is that Sarah saw the son of Hagar *mezahek* – playing or laughing or doing something related to Yizhak, whose name is derived from the same root, *lezahek*, which means to laugh. A number of midrashim and commentators, perhaps out of a desire to justify Sarah’s actions and blame Ishmael, choose to explain this verb *mezahek* in deeply negative terms suggesting he was involved in sexual abuse, shooting arrows at Isaac, killing and idolatry. This is a familiar

trope. When you want to diminish someone's worth, convict or expel, it is common practice to label or accuse that person of being a criminal or dangerous.

Sarah feels threatened by Ishmael doing something too familiar to her son, something which might indicate him as equal. Sarah's solution is to demand their expulsion, without referring to them by name, and proclaim that the son of that slave woman will not inherit his father's resources alongside his half-brother Isaac. Another familiar trope – there is not enough resources to go around. She will ensure he does not take from Isaac what she believes is HIS inheritance, what belongs to HIM and him alone.

Perhaps as a correction to Sarah's demand, before Abraham's death, in a later story in Genesis, we learn that Abraham personally gives Ishmael and his additional sons by concubines, gifts, making sure they are not left with nothing (25:6). And both Ishmael and Isaac, show up as equal sons at the moment of their father's death, burying their father together (25:9).

Sarah, in her demand to get rid of Hagar and her son uses a rare and strong verb.

גָּרַשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ

Expel this slave woman and her son.

This verb is used only one other place in the Torah. It is used in the 10th plague (Exodus 11:1) describing that the Jews will be forcibly removed and driven out of Egypt, permanently ending their ties with their former home.

Sarah's order is clear – permanent expulsion. Deportation. To make this order happen, Sarah turns to her husband Abraham, and gives him instructions in no uncertain terms. With this order, we are given a rare peek into Abraham's emotions:

וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָי אַבְרָהָם עַל אִוְלָת בְּנֹוֹ:

The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. It is not clear what distressed Abraham and about which son he is concerned. Rashi suggests that there are two very different ways to understand his distress. Abraham might be distressed by Sarah's demands to banish his son Ishmael. OR Abraham might be distressed by hearing Ishmael had taken to negative behavior.

Responding to his distress, God tells Abraham not to be distressed about the boy or your slave woman, and that his offspring shall be through Isaac and that God will also make Ishmael into a nation as he too is Abraham's seed. God counsels Abraham to hear Sarah's voice concerning what she had spoken.

כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלַיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

It is striking that God doesn't instruct Abraham to do what Sarah has asked, rather to hear her voice. What does it mean to hear someone's voice? Is it possible that God is instructing Abraham to hear Sarah's pain, listening to the fears in her voice, and finding a way to addressing those worries, instead of heeding her orders?

With this message from God, Abraham does indeed execute her order. Rising early in the morning, he sends away his own son and foreign born wife. They are expelled with no warning, no second chances, no goodbyes and almost no resources to survive.

Abraham, at this point in his life, has ample financial resources (13:2). He easily could have set up Hagar and Ishmael up with food, shelter, and whatever was needed for them to establish a comfortable new life and the rabbis notice and comment on this unusual and problematic behavior of sending them away with almost nothing (Exodus Rabba 1:1).

Abraham sends away mother and son with only a loaf of bread and skin of water. The verb used here for sending away, *וַיִּשְׁלַחֵהָ* is the same verb used in Pharaoh's edict to cast the baby boys in the Nile (Exodus 1:22) with the implication that this sending away is meant to cause certain death.

With almost no resources, they quickly finish their water. Hagar becomes despondent and sends her son away and lifts up her voice to God and cries. Ishmael, already having been abandoned by his father, is now separated and distanced from his mother. Though we don't hear his voice, the Torah tells us God hears the voice of the youth, where he is.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנְּעוּרָה בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־אֵשׁ

The verb choice *shema*, to hear is a theme and reminds us of the etymology of Ishmael's name, with God hearing the agony of his mother (Genesis 16). Along with hearing, the Torah points out God is with him, **where he is, as he is**. It is noteworthy, that this is the only time in the Torah where we have this expression of God being unconditionally with someone.

