

**THE SUFFERING OF HAGAR:  
A PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL REFLECTION  
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Among the earliest stories of suffering in Hebrew scripture is the plight of Hagar, an Egyptian slave. From a psycho-spiritual perspective, this paper analyzes the cause of her suffering, as well as human and divine actions taken in the face of her suffering, and it explores the contemporary relevance of her narrative and its application in pastoral caregiving settings.

**HER STORY**

The story of Hagar is found in two places in Hebrew scripture: *Bereishit* (Genesis) 16:1-16 (in *Parashat Lech Lecha*), and *Bereishit* 21:9-21 (in *Parashat Vayeira*). (Because one account uses the name *YHWH* and the other *Elohim*, and one account names Ishmael and the other does not—among other reasons—some Biblical scholars, such as Savina J. Teubal, have posited that these may be separate stories about two different women. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that Hagar is the same person in both.)

In the first account in *Lech Lecha*, Hagar is identified as the Egyptian maidservant or slave-woman (*shif'chah Mitz'rit*) of Sarai, wife of Avram. Because Sarai has had no children, she gives Hagar to Avram as a surrogate wife. When Hagar becomes pregnant, “her mistress became of light-worth in her eyes” (16:4)\*. This enrages Sarai who blames Avram, and Avram tells Sarai to “deal with her [Hagar] however seems good in your eyes.” Then “Sarai afflicted [Hagar], so that she had to flee from her” (16:6). The story goes on to relate that a messenger of God (*malach HaShem*) finds Hagar by a spring in the wilderness, addresses her by name, and asks where she has come from and where she is going. The messenger instructs Hagar to return to Sarai and “let yourself be afflicted under her hand” (16:10). The messenger then tells Hagar:

*I will make your seed many, yes, many, it will be too many to count!  
Here, you are pregnant, / You will bear a son;  
Call his name: Yishmael/God Harkens,  
For God has hearkened to your being afflicted.  
He shall be a wild-ass of a man, / His hand against all, hand of all against him,  
Yet in the presence of all his brothers shall he dwell. (16:10-12)*

\*All English translations by Everett Fox, from The Five Books of Moses.

After hearing this, Hagar names *HaShem*, “*El Ro-i*, You God of Seeing” (16:13). Hagar then bears Avram a son, and Avram names him Ishmael.

The second account in *Vayeira* takes place after Sarah and Avraham receive the *brit* and their new names and Yitzhak is born. Now Sarah’s ire is that “the son of this slave-woman (*amah*) shall not share-inheritance with my son” (21:10), and she demands that Avraham drive out Hagar and her son. *Elohim* reassures Avraham about doing what Sarah wants. Early one morning, Avraham gives Hagar some bread and a skin of water and sends her and the boy away, and Hagar “went off and roamed in the wilderness . . .” (21:14). When her water was gone, she put the child under a bush and sat off at a distance, saying “Let me not see the child die,” and she “lifted up her voice and wept” (21:16). The story then relates that *Elohim* heard the boy’s voice (not Hagar’s), and a messenger (*malach Elohim*) called to Hagar from heaven and said:

*What is (the matter) with you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the lad there where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and grasp him with your hand, for a great nation will I make of him! (21:17-18)*

The text then says that “God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water” (21:19) and gave the boy to drink. The remaining verses relate that the boy grew up and settled in the wilderness, became an archer, and his mother “took him a wife from the land of Egypt” (21:21).

### **ASPECTS OF HAGAR’S SUFFERING**

Estrangement is one aspect of how Hagar suffers in these accounts. Her very name has many associations with concepts of estrangement—*hajira*, the wanderer; *ha-gera*, the foreigner; *ha-gerusah*, the banished one (Frankel, p. 18). The Biblical text gives no clues to her family, she no longer lives in Egypt where she is from, in the text she does not speak directly to another human being, nor does any non-divine being speak directly to her, and in both accounts she spends time wandering in the wilderness.

