

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

The Status of Yishmael, or Hagar's Escape and Hagar's Banishment

Dr. Jonathan Grossman

At the conclusion of this week's parsha, Chaye Sara, we read of Avraham's third wife, Ketura (following Sara, who is already dead, and Hagar). The Torah enumerates her six sons, together with her grandchildren as well.

Following the description of the birth of these children, the Torah immediately emphasizes that Avraham sent them away, thereby effectively indicating that the son chosen to follow his path was Yitzchak: "And Avraham gave everything that was his to Yitzchak. And Avraham gave to the sons of his concubines gifts, and he sent them from before Yitzchak his son, while he was still alive, eastwards to the land of the east (Kedem)." (25:5-6)

The fact that these sons were sent "eastwards" is not at all surprising, bearing in mind that everyone in Sefer Bereishit who is banished, sent away, or abandoned invariably head in this direction: When God banishes Adam from Gan Eden, He places him to the eastern side of the garden ("And he dwelt east of Gan Eden..."); when Kayin is banished, after murdering his brother, from Eden he is once again sent eastwards ("And Kayin departed from before God and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden"); when Lot separates from Avraham he turns towards Sedom - on the east side of Eretz Kenaan ("And Lot travelled eastwards, and they separated from each other"), and later on we find his children - Amon and Moav - inhabiting the eastern bank of the Jordan; Esav, also denied the "chosen" status, dwells in Har Se'ir, which is likewise located on the eastern side of the Jordan (Edom). As a direct continuation and further example of these instances we find the children of Avraham's concubines and others turning "eastwards" - "to the land of Kedem".

However, juxtaposed to the banishment of the children of the concubines we find a surprising detail at Avraham's burial: "And Yitzchak and Yishmael HIS SONS buried him in Ma'arat Ha-makhpela" (25:9). Against the backdrop of the concubines' children being sent away, this emphasis - "his sons" - with regard to Yitzchak and Yishmael is clearly making a point.

Immediately after this emphasis we are once again surprised, this time by the Torah's description of Yitzchak: "And it came to pass after Avraham's death that God blessed Yitzchak his son, and Yitzchak dwelt at Be'er Lechai Ro'i" (vs. 11). The place where Yitzchak now lives - Be'er Lechai Ro'i - obviously recalls the place where the angel

appeared to Hagar, pregnant with Yishmael, to inform her that she would give birth to a son who would be called Yishmael. "... therefore the well was called Be'er Lechai Ro'i" (16:11-14).

It is indeed strange that in the midst of a parasha emphasizing which of Avraham's children was chosen and which were rejected, the Torah specifically points out that Yitzchak lives in the place where the birth of Yishmael was promised!

Moreover, the Torah immediately continues with a full description of the "generations of Yishmael, son of Avraham," followed by the words: "He settled in the presence of all his brethren," meaning that his inheritance expanded and he inhabited the entire area. This description once again reminds us of the angel's promise to Hagar, when she ran away from Sara, "And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

It would seem that while Yitzchak is clearly chosen as the true heir of Avraham, the status of Yishmael is nevertheless special in some sense. The exact nature of this status and the reason for Yishmael deserving it will be the focus of today's shiur.

Last week, we compared the news of Yitzchak's forthcoming birth as conveyed in the parasha of berit mila and the similar news conveyed to Sara during the angels' visit. We demonstrated how the Torah makes use of certain literary motifs in the context of berit mila to emphasize that the news is connected to the choice of Avraham on the historical-national level, while different literary motifs are used to emphasize the status of Avraham and Sara as private people, without any connection to the question of historical chosenness.

Let us now examine whether similar literary differences may be of assistance in understanding the special status of Yishmael, by comparing two very similar stories which we have read in the past two weeks - the story of Hagar's flight from Sara, who is mistreating her (chapter 16), and Hagar's banishment by Avraham and Sara (chapter 20). In the parsha dealing with Hagar's flight - Lekh Lekha - I discussed this episode as a story in its own right. Let us now make use of what we learned then for the purposes of our present comparison.