Upon hearing the cries, God instructs Hagar what to do. Her trauma or perhaps her starvation, is so great, that on her own, she has forgotten how to mother and needs guidance. She is told to get up, lift up the boy and strengthen her hand on him. And God reassures her that Ishmael will become a great nation.

Then God opens her eyes and she sees a previously unseen well, a source of vitality, sustenance and possibility. She fills up her skin of water and lets the boy drink.

Where did the well come from? Was it there all along and Hagar couldn't see it until God opened her eyes, expanding her vision OR is she seeing a new well and new possibilities?

Hagar is not the only one in our story who is blinded to different options and resources. She is fortunate to have her eyes opened by God. Who else needs this metaphor and action of eyes being opened to new wells, possibilities, and solutions?

Our story ends with learning God is with Ishmael and he grows up in the desert to become a bowsman and his mother finds him a wife.

This is the last time we hear from Sarah and Hagar. Their only additional mentions are learning of Sarah's death and burial and Hagar's name appearing in her son's genealogy. Many midrashim associate the binding of Isaac with Sarah's death, suggesting the trauma of this near sacrifice of her son leads to her death. However, she actually disappears earlier from the text. She never reappears alive after giving her order to banish Hagar and her son.

As Hagar and Ishmael are exiled from Sarah's presence, so too is Sarah exiled from the narrative. What happens to our fierce mama bear after this demand to banish others? We don't know and we don't hear. She disappears from the story and has no more agency, presence or voice. **This is Sarah's final act.** Is the Torah suggesting that causing harm to another and trying to ostracize and banish them is dangerous to your own selfhood and can possibly cause your own demise?

Hagar's final action is strikingly different from Sarah's. Hagar's act is a redeeming, motherly one. We learn she gets her son a wife, and with it the beginning of the fulfillment of the divine promise of him fathering a nation. Hagar is the only biblical woman who is promised her descendants will be too numerous to count (16:10) and is the only woman to find a spouse for her son. While Sarah seeks to diminish her, the Torah augments her by ascribing to her a number of unique and noteworthy roles and blessings. Earlier in Genesis, she is the first person to whom an angel of God appears and calls by name and she merits giving a name to God. This is our foreigner and our Other. What could the Torah be hoping we learn from this? Are we being challenged to not undervalue anyone, particularly the foreigner and outsider, as who knows the unique potential of each and every human being.

Sarah's death and burial are recorded at length in the Torah portion of Chayei Sarah while Hagar's death is not mentioned. Is this a commentary by our text desiring to bury the course of action Sarah has chosen? Or perhaps Hagar's death is not mentioned because her story, the story of the foreigner, continues to live on? Or, alternatively, because she represents the other and the foreigner, her death is not deemed sufficiently significant to get a mention?

Where is Isaac in this story? We don't know and can only speculate how he is affected when he wakes up the next morning to find his older half-brother and step-mother permanently gone. Many commentators note how complacent he is when he next appears in the Torah when his father takes him up mount Moriah to be offered as a sacrifice. And strikingly Abraham descends the mountain without Isaac. Isaac is absent at the time of his mother's death and burial and for some time afterwards, returning only as Rebecca is brought to his home(24:62).

And when Isaac next appears, he is coming from *Beer Lehai Roi* – the place which Hagar named upon being told by an angel of God that she was pregnant with Ishmael. What is the Torah suggesting about how Isaac might have been impacted by the expulsion and the lengths he travelled to be reunited with Hagar and Ishmael?

The Torah is not just a book of answers, but also a book of questions, challenges and warnings. Today's reading is an old story, one that we, as Jews, who were *gerim* in Egypt, and immigrants and a persecuted people know only too well. But this is not just our particular story as Jews, it is a universal story that is taking place now under our very own watch. This is the story of loved ones, families, torn asunder, expelled from their homes and lands which turned and become hostile to them. Running and sent away without resources, desperate to find safe passage, even at risk of endangering themselves and their children in that pursuit.

We are being asked to hear this story and to know it is not a story of yesterday or of history. It is a story of TODAY and we are challenged to make manifest God's compassion. We're reminded of the damage we cause ourselves when we wish harm of others and the wells of possibilities that exist if we only allow our eyes to be opened to them. And we are reminded that God cares about all of God's children.