Corollary with Hagar’s estrangement is her powerlessness. There is a wide range of *midrashim* as to her origin, and interpretations about her status. For example, some sources say Hagar was Pharaoh’s daughter, given to Sarai while she and Avram were in Egypt (*Bereishit Rabbah*—*BR*—45:1 in Antonelli, p. 34; Ginzberg, p. 223). In Islamic tradition, Hagar was a princess married to Avram in a dynastic marriage (Frymer-Kensky, p. 226), and along those lines, some rabbinic sources speculate that she was also Avraham’s second wife Keturah (e.g.,

*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 30, cited in WRJ, p. 128). Another source has Hagar descended from the family of Ham (*Yalkut Reuveni*, Genesis 26.2, 36c, cited in WRJ, p. 128). Related to her status, in the *Lech Lecha* account, Hagar is referred to as *shif'chah*, and in the *Vayeira* account as *amah*. These terms seem to vary somewhat in terms of definition. Antonelli defines *shif'chah* as a slave or bondswoman, and says that after Ishmael's birth, Hagar's status was raised to *amah*, a maidservant (Antonelli, p. 35). Teubal, on the other hand, defines *shif'chah* as a "woman in the service of another woman," and defines *amah* as "slave" (Teubal, p. xxxi). The WRJ Torah Commentary defines *shif'chah* as the lowest level of servitude (WRJ, p. 71). Also, while many English translations define her role with Avram as concubine, the Hebrew text says that Sarai gave Hagar to Avram *lo l'ishah*, "as a wife for him" (16:3), and the ancient laws of Hammurabi have provisions around when a slave becomes a "slave-wife" (Frymer-Kensky, p. 228). The WRJ Torah Commentary states that concubinage is a status higher than that of a slave, but lower than a wife (WRJ, p. 71).

But however commentators define Hagar's origins and role, she is a woman without power. She is given away by her father, taken from her home in Egypt to Canaan, given away to Avram for child-bearing purposes. She is property. Frymer-Kensky summarizes it this way.

*Hagar is . . . passed from person to person. Neither Abram nor Sarai ever calls her by her name. They treat her as a slave, not a person, and to recognize that she is also a person would get in the way of their plans.* (Frymer-Kensky, p. 228)

And Baskin has this to say: "In this power equation [of mistress to servant], Hagar is a chattel who was at fault for fleeing her rightful superior" (Baskin, p. 152).

This powerlessness also extends to Hagar's treatment by many rabbinic commentators. She is often depicted as inferior and deserving of her treatment. The Torah text states in the *Lech Lecha* account that Hagar was disrespectful to Sarai, and in the *Vayeira* account that her son was not considered worthy to share inheritance. *Midrashim* and Zoharic commentary state that Hagar had turned to idol worship (Ginzberg, p. 235; Matt, p. 186; Zohar 1:118b in Antonelli, p. 36), and *midrashim* in general "impugn[s] Hagar for her insufferable behavior" (Baskin, p. 11). And, of course, as both an Egyptian and as the mother of Ishmael, who would become the founder of the Arab people and by extension the Muslims, Hagar is often denigrated for various reasons as the ultimate Other. For example,

*Rabbinic discomfort with Hagar's Egyptian heritage is also a factor in the negative tenor of [rabbinic] texts. The otherness of the foreign woman evoked significant sexual anxiety in rabbinic discourse. (Baskin, p. 152)*

And not only do many rabbinic commentators feel Hagar is deserving of her treatment, some also deem her undeserving of God's attention. *BR* 45:10 states, "God never condescended to hold converse with a woman save that righteous woman [Sarai]" (cited in Shekel, note 2, p. 411).

A different kind of powerlessness may have also been at play in the second Biblical account, when Hagar distances herself from her young son in the desert.

*Too often parents find themselves in this position, powerless to save their children from the Angel of Death . . . Is it not difficult to endure a child's death even 'at a distance' . . . ? (Frankel, p. 29).*

And this sense of futility in the face of life challenge could have endangered both their lives:

*Hagar's eyes are at first so blinded by tears that she is unable to see the miraculous well nearby. Too overcome with grief over her son's approaching death, she fails to attend to her own survival. (Frankel, p. 30)*

Estrangement and powerlessness can be seen as existential states of being. Hagar, however, also suffered actual abuse. The Torah text says, *vat'aneha Sarai* (16:6)—Sarah afflicted Hagar, dealt harshly with her. *BR* 45:6, states that "Sarah began to oppress Hagar, restraining her from sexual relations, making her carry water buckets and bath towels, and even slapping her with a slipper" (cited in Antonelli, p. 35; Baskin, p. 152). The *Etz Hayim* Torah commentary says, "The Hebrew verb used . . . implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse" (RA, p. 87). The WRJ Torah Commentary points out that the verb *innah* refers to various forms of coercion, and is the same verb used to describe the treatment of the Israelites in Egypt (WRJ, p. 72). A *midrash* elaborates on Sarah's cruelty, saying that she "tormented [Hagar], and finally she cast an evil eye upon her, so that the unborn child dropped from her, and she ran away" (Plaut, p. 144). And no help comes from Avraham, who says, "I am constrained to do her neither harm nor good" (*BR* 45:6 cited in Baskin, p. 152).

