The Shared Testament: Sara and Hagar

01/01/2012 | Dalia Marx and Ursula Rudnick

Two feminist scholars, Dalia Marx, a liberal rabbi and an ordained Lutheran minister, Ursula Rudnick, in dialogue about the Hebrew Bible.

A perfect stranger

A Jewish reading (*Dalia Marx*) and a Christian response (*Ursula Rudnick*)

The traditional Jewish morning benedictions include three benedictions with which the worshipper thanks God for his lot in life. By reciting the benedictions - "Who did not make me a gentile", "who did not make me a slave," and "who did not make me a woman" - all of them formulated in the negative - the worshipper gives thanks for his lot inasmuch as he belongs to the Jewish group, the freemen, and the males. These three benedictions - which were rejected and replaced in Liberal and Conservative Judaism - comprehend human existence in terms of national, social, and gender status. In each case, they place the speaker of the bessing in the preferred class of persons. Hagar, Sarah's female servant and mother of Ishmael, belongs to every category from which the worshipper is thankful for having been excluded - she is a gentile, slave, and woman. Hagar is not only the perfect stranger; she occupies the wrong side of every equation set up by the three benedictions.

How surprising, then, to discover that when it comes to their children, there is a great deal of similarity between the story of Abraham, Father of the Jewish People, the perfect and ideal Jew who was granted direct and continuous connection with God and the story of Hagar, the gentile slave-woman. The story of Abraham and his beloved son Isaac is similar to that of Hagar and her son Ishmael, whom she had born for Abraham. If we place the two narratives side by side, the very similarity of the two makes the differences between them all the more salient. To our great surprise, the comparison is not always complimentary to Abraham.

In parashat Lekh Lekha, we read of God's revelation to Abraham, of Abraham's readiness to respond to the revelation, and of God's promises to him and to his descendants. Hagar's story lies hidden within Abraham's.

Neither Abraham nor Hagar accepts the conventions of their societies; they act against them. In the beginning of the parasha, upon receiving divine revelation, Abraham leaves his home, the land of his birth, and his father's house. By departing, he cuts himself off from the framework in which he had grown up and whose values were supposed to direct his actions. Hagar the slave refuses to serve as a surrogate mother for her mistress Sarah, even though that function was accepted by her cultural environment (after all, two generations later we see it occurring in the story of Zilpah and Bilhah). Lacking any real ability to oppose the hierarchical and patriarchal institutions that throw her to Abraham's bed, she exploits her power - the power of the weak - and takes rebellious action, deprecating Sarah: *Seeing that she had become pregnant, her mistress lost honor in her eyes* (16:4).

The lines of comparison between the two stories are numerous. Both are framed by Abraham's two revelations that begin with the words *lekh lekha* [go!]. The first tells him to leave his home and the second to sacrifice his son. These are traditionally referred to as Abraham's first and final trials

(Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 5; Tanhuma [Buber] Vayeira 46). Hagar also experiences two revelations. First, an angel addresses her after she flees from Sarah, saying, *Return to your mistress and be afflicted under her hand* (16:9). (This revelation is largely opposite to that received by Abraham in the opening of our parasha; God tells Abraham to leave his home, the cultural center of the age, and go to an unknown land, while the angel of the Lord tells Hagar to leave the wilderness and return to the house which had been a source of suffering for her). The angel promises the pregnant Hagar that *I will surely multiply your seed, it will be numerous beyond counting* (16:10) - a promise similar to the promise received by Abraham after the binding of Isaac. He also promises that the son will be a free man, a ruler rather than a lowly slave like herself. It seems that Hagar agrees to return to Abraham's house in order to attain her son's promised freedom at the price of her own. Hagar experiences her second revelation when God opens her eyes and she sees the well. She is the first biblical character whom God addresses by name. In fact, she is so addressed on two occasions (16:8, 21:17). Franz Rosenzweig claims that by saying *Here I am*, Abraham became the first person to answer upon being called by name by God. The first Divine call to humans, namely to Adam: *Where are you?* Was not responded, Adam could not confront God and instead hid from God's presence. While Abraham was the first to respond to God's call, Hagar is the first biblical figure the angel of God addressed by name.

