

JEALOUSY OR LOVE?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The story of Hagar and Sarai has fascinated and confounded students over the centuries. On the one hand, a casual reading of the Parsha seems to cast Sarai in the role of the overbearing, possessive, and jealous mistress, and Hagar as the victimized maidservant who must acquiesce to her mistress's demands or be banished from her husband's home. Avram, appears to be overwhelmed by Sarai's jealous demands, and rather than come to the defense of Hagar, his pregnant wife, allows Sarai to do as she sees fit.

On the other hand, everything that we know about Avram and Sarai contradicts this presentation! First of all, Avram and Sarai are the quintessential paradigms of Chesed. Their kindness to all, including the stranger and the enemy, was legendary. Their sensitivity in meeting the needs of their many guests, and their all encompassing love for all people, regardless of background or religious affiliation, were the very methods of their monumental teaching success. Sarai's selflessness was so extraordinary that it was her own idea for Avram to marry Hagar so that he would be guaranteed a son and an heir! How then could she be accused of jealousy and selfishness just because Hagar had become pregnant?

Secondly, Avram is the last person we could accuse of being weak and spineless in the face of injustice. For seventy-five years he fought Nimrod's pagan and self-serving influence. For seventy-five years he withstood the pressures of his family and society while steadfastly maintaining and teaching his belief in monotheism. The Torah has already related Avram's fearlessness in freeing the local population from the evil tyranny of the four kings. In next week's Parsha Avram will soon challenge G-d Himself in attempting to defend Sodom and secure for them a judicious reprieve. Why then does he appear so dominated by Sarai's feelings and so unwilling to contest them?

Who was Hagar? Why did she merit being a part of Avram's destiny? What was the relationship between herself, her husband, and her mistress? Why even after she was married to Avram, did she remain Sarai's maidservant? Why wasn't she elevated to the more exalted position as Avram's wife?

In order to understand Hagar's story we must review Avram and Sarai's self-assumed mission. Their universe was a pagan world ignorant of or opposed to monotheism. Daring all odds, Avram and Sari confronted their society's beliefs and awakened their hearts and minds to the majesty of G-d's manifest presence. G-d confirmed their assumed task and promised that Avram would become "a father of nations" and a "blessing to all the families of the earth." In essence, Avram and Sarai accepted the job of reintroducing humankind to G-d.

Following Adam and Chava's expulsion from Gan Eden, the world's destruction through the Mabul, and the incident of the Tower of Babel, G-d retreated behind a veil of secrecy. The original plan had been for His infinite presence to be self-evident in nature and for humankind to extend their awareness and understanding of G-d by exploring and experiencing His universe. As humankind continued to deny His manifest presence by sinning and appointing other gods, G-d retreated from the forefront of nature and secreted Himself behind the illusion of a natural world.

As the centuries passed, a handful of righteous individuals maintained their steadfast awareness of the Creator and passed on their knowledge to a few worthy disciples. Avram and Sarai's emergence onto the stage altered that accepted script. Rather than maintain G-d's secrecy, they actively pursued a campaign to reverse the consequences of humankind's folly and reveal His presence to as many people as possible. Therefore, G-d confirmed their mission and rewarded them with the promise that their children would merit being the "Chosen People." As the Chosen People they would be obligated to teach the world about G-d and continue Avram and Sarai's volunteer work of revealing G-d's presence in the workings of history and nature. (As an interesting association, consider the nature of volunteerism Vs obligation in contrasting the beginning of Avram's mission with the "reward" of our obligations.)