The similarity between the two stories is considerable: In the story of Hagar's flight, Sara oppresses Hagar after this handmaiden begins to treat her mistress disrespectfully. As a result Hagar flees from Avraham's house, with the son she is carrying in her womb, towards the desert. There, close to a source of water (the well) an angel of God is revealed to her and commands her to return to her mistress's house. At the same time he blesses her, "For God has heard your suffering" - her son, Yishmael, will be born and will succeed in his life.

In the story of Hagar's banishment, Hagar is once again removed from Avraham's house and heads for the desert. Here, too, she carries her son with her, and again an angel is revealed to her at a source of water ("And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of

water"). The angel encourages her and grants her a blessing that Yishmael will succeed in his life since "the Lord has heard the voice of the boy."

These similarities draw our attention to the differences between the two stories:

a. Central figure of the story: In Lekh Lekha, the dominant figure of the story is Sara. The story begins, "And Sarai, wife of Avram, had not borne him children, and she had an Egyptian handmaid whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Avram..." (16:1-2). Even Sarai's suggestion that Avram take Hagar as his concubine is explained with a focus on Sarai - "Perhaps I shall obtain children through her." Avram's reaction - "And Avram listened to Sarai" - strengthens even further our impression that Sarai is active while Avram is completely passive, a secondary character who neither expresses his own opinion nor asks any questions; he simply does as his wife suggests. Verse 3 is the most outstanding example of Sarai's centrality in the story: "And SARAI, the wife of Avram, TOOK Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid, after Avram had dwelt ten years in Eretz Kenaan, and she gave her to Avram her husband as a wife." The concept of "taking" is used often in the Torah in the sense of marrying a woman, e.g., "when a man takes a wife for himself." The Torah makes use of the same word in the context of Hagar being taken as a wife for Avram since, after all, this is a type of marriage, but it is not Avram who does the "taking" but rather Sarai herself. Even the very act of taking a wife for Avram is attributed to Sarai rather than to Avram himself.

Following the short recounting of Hagar's pregnancy, the Torah returns immediately to its focus on the central character - "And she (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, and her mistress was scorned in her eyes. And Sarai said to Avram, My anger be upon you...." Once again Avram passively responds to Sarai's dominance - "Behold, your handmaid is in your hands, do with her as you see fit."

In contrast, in the story of Hagar's banishment in Vayera, we are witness to a completely different marital dynamic. Although once again the story begins with a suggestion by Sara - "And she said to Avraham, Banish this handmaid and her son" (21:10), Avraham takes a stand on the issue: "And the thing was very bad in his eyes because of his son." Ultimately, Avraham accedes to Sara's request, but only because that God commands him to do so. From this stage onwards, Avraham plays an active role in the story: "And Avraham ROSE UP EARLY in the morning AND HE TOOK bread and a pitcher of water AND GAVE THEM to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the boy, AND HE SENT HER AWAY." This description of Avraham rising early in the morning indicates energy and action. He arises, takes food and drink, gives it, and even packs up their belongings. The actual sending away is also attributed to him - "And he sent her."

The first and most noticeable difference, then, is that in the story of Hagar's flight it is Sarai who is active and the Torah focuses on her, while in the story of her banishment Avraham plays an active role in the events.

b. Site of the blessing and its content: As we emphasized in our shiur two weeks ago, the angel appears to Hagar following her flight and tells her to return to Sara, although she is

being oppressed by her. As reward and payment for this suffering the angel promises her:

1. "I shall surely multiply your seed, such that they will not be numbered for multitude."
2. "He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against everyone and the hand of everyone upon him, and he shall dwell among all his brethren."

As we explained, the word "pereh" (wild) in the Torah signifies a wild, free animal which cannot be captured or tamed. The blessing is a promise to Hagar that her son Yishmael would achieve freedom and would no longer remain subjugated to her own master and mistress. Moreover, Yishmael and his descendants would succeed greatly in the sphere of economics ("his hand shall be upon everyone and everyone's hand upon him"), and he is even promised a portion of land ("and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren"). In the shiur on Lekh Lekha we compared this blessing to the berit bein ha-betarim. In this light Hagar is granted a truly significant blessing from the angel, and it appears that she receives it in her own right - i.e., in consideration for her returning to oppression at Sara's hands.