Both stories depict loving parents confronted by a situation in which the beloved son faces danger. In both cases, the danger is connected to leaving home and a journey that the parent is commanded to undertake.

Abraham, father to both boys - Isaac and Ishmael - acquiesces in both cases to powers that ask him to act in a way that will place the children's lives in tangible danger. In Isaac's case, he unquestioningly obeys the divine call. Regarding Ishmael, he also obeys God's command that he obey his wife Sarah, although, there we also read: *The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son* (21:11). In both cases we see that Abraham rises early in the morning to fulfill his difficult mission.

Abraham travels with Isaac to Mount Moriah out of a choice to obey the divine command that he sacrifice his son's life. He is the one who holds the knife over his son. In contrast, Hagar does not acquiesce to the evil decree. However, as an enslaved gentile woman, she cannot actively resist the expulsion that is forced upon her.

While Abraham took an active step and brought his son to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah, Hagar engages in passive protest, the resistance of the weak. She does not accept her fate and instead she refuses to watch the child die. She leaves Ishmael to die of thirst, while she sits *away at the distance of a bow-shot* (21:16), so expressing her refusal to cooperate with the cruel decree. Hagar's tears contrast strongly with Abraham's restraint in the story of the binding of Isaac. It is the first mention of someone crying in the Bible; a mother crying at her son's bitter fate.

In both cases an angel of God addresses the parent and halts the terrible course of events just before its consummation. In both cases, divine intervention connected with the act of *seeing* snatches the son from an awful death. In the binding of Isaac, Abraham sees the ram and sacrifices it instead of his son. God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well. The motif of vision is important to both stories; indeed, the place where Ishmael was saved is named *Be'er Ro'i [well of my seeing]* and the site of the binding of Isaac is *Har HaMoriah*, in which is embedded the verb *ra'ah [saw]*.

The tension between these two interwoven stories that are found in the parashiyot of Lekh Lekha and VaYeira is not resolved in the framework of Scripture. It seems to be only further intensified by the fact that Isaac is later to be counted among the nation's founding patriarchs, while Ishmael comes to be viewed by both Jewish and Islamic tradition as having founded the Moslem nation.

A midrash now comes to our aid. There is a midrashic tradition that identifies Hagar with Keturah, who Abraham married after Sarah's death (Bereishit Rabbah 61:6) It views them as being one in the same woman. The midrash suggests a kind of repair [*tikkun*] in that the female slave turns into a married woman, and the hierarchical relationship is replaced with a spousal relationship.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai gives voice to a different midrashic tradition, according to which Hagar the Egyptian is none other than the Pharaoh's daughter (Bereishit Rabbah 45:1). Hagar becomes the daughter of pharaoh known in Jewish tradition as *Bityah*. In her youth, she suffered a terrible trauma, almost losing her only son. Later, thanks to her human compassion, she saves the infant Moses, a son of the Israelites. The mercy she shows contrasts with the stern decree that she had herself experiences; it creates a kind of *tikkun* (repair, correction), and allows for consolation.

According to this tradition, Abraham and Sarah, who had oppressed Hagar, would beget descendants who themselves would be enslaved by the descendents of Hagar and Abraham. Hagar had suffered because of her fertility, and her children would want to destroy the descendents of Abraham and Sarah because of their great fertility - *Let us deal shrewdly with them* say the Egyptians, *lest they lest they increase* (Shemot 1:10). Interestingly, this tradition may involve the principle of measure for measure. (Concerning the verse, *Sarah afflicted her, and she [Hagar] took flight from her*, the RaMBaN writes: Our mother Sarah sinned by this affliction and Abraham sinned likewise for letting her do it. God heard her affliction and gave her a son who would become a wild man in order to afflict the descendents of Abraham and Sarah in all manners of affliction).

It even seems that we can find a dimension of repair and solace within the biblical text itself. Two boys, both sons of Abraham, sons to mothers who were at odds with each other, sons, each of whom had stood on the edge of violent death, join together to make the effort to bring their father to a proper burial: *And his sons Isaac and Ishmael brought him to burial in the Cave of Makhpelah* (25:9). Perhaps because of this, the Torah mentions that Abraham died well-satisfied and at a good old age. Isaac and Ishmael knew how to get over the past, over the hatred that lasted a generation, and cooperate in the care of their beloved father.

