



Beginning Anew


A Woman's Companion
to the High Holy Days

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Sarah and Hagar: The Heelprints upon Their Faces

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What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

AUDRE LORDE

"The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"
from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984)

If feminism is about the search for sisterhood, then the story of Sarah and Hagar is a foundational story about the impossibility of feminism. The story of Sarah and Hagar is a story about women wronging women. It is a story so sad, so shameful, so sorrowful, that to own up to it is to admit that feminism has its origins in terrible violence and terrible lack of compassion between women. The story of Sarah and Hagar is a key source for the painful lesson Audre Lorde, an African American feminist, taught us: that women, who have the potential to bring each other into the world, also have the potential to oppress one another, to leave their heelprints upon each other's faces. Feminism begins, not with assumptions about the automatic sisterhood of women, but with seeing those heelprints women have left on one another's faces. Neither Sarah nor Hagar was capable of seeing the heelprint each left on the other's face. Yet the failure of their mutual recognition has buried utopian dimensions that feminists must attempt to rescue if we are to break the impasse of our foremothers and imagine our own liberation.

But you may ask: What does all this feminist stuff have to do with the Jewish people? And the Jewish New Year? Why is the story of

Sarah and Hagar retold and remembered by Jews, year after year, during the holiest days of the Jewish religious calendar? Is the plight of feminism really so central to Jewish concerns? How can the impasse of Sarah and Hagar nourish the strong desire Jews have to connect with other Jews during the Days of Awe? Are we not more likely, after hearing their story again, to turn away in disgust from our Jewish identity? And since we also care about how non-Jews see us, what face do we present to the world by acknowledging the sorry story of Sarah and Hagar?

In the following reflections I want to show that feminist concerns are always central to Jewish concerns. Further, I want to show that the purpose of the story of Sarah and Hagar is to awaken in the Jewish listener both the humility and the courage to stand before the cold winds of self-scrutiny, an act essential to the spirit of the Days of Awe. Last, I want to show that the story of Sarah and Hagar gives both women and men a fundamental basis for returning from the sanctuary of Jewish penitence to the wider world with an altered empathy for those we have wronged, a renewed sense of commitment to social justice.



Sarah and Hagar are drawn into a relationship because of Sarah's barrenness. God has promised Abraham as many offspring as there are stars. So how is it, Sarah wonders, that her womb is closed? God seems to have forgotten that her biological clock is ticking; soon her years of birthing will be over. If the only way a woman's life gains meaning is if she bears sons for her husband, why has God chosen to degrade her by keeping her barren? Sarah decides she must take matters into her own hands: she names Hagar, her handmaid, as a surrogate and has Abraham consort with Hagar so that Sarah can have a son through her.

In the language of the Biblical narrator, I hear a judgment on Sarah's faithlessness, fickleness, and impatience, but no recognition of her rage, desperation, and fierce independence of spirit. Let us try to imagine in its fullness the emotional depth of Sarah's pain and sense of loss in the only way we can do so passionately, from our own contemporary perspective. We know that one aim of the feminist

movement was to persuade women that they have an inherent value as persons. Women have wombs, yes, but they must not derive their whole sense of self from biology. Motherhood should be a choice, not an obligation. Liberated from the tyranny of their wombs, women would become free to reframe their lives in terms of their careers, their relationships, their communities, their ambitions. And what happened? Women pursued their careers, relationships, communities, and ambitions, but the desire to bear children did not disappear. Instead, mothering made a dramatic comeback in the form of surrogate motherhood, in elaborate technologies to promote fertility among women in their late-bearing years, and, most unexpectedly, in the advent of lesbian motherhood, which drove a wedge into the new communities of women whose hope was to undo the ideology that the female body was good only for procreation.¹

I have a close friend, a talented scholar and writer, a Jewish Cuban like me, who is forty-four and has been through several miscarriages as well as a uterine operation in her efforts to bear a child. She tells me about the sense of grief she feels, knowing she probably won't have children of her body. Her sense of loss is especially acute because she is the child of a double Jewish diaspora, from Europe to Cuba and from Cuba to the United States, and as a family psychologist she recognizes that it was the strong bonds of her family that maintained coherence and unity during all the years of exodus. Yet she asks herself why she needs children of her own. Is it not enough that her two sisters have children? Why can't she be content to be the much beloved aunt she already is? But the fact is she is not content; she and her husband will adopt, she says, as soon as she finishes making peace with her grief. I understand her; I have a son, and I feel blessed, yet I mourn for the daughter I will never have. Nor do I forget how during the years when I lived in rural Mexico, before I had my son, before I knew I could have a son, I would be accused of giving other women's children the evil eye if I played with them too long and thus too longingly.