Some commentators support Sarai's action, citing Hagar's arrogance toward her mistress. Rashi puts these triumphalist, and presumably punishable, words into Hagar's mouth:

*Hagar argued: This Sarah is not what she seems to be. She behaves as if she were a righteous woman when she is not righteous, since she did not merit conception all these years, whilst I became pregnant the first time. (Leibowitz, p. 155)*

And Baskin states that Sarai was simply protecting her turf and “treating [Hagar] like an ordinary slave, . . . a denial of the status that Hagar had achieved by being pregnant” (Baskin, p. 229).

However, Ramban states that Sarah “sinned” by her harsh treatment of Hagar, as did Avraham (Leibowitz, p. 156; RA, p. 87; Antonelli, p. 35). According to Leibowitz, “our commentators find no excuses to condone Sarah’s behavior, look for no psychological explanation in extenuation of her deed. No appraisal of Sarah’s character could condone the sin of ‘Sarah dealt harshly with her’” (Leibowitz, p. 156).

### **ALLEVIATION OF SUFFERING**

The story of Hagar reveals within it, both directly and indirectly, several ways in which the suffering caused by estrangement, powerlessness, and abuse can be alleviated.

#### **Taking action**

The first of these involves Hagar taking action on her own behalf. In the *Lech Lecha* account, presumably when Sarai’s abuse became more than she could bear, Hagar fled (16:6). While running away can in some circumstances be seen as an act of cowardice or desperation, in Hagar’s case it could also be seen both as an act of self-preservation and as the first steps in what would become a powerful spiritual journey.

Hagar’s action to flee took her to a profound spiritual encounter, and after that encounter, Hagar takes another initiative, that of naming God—*El Ro’i*. She is the only individual in the Bible, male or female, who gives God a name (RA, p. 88). Through that act, she affirms both her experience of and relationship with God. As Shekel describes, naming is a profoundly empowering act in Biblical tradition:

*The act of naming is both empowering and embracing . . . Adam names his wife, Eve, placing himself in relationship to her. Eve names her children Cain and Seth. God names the children of Sarah and Hagar. God will also rename adult individuals, beginning with Abram and Sarai. From the very beginning, humans name animals and humans name each other. Yet here, for the first and only time in a Divine encounter, a human, a woman names God. (Shekel, p. 59)*

At the end of the *Vayeira* account, Hagar took another action—she took (*vatikach*) for her son a wife from the land of Egypt (21:21). Even though at the beginning of the *Vayeira* account, she and her son were sent away by Avraham and Sarah, her encounter with dying and with God brought her real freedom, a freedom consisting of “the possibility of meaningful action in a setting that allows self-determination” (Wolpe, p. 45).

Meier says that taking a “commitment leap into action” helps in “completing the patterning of the events of one’s life in some coherent fashion” (Meier, p. 114). Hagar’s trajectory of action in the face of suffering helped her move from fleeing—an act of self-preservation, to naming—an act of empowering, to taking—an act of freedom. Step by step, her own actions alleviated her powerlessness.

### Being seen

Suffering through estrangement can entail not being seen by others. The story of Hagar is a study of how the process of being seen led to being able to see. In both Hagar accounts, she is labeled and used in certain functions—slave, handmaid, concubine, surrogate mother, surrogate wife—but she is not really seen by Avraham or Sarah in any meaningful or authentic way beyond her function. Her first experience of being truly seen is when *malach YHWH*, a messenger of *HaShem*, finds her in the wilderness, seeks her out, calls her by name (not just label), and actually inquires about her life—“whence do you come, whither are you going?” (16:7-8), and tells her about her future.