Each of us is Hagar sometimes - lost and abandoned in the middle of the wilderness, standing hopelessly and full of yearning in the face of dangers that beset that which is dear to us.

Each of us is Abraham sometimes - torn between our great loves and unable to repair the tears.

Each of us is Sarah sometimes - hurt and abandoned and feeling forsaken, even within our own homes and families.

May we not have to wait a generation's time for repair and consolation! May we learn to open our eyes and see a well of living waters and pour balm over the wounds of the past!

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Ursula’s response to Dalia´s reading

I very much like the critical reading of the text, which takes up much from the Jewish tradition. The story entails a lot of pain and yet, you Dalia, discover a way that points towards repair and solace, namely in the interaction of the sons of Abraham. “Isaac and Ishmael knew how to get over the past, over the hatred that lasted a generation…”

Pain and hate need not to have the last word. It is upon us to look at the past, to acknowledge the atrocities that have been committed and look for venues of reconciliation.

Furthermore, I like the fluidity with which you identify each of us with Sarah, Hagar und Abraham which is juxtaposition to Paul´s rigid categorization.

Yes, each of us is Hagar sometimes, Sarah and Abraham.

Sara and Hagar

A Christian perspective (*Ursula Rudnick*) and a Jewish response (*Dalia Marx*)

Exegesis is not beyond time, nor place or context. Thus, reading the story of Sarah and Hagar and being in a dialogue with You Dalia, an Israeli rabbi and professor, immediately conjures up Paul`s interpretation of this story in the letter to the Galatians in the New Testament.

Paul, the apostle to the peoples of the world, as he saw himself, wrote the letter to the newly found believers in Galatia, a landscape in asia minor, today a part of Turkey. Paul presumably wrote this letter from the megapolis of Ephesus, probably around the year 53-55 C.E:

When I read the text of Paul, that is a part of my Bible, I feel shame. For Paul quotes from Genesis “Drive out the slave and her child…” and in his train of thought, this refers to Sarah and her children. These words seem to nullify the covenant between God and the Jewish people, Am Israel, sealed at Sinai. Sentences like this conjure up images from the time of National-socialism in Germany, when this admonition indeed was heeded. Jews were marginalized and exploited, their property was stolen and they were driven out. Those who did not or could not flee were murdered.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the text. What is the message that Paul tries to convey in his letter to the Galatians and in which way does he use the story of Sarah and Hagar in his line of thought?

To understand Paul´s allegorical interpretation and use of the story of Sarah and Hagar, it´s important grasp his train of thought. In this letter, Paul fights for the right of non-Jewish followers of Jesus not having to take the yoke of Torah upon themselves to have part in the world to come. According to Paul, those believers who have a non-Jewish background do not have to obey all the Mizwot, the 613 commandments. What is common sense among Christians today, was not undisputed among the followers of Jesus Christ in the first century. From the context of the letter to the Galatians, it becomes clear that there were those who advocated that Non-Jews must also take all the mitsvot – and not only the seven Noahide laws – upon themselves. However, it was very important to Paul that men and women who had become believers of the God of Israel via Jesus Christ did not have to follow the Mitsvot of the written or the oral Torah.

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of

the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,

burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;

for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous

than the children of the one who is married.’

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

Galatians, 4. 21-32, New Revised Standard Version)

What does Paul do here? He interprets the story of Sarah and Hagar in an allegorical way and uses the text to make his point. Unfortunately, it does not suffice for Paul to claim “equal status” for the new comers, but he vilifies Hagar and her children, i.e. the Jewish people. As a consequence, the Christian church which subsequently came into being, heeded the advice of Paul: “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’”

Paul takes the figures of Sarah and Hagar and interprets them as representing two covenants: The children of Hagar represent Judaism, whereas the children of Sarah represent the non-Jews who have come to believe in Jesus Christ. How does Paul justify this representation? Those children who were conceived in a “natural way” via sexual intercourse represent Judaism: any person who has a Jewish mother (or has converted) is Jewish. Those, however, who do not have a Jewish mother are – according to Paul – “the children of promise”, just as Isaac was a “child of promise” since Sarah and Abraham were much do old to conceive a child without divine intervention.