In the corresponding episode, concerning Hagar's banishment, she once again receives a blessing. But the differences between this blessing and the previous one are great. Although here Hagar herself hears that the descendants of her son will become a great nation - "Arise, take up the boy and hold him with your hand, for I SHALL MAKE HIM A GREAT NATION" (verse 28), it must be remembered that this same promise was already made earlier, when God persuaded Avraham to banish Hagar and Yishmael: "And also the son of the handmaid I SHALL MAKE INTO A NATION for he is your seed." The angel is apparently revealing to Hagar the secret of a blessing given to Avraham, not a new one.

The original blessing includes a reason: "for he is your seed." In other words, Hagar's son will indeed be blessed, but not as a personality standing before God in his own right, but rather by virtue of his being Avraham's son.

This difference between the two episodes therefore reveals who it is that actually receives the blessing. The fruits of the blessing apply to Yishmael, but it is Avraham who is given the blessing, not Hagar or Yishmael. It is told to Avraham, and in a qualitative sense its entire validity is bound up with him, for it is only by virtue of Yishmael's being his son that any blessing is forthcoming.

c. In the story of Hagar's flight the angel tells her what to name the son who is destined to be born: "And you shall call his name Yishmael." In contrast, the story of Hagar's banishment is bereft of even a single mention of Yishmael's name. He is called "the son of the handmaid," "the boy," "his son," "lad" etc., but his name is never mentioned, even in places where it begs to appear: "And God heard the voice of the boy ... for God has heard the voice of the boy" (17).

d. In the story of Hagar's flight the angel finds her at a fountain, and speaks to her. In many places in Tanakh we read of angels revealing themselves to people and in each case, like here, there is a direct and personal dialogue, just like a regular encounter

between two people. In the story of the banishment, though, the angel is revealed to Hagar not as a person with whom she can speak, but rather in a prophetic vision from the distance - "And an angel of God called to Hagar FROM THE HEAVENS and said to her..." (17).

e. While Hagar's flight is reversed (and it is for this very purpose that the angel is sent - to encourage her to return to her mistress's house), her banishment is final.

f. An additional difference between the two stories revolves around the use of God's names: Mentions of God in the story of Hagar's flight make use of the Tetragrammaton, while in the story of her banishment the name "Elokim" is used.

Summarizing all the differences, we conclude that the story of Hagar's flight is a personal episode: There is conflict and tension between a mistress and her handmaid, forcing the latter to flee. In this story Hagar stands before God in her own right and receives a blessing. The dialogues all take place on a personal level - the angel meets her and speaks to her, and her son is called by his own name. It is perhaps for this reason that the Name of God used in this parsha is God's more "personal" Name, the name connoting the God of Israel, as opposed to the name "Elokim" which is more generic and universal in nature.

The story of Hagar's banishment, on the other hand, reveals the Divine historic plan. Here the story involves more than a personal, private argument between two people: the conflict from the start is a fundamental one and concerns the establishment of a nation according to certain principles and values. What disturbs Sara in this story is not her own personal honor but rather the educational environment required for her son, who is destined to become a nation. Here God intervenes in the banishment, for this represents the fulfillment of His will in the guidance of His world and in the development of Am Yisrael. This banishment has fundamental significance for all generations, for here Yishmael is rejected from membership in the chosen nation; here he is sent away, leaving only one choice: "For through Yitzchak shall your seed be called." Yishmael is indeed worthy of a blessing, but only because he is Avraham's son, and even so his blessing is rather more limited in scope.

The personal tone concerning Hagar which we encountered in the previous episode is absent from the story of her banishment: Yishmael is called not by his own name but rather by what he represents: "the boy" of Avraham or Hagar, "lad," etc. The angel is revealed to Hagar in a prophetic vision "from the heavens," devoid of the personal attention which accompanied the encounter in the story of her flight. Therefore in this story God's name of "Elokim" is used - the general Name connotating general guidance of the world; development of events as they must and were planned to develop.