And Hagar is aware that she has been seen, and not just by a messenger, but by *HaShem*: “Now she called the name of YHWH, the one who was speaking to her: *El Ro’i*” (16:13). She names God literally “God of seeing,” but a name that can also mean “God of my seeing” or “God who sees me.” Perhaps the sheer experience of being seen is what gave her the courage to obey the messenger’s command to “Return to your mistress and let yourself be afflicted under her hand” (16:9).

Hagar’s second experience of being seen also happens in the wilderness, this time after she is sent away with her son by Avraham and Sarah. After running out of water, while weeping for what would seem the inevitable death of her son, *malach Elohim*, a messenger of God, called to her, told her not to be afraid, and reaffirmed her future. The text then says that “God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water” (21:19). Being seen by God now allowed her to see:

*God's miracle was not in creating a well where none had been before, but by opening Hagar's eyes so that she could see what she previously had been blind to, the existence of life-sustaining resources in her world. (RA, p. 115)*

Being seen, by extension, also means being heard. In the *Lech Lecha* account, *HaShem* instructs Hagar to name her son Ishmael, meaning “God listens” or God hearkens,” “for God has hearkened to your being afflicted” (16:11). Her son’s name will serve as both divine reminder and divine promise about God’s attentiveness to Hagar’s plight. And there is also the implication of divine hearing in the *Vayeira* account, although it is not Hagar who is heard, even though she is seen. While it is Hagar who “lifted up her voice and wept” (16:16), it was the voice of her son that God heard (16:17), even though the text makes no mention of Hagar’s son making any sound. From this, one commentator teaches that God can hear the silent cries of anguish even when no words are uttered (RA, p. 115).

Being seen and being heard affirms Hagar’s humanity and her value as a person, which in turn may have given her the strength and resolve initially to return to an abusive situation, and later, to take on sole responsibility for her son’s future. Being seen and being heard had the potential to alleviate both her estrangement and powerlessness. Even if she was not seen or heard by the humans around her, she did have a personal relationship with God, who looked out for her welfare.

### Finding meaning

Finding meaning often involves creating a larger context for, seeing a bigger picture of, or changing perspective about one’s experience. Hagar finds meaning in her suffering in part through information shared with her by the divine *malachim* in both the *Lech Lecha* and *Vayeira* accounts. This information takes the form of truth-telling about her situation and covenantal promises. In both accounts, Hagar receives from God a *brit*, a covenant, similar to the one Avraham and Sarah received—that God “will make your seed many, yes, many, it will be too many to count” (16:10) and “a great nation will I make of him [your son]” (21:18). In the first account, she is also told that she is pregnant with a son, and what kind of person he will be and future he will have, that he would be a “wild-ass of a man,” with “his hand against all, hand of all against him” (16:11). Knowing both the reality of what she and her son are up against, and that they have a divinely ensured future may have enabled Hagar to endure her present suffering and anticipate a clearer and improved future.

Commentators have also drawn for themselves a wide range of meanings from the Hagar story. One of these involves changing perspective. Green says that “to find God is to change perspective, even when the reality of suffering itself cannot be changed” (Green p. 141). One way in which Hagar’s view of herself may have changed is related to when she and her son were sent away by Avraham and Sarah; they were not sold nor did they leave as runaway slaves (as Hagar did the first time), but instead left Avraham’s household as emancipated slaves, as free persons (Frymer-Kensky, p. 235). Shekel points out another example of changing perspective around Hagar’s name. She says that traditionally Hagar’s outsider status comes through interpreting her name as *Hey ger*, “Adonai is foreign.”

*But Hagar is no stranger to God; she is comfortable with God’s presence in a way that is less formal than God’s relationship with Abraham or Sarah. Hers is a more personal relationship with God. This is symbolized by the Divine letter hey, which is a part of her name from the moment we first meet her. For surely, Hagar fulfills the destiny of her name, hey gar, “Adonai dwells” with her. (Shekel, pp. 61-62)*

The Hagar story also involves many “firsts” in Biblical tradition: for example, the first appearance of an angel (*malach HaShem*) in biblical literature (16:7), and the first of several announcements by a divine messenger predicting the birth and destiny of one who is given a special role in God’s design of history (RA, p. 87). In addition, Hagar is the only individual in the Bible (male or female) who gives God a name (RA, p. 88), she is the only woman in Torah to be informed directly that her descendants will be numerous (WRJ, p. 73), and she is the only woman whose experience is enshrined in a place name—*Be’er-lachai-ro’i*, “the well of the living one of my seeing” (WRJ, p. 74). That these “firsts” and “onlys” are accorded to a woman, a foreigner, and a slave brings the promise of hope to the most lowly, outcast, and marginalized members of any community.