Jerusalem – the place of God´s presence with his people – is equally claimed by Paul for the “the new ones”. According to the tradition, there is an earthly as well as a heavenly Jerusalem. According to Paul, the earthly Jerusalem is held in captivity, whereas the heavenly Jerusalem represents the” city of freedom”. This latter city is called “the mother” of the new ones. And as someone who is familiar with the rabbinic exegesis, Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah (54.1) to give more weight to his thought.

The problem of Paul´s line of argument is very clear: those who keep the Torah are characterized

in a very negative way as the children of Hagar who need to be driven out. The price that Paul has to pay for his claim (that the new ones are Sara´s children) is that the already existing children of Sarah are deprived of this title of honor and the rights and privileges that come with it. And furthermore, they are vilified as the children of Hagar, who is characterized as a slave and who is “bearing children for slavery.”

Unfortunately, Paul does not only advocate the legitimacy of a relationship to the God of Jacob without Halakha, but at the same time he rejects and vilifies other positions.

Recent Pauline scholarship suggests that this paragraph should not be read as rejecting Halakha for Jews, but as rejecting Halakha for Non-Jews. Such a reading would have implications for the appreciation of observant Jews through Christians today.

Yet, no matter how these lines are interpreted today: in the past the Christian exegesis used these sentences to reject all forms of Halakha. Furthermore, very early on Christians developed a replacement theology in which we saw ourselves as the “true Israel”, claiming the chair of the matriarch Sarah for ourselves and relegating Jews to the position of Hagar. And what was nothing but a phantasy in the first century C.E., became a bitter truth in later centuries. The motif of “ecclesia and synagoga”, which arose in the early middle ages, gives witness to this. It depicts two women: one is blind, the other is beautiful. Superfluous, to say which woman represents Judaism.

Over the past decades, changes have taken place in the Christian theologies, especially in Europe and North America. Christians reject the model in which one tradition represents Sarah and the other Hagar. The “theology of contempt”, as the French historian Jules Isaac, called it so aptly, has come in many – yet not in all - churches to an end. Christians are learning that advancing a theology does not entail the vilification of other positions. Yet, it means disagreeing with Paul at times and standing in opposition to some sentences of the Bible.

P.S. After Hagar and her son were driven out by Abraham, the Bible reports no further communication between the women, understandably. However, their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, came together to jointly bury their father Abraham. Isaac and Ishmael are the children of the second generation. Were they able to talk about the painful family history? We do not know. However, after the rupture the subsequent generation managed to resume communication.

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Dalia’s response to Ursula’s reading

Obviously, reading about Paul’s identification of the Jews with Hagar, is not an acceptable one to me, especially due to the negative value ascribed to this identification. However, if we look back to the Jewish existence throughout the history, we see that most of the time, Jews lived in a complex reality – they identified themselves as the descendents of Sara but they lived in a reality that placed them, in many cases, in the position of Hagar: they were a minority, lived under foreign rule, and occasionally subject to persecutions.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the wheel has turned; we are no longer a

minority, depended on the good will of others, we are a sovereign (and normal?) state, dwelling in our historical land. We are “Sara” again, and in our midst there dwell the descendents of Hagar. The common past of the children of Sara and the children of Hagar requires both of us to correct the ancient balance of Terror.

Ursula, I believe that Christian people can fulfill a crucial and just role in the reconciliation between Jews and Moslems.

This dialogue was initiated by the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Meanwhile the ICCJ has opened a “Shared testament Forum” with responses, questions and remarks on Dalia’s and Ursula’s contributions. Peta Pellach Jones from Israel, Elijah Interfaith Institute, and Marianne Dacy, Australian CCJ, are the first to comment. The ICCJ invites every reader to join the discussion. See here:

Shared Testament Forum

This article is also available in Czech language (translated by Sidiworld.com team).