The Torah presents us with a series of events in the lives of Avram and Sarai that must be evaluated in relation to their primary mission - revealing G-d's presence in the world. Upon arriving in Canaan, Avram is forced to go to Egypt. His encounter with Mitzrayim and Pharaoh presents is a fundamental contrast between Avram, representing a G-dly way of life, and Egypt, representing a civilization founded upon principle of hedonism and self-worship. The simple contrast between Avram's affirmation of Sarai's modesty, "and only now do I realize how beautiful you are," and the Talmud's description of the Mitzrayim as "promiscuous and licentious," reveals how opposing their values were. It is this contrast that would provide the Bnai Yisroel with the cognitive awareness and emotional strength to withstand the temptation of assimilating into Egyptian society allowing them to develop into their own nation. Likewise, just as Avram was able to leave Egypt and return to Canaan so too would his children be able to do the same. Avram's encounter with Egypt and her king clearly demonstrated two fundamental truths. 1. In order for the Jew to affect changes in the world, society must be desirous of having us live among them. (Note: the contrast with Abimelech) 2. As the children of Avram and Sarai, we have the ability and the strength to withstand the temptations of society. However, ideally, we are intended to return to Eretz Yisroel.

Before leaving Egypt, as per the request of Pharaoh, Pharaoh presented his daughter, Hagar, to Sarai as a maidservant. Rashi records that Pharaoh reasoned, "it is better that she be a maidservant in the home of Avram than a princess in my palace." This revealed that even Pharaoh recognized the basic value of Avram's teachings and wanted to be a part of his "blessed" destiny. Hagar willingly went with Avram, which revealed the nobility of her character and her eventual worthiness to become Avram's wife.

Cham's descendents were cursed to be "a servant to his brothers." Mitzrayim was a son of Cham, making Hagar Cham's direct descendent. Therefore, her destiny was to be a maidservant to Sarai (Shem's direct descendent), just as Eliezar, the son of Nimrod and great-grandson of Cham, was a servant to Avram. The true meaning and greatness of Noach's curse was to foster a relationship between the G-dliness of Shem = Avram and the passions of Cham = Hagar and Eliezar. Thereby, the passions of Cham would eventually be used in the service of Shem and G-d.

Sarai accepted Hagar as her maidservant providing Hagar with an unequalled opportunity to learn from her teachings and her example. Hagar embraced the opportunity and Sarai sensed in Hagar true nobility and potential. Therefore, when Sarai realized that she might never provide Avram with an heir she reevaluated her role and accepted that her destiny was to be the spiritual mother of the Jewish people, not necessarily their birth mother. She therefore urged Avram to take Hagar as a mate, with the understanding that Sarai would be responsible for raising and training the child to be a proper heir to the spiritual throne of Avram. However, in order for Sarai's plan to work, Hagar would have to remain subservient to Sarai's instructions and teachings. Therefore, Hagar remained the maidservant of Sarai rather than the wife of Avram.

Once Hagar became pregnant, Sarai, the master teacher, sensed a growing arrogance in Hagar that would eventually interfere with Sarai's ability to teach Avram's son. Therefore, she demanded that Avram choose between the two of them! Either the child would be only his son, or he would be the spiritual child of both Avram and Sarai. It wasn't jealousy, it was a demand for Avram's to support her as the spiritual mother of his soon to be born son. Avram immediately agrees to support all aspects of her educational program and strategy, including attacking Hagar's growing arrogance. Avram had absolute trust in Sarai's ability to train Hagar and develop her abilities to be worthy of sharing in the raising of their son.

Hagar was unwilling to accept Sarai's demands and she fled. Underscoring Hagar's nobility is the incident of the angel speaking to Hagar and instructing her to return to the tent of Sarai, "...and submit yourself to her." The angel clearly told Hagar that it was in her best interest to submit to Sarai's instructions and demands. Sarai's investment was in Hagar's future and the future of her child. There wasn't any jealousy. There wasn't any possessiveness. There was only a love for the goodness and nobility in Hagar and the child she would bring into the world.

In the end, Sarai's relationship with Hagar and the manner in which she dealt with her was motivated by her and Avram's mission to reveal G-d in the world. Although Hagar's destiny was to be apart from Sarai, nevertheless, her experience as Sarai's maidservant prepared her to join Avram as a "father of nations." As Rav Kaplan Zt'l writes, it was the children of Avram, the Jews, the Moslems and the Christians (children of Eisav) who were responsible for fulfilling Avram's mission of spreading monotheism and revealing G-d to all people of the world.

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