Some commentators also draw correlations between Hagar’s story and Avraham’s. For example, she leaves her home (*lechi lach*), going forth both into an unknown land and into herself, as does Avraham. God makes a *brit*, a covenant with her, and actually does so before God’s covenant with Avraham. And she is told her son’s name, just as Avraham will later be told Yitzhak’s name before his birth (Shekel, p. 59). In addition, Hagar’s sojourn in the desert in the *Vayeira* account foreshadows the Akedah story later in the same *parsha*—the parent rises early, a child is imperiled, and a divine messenger intervenes at the last moment (WRJ, p. 98).

## USING THE HAGAR NARRATIVE IN PASTORAL CARE SETTINGS:

### A PERSONAL REFLECTION

As a chaplain, I have used the Hagar narrative with certain patients, most particularly those hospitalized in a psychiatric unit. Their feelings of estrangement from family, community, and themselves are often extreme, as is their sense of powerlessness over their disease. In addition, some patients with mental illness are survivors of various forms of abuse or post-traumatic stress. These patients often identify strongly with Hagar's story when I share it, her experience of suffering seeming to parallel aspects of their own. And for those patients with religious or spiritual leanings, the metaphor of a "God who sees me" is potent medicine indeed. And even for those without such inclinations, the need to "be seen" is no less.

I believe the Hagar story can also have application when working with those who are homeless, runaway or foster children, abuse victims, and those who are otherwise socially disenfranchised or isolated.

Here are some of the ways I believe pastoral caregivers can apply and model the Hagar narrative when working with patients or others we may be counseling:

- We as pastoral caregivers can function as *malachim* for others in their own particular wilderness—seeing them and helping them be seen, hearing them and helping them be heard. We can seek them out, ask them about their lives, hear and see their stories of suffering, create I-Thou containers in which the God of their understanding can be present. Through our seeing, we can introduce them to a Divine Presence who also sees the oppressed, the needy, and the marginalized.
- We as pastoral caregivers can help them "see the well," to find and recognize the life-sustaining resources in their world, to cultivate their own places of spiritual focus and renewal, and to tap into their own springs of hope and resilience.
- We as pastoral caregivers can "speak truth," helping open up doors to the reality of a person's situation—the reality of challenge and hard truths, the reality of hope, the reality of freedom and healing.
- We as pastoral caregivers can advise on next steps. Here, however, is where I find difficulty in applying the Hagar story. The messenger in the *Lech Lecha* account tells Hagar to return to Sarai and "let yourself be afflicted under her hand." That is a particular piece of advice I would consider with the greatest of caution. I could not see myself advising a battered woman, or an abuse or incest victim to return to their abusers and let themselves be afflicted. However, with discernment, we as pastoral caregivers can and should advise those we counsel about next steps and community resources that can aid in their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

- We as pastoral caregivers can help them find/shape meaning from their experience, by helping them enlarge the context of their situation, see a bigger picture, or change their perspective. Green says that changing perspective allows “a chance for the deep force of healing that comes from a level of consciousness beyond our control or knowledge to work its magic on us” (Green, pp. 141-142). Wolpe teaches that “sometimes a weakness allows one to see more of the truth than does strength” (Wolpe, p. 154).
- We as pastoral caregivers also “have to be able to look upon their distress and allow them to bear it. We can share their sadness; we cannot fix their pain. . . . What [suffering] cries for is not to be fixed or to be explained, but to be shared and, eventually, to find its way to meaning. . . . Making loss [or suffering] meaningful is not making [it] disappear.” (Wolpe, p. 15)

## **CONCLUSION**

The Hagar narrative is a study in suffering and in hope, in dysfunctional human interactions and in spiritual help and sustenance. It shows us the effects of estrangement, powerlessness, and abuse as elements of suffering, and also the healing qualities of taking action, being seen, and finding meaning. Hagar’s story can have contemporary relevance in situations involving mental illness, family dysfunction and abuse, homelessness, and general social isolation. It can serve both as a mirror for those who are suffering to recognize elements of their own situation and as a template for pastoral caregivers in providing guidance and hope for those they are counseling.

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