The simple fact is that enormous pressure is placed on women to bear children. Even women who choose not to have children are tormented by feelings of grief. For Jewish women this grief is laced with guilt because we are expected not only to bring forth new life, but to resurrect the dead.² No one has expressed this view more movingly

than Irena Klepfisz, a Holocaust survivor, who feels she is viewed as "perverse, stubborn, ungiving, selfish" for not producing the children who will insure the continuity of her family and of the Jewish people after the staggering loss of the six million whose bones stayed in Europe.³

I bring the full burden of the procreative weight that rests on the shoulders of Jewish women to bear upon the story of Sarah and Hagar because it is not at all easy to feel compassion for Sarah, yet we must feel compassion for her if we are to inherit something better from this foremother than self-loathing for ourselves as women and as Jews. Sarah appears unredeemable and unlovable. She is totally unlike Hannah, another foremother whose story we read on Rosh Hashana. Hannah converts her heartbreak about being barren into a prayer so poetic that God cannot help but hear her and open her womb. But Sarah refuses to turn her suffering inward by humbling herself before God. No, she turns her suffering outward, creating yet worse suffering for Hagar, her Egyptian servant, the woman whose womb she thinks she controls.

Hagar gives the ultimate gift—she bears a child for Sarah. But this gift is not given with a full heart. And perhaps it cannot be, for Sarah has demanded it, and gifts must always be exchanged freely. What is certain is that from the time she conceives, Hagar develops a new-found sense of self-esteem; she no longer sees herself in servile terms. She can conceive a child and her mistress cannot. Why then is Sarah to rule over her? Are they not equals now? Or is Hagar perhaps more favored in the eyes of God? Why else has her womb opened so quickly while Sarah's has stayed shut so long? Sarah, her mistress, "is lowered in her esteem."

Hagar's loss of respect for her mistress devastates Sarah. If we view Sarah solely in terms of power dynamics, then we are likely to see her core emotion as being fury, fury that Hagar, a human being who existed only to serve the needs of her mistress, should dare to look down upon her. But say we view Sarah as less enraged and more despondent. Might it not be possible that Sarah hoped Hagar would feel for her as a woman? That Hagar, even though downtrodden, would summon compassion out of the depths of her being for the pain Sarah felt at being barren? That Hagar, in the service of her mistress rather than herself, would not grow disdainful but take delight in conceiv-

ing a child for Sarah? That Hagar, even though used by Sarah, would express not a lesser but a fuller humanity, a fuller sense of grace, a fuller overcoming? If we view the relation between Sarah and Hagar this way, we redeem Sarah a little, and just as important, we are able to see Hagar not only as being at the mercy of Sarah, and therefore abject and powerless, but as a person who also has agency.

In any case, Sarah is angry or disappointed—however you wish—by Hagar's slighting of her, and she complains to Abraham. Perhaps Sarah fears she has fallen in his eyes, too. But Abraham won't take responsibility. "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right," he says to Sarah. And Sarah, unforgivably, treats Hagar harshly. More than harshly. The original Biblical language reads, "Sarah afflicted her," the same expression used to characterize the subsequent affliction of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, except here it ironically depicts the suffering of a lone Egyptian slave woman at the hands of a Hebrew woman in Canaan.⁴

Hagar uses the limited agency she has to flee from Sarah. She wanders into the wilderness but soon returns to serve Sarah again after she is ordered to do so by an angel of God, who promises her, as the patriarchs are promised, many offspring. As for the child in her womb, Ishmael, he will be a wild son, the angel tells her. We are not told of Hagar's return, but the years seem to pass quietly. Ishmael grows and is circumcised by Abraham. Then, in her ripe old age, Sarah conceives. Long ago she stopped thinking about her barrenness and laughs at the idea that she, so withered, will bear a child. God, who catches her laughing and scares her, is reminding Sarah just who's in charge.

Can we assume that after so many years Sarah had made peace with the fact that Ishmael would be Abraham's heir? For it seems clear that he would never be hers; Hagar had firmly asserted that she, and not Sarah, had been raised up by the birth of Ishmael. But now, by the sheer will of God, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Once she weans the son of her own womb, put there by God, the mere sight of Ishmael playing troubles Sarah. When she had no choice but to accept Ishmael as Abraham's heir, Sarah tolerated his presence. Tolerated, perhaps, the way he too, like his mother, looked askance at her. But having given birth to Isaac, she need no longer feel ashamed. Now it is Isaac's inheritance that concerns her. Will it be lost to Ishmael, the firstborn,

the son who belittled her? She demands of Abraham that he cast out "that slave-woman and her son," displaying by not naming them how, in her turn, Hagar and Ishmael have fallen in her regard. Abraham hesitates, for he hates to lose a precious son, but God, who seems to welcome Sarah's reaction, tells him not to worry, that since Ishmael is "his seed," he too, like Isaac, will be made into a great nation. Abraham is traumatized, but not being one to doubt God, he provides Hagar and Ishmael with bread and a flask of water. And off they go into the wilderness of Beersheba, where they nearly die of hunger and thirst. Desperate, Hagar leaves Ishmael by a bush—sacrificing him to God, as Abraham will later be willing to sacrifice Isaac. And as she weeps, an angel of God again calls to her, opening her eyes so she can see a well of water with which to relieve Ishmael's thirst and thereby save him, insuring that his progeny, the nation of Islam, will survive.