In light of the above we are able to understand a further difference between the two stories: In the story of Hagar's flight, the blessing concerns the multiplicity of her offspring ("I shall surely multiply..."), while in the story of her banishment the emphasis is on the nationalistic aspect of Yishmael's progeny - "For I shall make him into A NATION." It would seem that this is yet another example of the tension between general,

national concepts and good news on a personal level to a woman who is suffering a personal crisis.

In other words, we may say that the difference between the two parshiot turns on the difference in Yishmael's (and Hagar's) status. In the story of Hagar's flight - a personal story - Hagar stands before God and receives a blessing in her own right, while the story of her banishment reflects the realization of the original Divine plan, the primeval blueprint. Remember that even before Yitzchak's birth Avraham is informed that the one who will continue God's covenant will be not Yishmael but Yitzchak (17:19-21).

Here, in the story of Hagar's permanent banishment, this Divine process is revealed, and the path is left open for the chosen son - Yitzchak.

As a result of this change from the personal to the national, the focus of the story moves from Sara to Avraham. In the story of Hagar's banishment - which describes the forcible separation of Yishmael from Avraham's nation - Avraham plays an active role in the sending away. In the story of Hagar's flight, on the other hand - a personal story - it is Sara who stands at the center. She is fulfilling a Divine plan here. She epitomizes the simple and natural aspect of their marital life as a regular couple, with normal aspirations for continuity through children. Sara, the woman, makes us aware of the personal side of herself and her husband, aside from the Divine historical promises which they face.

Hagar, in fleeing from Sara, halted the original Divine plan, according to which she was meant to leave with her son Yishmael only after Yitzchak was born. Therefore, she must return to her mistress's house, even at the price of the suffering she will endure, but the True Judge will repay her for her suffering and will grant her the blessings promised by the angel.

We can reformulate this distinction by focusing on Yishmael's status. Owing to the oppression which Hagar suffers, her subsequent flight and the revelation of the angel, she and Yishmael receive a blessing in their own right before God. Yishmael is then granted an additional blessing on the eve of his banishment from Avraham's house. But this latter blessing is not bound up with himself personally; it comes to him by virtue of his identity as Avraham's son. Any progeny of Avraham who is rejected at any stage (e.g., Lot and Esav) is still blessed by virtue of his relationship with Avraham, even if he personally is not deserving. Thus Yishmael is blessed "for he is your offspring."

According to what we have said above, Yishmael's status contains an extra element which was not present in the case of the other "rejected offspring:" at some stage of his life he stands before God as an independent entity and as such receives a blessing. And indeed when we examine the site of Yishmael's dwelling, the great difference between him and the other rejected and banished personalities becomes clear.

As noted above, characters in Sefer Bereishit who were banished for any reason generally moved eastwards, while those who were rejected (as chosen offspring) went to live on the eastern bank of the Jordan. In contrast, Yishmael dwells in the south: "And God was with

the boy and he grew and he dwelt in the desert, and he became an archer. And he dwelt in the desert of Paran" (21:20-21).

This difference in dwelling place may also be bound up with Yishmael's special status. On one hand he is rejected, like the other rejects for the status of "chosen son," and in this sense he is worthy of a blessing only by virtue of his being Avraham's son. And in this sense he should indeed dwell on the eastern side of the land. But at the same time he has merited an independent blessing, God has "chosen" him too, and for this reason he cannot join the other rejected offspring. For this reason he leaves the clearly delineated borders of Kena'an, but does not head eastwards.

The same duality which we saw in the two instances of the news of the son to be born to Avraham and Sara is repeated in the clear differentiation between these two stories of Hagar - one is a moral episode in which Hagar and Yishmael are granted a blessing as moral remuneration for their suffering, while the other describes Yishmael receiving a blessing as someone who is one of Avraham's sons but nevertheless rejected as a candidate for continuing the covenant; a blessing which relates to the pre-planned process of history.