Without further ado, Hagar and Ishmael are dismissed from the Jewish story. Only in Arabic legends will they reappear in a much happier incarnation, accompanied by Abraham on their journey to Arabia and eventual settlement in Mecca.⁵



From the Jewish perspective, Hagar seems to be a "throw-away" character. After all, "she is not part of Israel's salvation history. On the contrary, Hagar and Ishmael are depicted as a *threat* to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah." Yet the fact that Hagar has not been erased from the Jewish canon suggests that we are not to forget her: "Hagar must not be thrown away. We must affirm what Abraham and Sarah do not: Hagar is more than a possession; she is a human being. . . . Hagar's story reminds us that one person's salvation history can be another person's history of oppression."⁶

If we are not to forget Hagar, how then should we remember her? In searching for an answer, I found myself turning to the African American response to Hagar's call from the wilderness. For African American readers have lovingly claimed Hagar as their own, made her a foremother, taken pride in her struggle, formed spiritual churches in her name, and led the way in creative appropriations of her story. In the last century African American artists, scholars, and preachers, as well as ordinary black people, have continually invoked the Bibli-

cal figure of Hagar.⁷ Richard Wright referred to the African American family as Hagar's children. Anthropologist John Gwaltney described Aunt Hagar as "a mythical apical figure of the core black American nation."⁸

From an African American perspective, Hagar's story is the story of "a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was barren. . . . Like Hagar and her child, Ishmael, African American female slaves and their children, after slavery, were expelled from the homes of many slaveholders and given no resources for survival. Hagar, like many women through African American women's history, was a single parent. But she had serious personal and salvific encounters with God—encounters that aided Hagar in the survival struggle of herself and her son."⁹ The bitter connection between motherhood and slavery has long been recognized by black feminists, who have examined the way black women were valued for their capacity to breed, to "produce" more black workers, while always being expected to care for and protect the children of their white masters.¹⁰ But what has always saved black women in the face of their suffering is the depth of the religious quests they have undertaken in the wilderness of their solitude. There, "in the midst of trouble and what appears to be impending death and destruction," they have met God, their own God, not the God of their oppressors, but the God to whom they have given their own name. As black theologian Delores Williams notes, Hagar is the only person in the Bible who names God, and it is through this communion with God that she makes "a way out of what she thought was no way." Hagar has come to embody, for black women, the possibility of triumph in impossible struggles, showing how an ex-slave mother withstood desolation by being utterly alone with God.¹¹

This Hagar of the African American *midrash* is quite compelling. It allows us to return to Hagar as a figure of strength, as the proud single mother she was, as the brave woman who could fend for herself in the wilderness, as the Egyptian who knew the grief of expulsion and homelessness and diaspora long before her Hebrew masters. It allows us to better imagine the humiliation Hagar underwent in her position as servant and surrogate and, indeed, slave to Sarah and to understand just how terribly alone she was, how terribly bereft of sympa-

thy and support. Sarah could at least complain to Abraham, but to whom could Hagar complain? Hagar may have lacked compassion for Sarah's barrenness, but Sarah was unwilling even to begin to fathom the terror of Hagar's vulnerability, Hagar's voicelessness, Hagar's lack of freedom, Hagar's exile. That is why Sarah left so large a heelprint on Hagar's face and why we must search hard to find the fainter hint of one that Hagar left on Sarah's.



"We are not only descendants of slaves, but we are also the descendants of slave *owners*," writes Alice Walker. And she adds, "Just as we have had to struggle to rid ourselves of slavish behaviors, we must as ruthlessly eradicate any desire to be mistress or 'master.'"¹² This, I believe, is the valuable lesson of the story of Sarah and Hagar. We were slaves in Egypt, yes, but let us not forget that we also enslaved. Let us not forget that slavery was carried out by human beings, by the very human beings whose names we invoke in our Jewish prayers, but it was inhumane. And let us not forget that women, too, sadly, mournfully, must hold themselves as accountable as men. It is a story that makes you want to weep precisely because it unfolds between two women, both of whom are ultimately insignificant under patriarchy, both of whom are unable to recognize their mutual insignificance and thereby become truly significant to one another.

As Jews we read the story of Sarah and Hagar as we begin the new year, brimming with hope, desperately seeking that state of grace where we are ready "to risk loving again those who have wounded us," and ready for "others to trust us to try again despite the fact that we have broken their hearts."¹³ Reading the story of Sarah and Hagar, we can begin to risk compassion for ourselves and for others. The failure of their feminism develops our sympathy, educates our sentiments, encourages us to cross the borders of our differences with more respect.

We emerge caring "profoundly about the bad things that happen to others, what reasons to get involved, to take risks, for the sake of social justice and beneficence."¹⁴ We emerge with a renewed Whittmanesque sensibility: "Whoever degrades another degrades me." We

emerge painfully aware that we have cast out others whom we did not know how to include, and that those we cast out do not forget. We emerge, beating our hearts, for now we know that only at the truly terrible expense of others have we become "a people."

Or, at the very least, we emerge ready to lay Sarah and Hagar to rest, side by side, in the same blood-ravaged land.