

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

"Sarah Treated Her Harshly- "

Did Our Matriarch Sin in This Regard?

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There are several stories in Tanakh where the conduct of one of our national forebears or leaders arouses within us a certain sense of discomfort and surprise. At times we cannot but ask: Is this behavior appropriate for a person of such distinction? Does it not seem morally lacking?

Such a story appears in Parashat Lekh-Lekha, in the context of the domestic conflict which erupts in Avraham's home (16:1-16). Although the incident begins by describing Sarah's selflessness, as she gives her maidservant to Avraham as a wife to bear children, the problems arise immediately upon Hagar's conceiving a child: "And her mistress was lowered in her esteem." Sarah expresses her frustration to Avraham, who responds, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Consequently, "Sarah treated her harshly, and she ran away from her".

In order to understand Sarah's ruthless reaction to Hagar, we must first understand Hagar's behavior - "Her mistress was lowered in her esteem." The Chumash does not clarify how she manifested this contempt - through verbal abuse (as Rashi explains), by her refusal to obey Sarah's instructions (as the Radak suggests), or perhaps by general disrespectful behavior. In any event, Hagar's reaction to her quick conception was unquestionably inappropriate. Her impudence involves not only tormenting a barren woman, but also a coarse lack of gratefulness to the one who gave her to Avraham in the first place, and thanks to whom she now bears a child.

Nonetheless, Sarah's ruthlessness is still difficult to accept. Despite our sympathy for her inability to conceive and the humiliation she now suffers from her arrogant and abusive maidservant, can we in any way justify the behavior describe in the verse, "Sarah treated her harshly?" Although the Torah doesn't specify the precise means of oppression, it was harsh enough to warrant Hagar's "escape." Sarah's maltreatment of Hagar clearly involves more than slight, tolerable insensitivity; her cruelty was enough to lead Hagar to the dramatic and difficult decision to leave the secure environment of Avraham's home and run away into the wilderness.

Our empathy with Hagar is confirmed later in the drama, when the angel expresses his identification with Hagar's plight: "For God has paid heed to your suffering".

And so, we return to our initial question: How do we deal with our moral misgivings regarding Sarah's mistreatment of her maidservant?

The straightforward solution seems to be that this story is to be viewed as criticism of Sarah. The Tanakh does not present our Biblical heroes as infallible and above criticism. If they had been presented this way, they could not serve as the inspiring role models that they are. Chazal and commentators throughout the ages have interpreted several incidents in Tanakh this way, and this is the approach of the Ramban in his commentary to this story: "Our matriarch sinned through this oppression, as did Avraham by allowing this to transpire." Thus, we may conclude, as the Radak says, that "This story was written in the Torah so that the individual can acquire therefrom good qualities and distance himself from bad qualities".

Unquestionably, this is the intention of several stories in Tanakh. But, given both our reverence for our ancestors and our interest in arriving at "peshuto shel mikra" (the straightforward meaning of the text), we must carefully analyze each such episode to determine if it really intends to censure the conduct of the character in question.

This analysis must be conducted on four levels.

- I) The background and setting of the story: Given the thousands of years that separate us from our Biblical forefathers, anachronism may distort our understanding of Chumash.
- II) The literary level: In our context, we must carefully examine the words, "Sarah treated her harshly," as it is this phrase that calls our matriarch's conduct into question.
- III) Viewing the story in its entirety: Can we necessarily conclude that the story's intent is to censure Sarah, or is there perhaps some other objective?
- IV) The story's broader textual context: Very often, isolating a story from its general context can hinder the reader from understanding it properly. This incident must be studied as part of the assemblage of stories involving the patriarchs in Sefer Bereishit, particularly Avraham and Sarah, who are torn between the divine promise of offspring and the ongoing delay of its fulfillment.

I) THE SETTING: "A MAIDSERVANT WHO SUPPLANTS HER MISTRESS"

Right at the outset, we sense that what transpires is an ancient institution, foreign to the contemporary mind - that a barren woman would give her maidservant to her husband as a wife for the purpose of bearing children. As we know, this phenomenon reemerges later in Bereishit, when Rachel gives her servant, Bilha, to Yaakov. Bilha bears two children - Dan and Naftali - and it becomes clear from Rachel's comments after their birth that she relates to the children as her own (30:6,8). The same occurs later, when Leah becomes infertile and has her maidservant Zilpa marry Yaakov (30:9-13.)

The practice of the wife bringing a maid into the home to help with the wife's domestic responsibilities was still in existence during the Mishnaic era (see Ketubot 5:5). But the institution about which we read in our parasha - giving one's maid to the husband to bear children on behalf of the mistress - never appears again after the period of the patriarchs. Its disappearance is to be attributed to the institution of the "shifcha kenaanit" (gentile maidservant), marriage to whom is forbidden to any Jewish male (with the exception of a Jewish servant.)

This practice is, however, familiar to us from archaeological research of ancient Near Eastern cultures. The most important and relevant source is the Code of Hammurabi, which was compiled during the general period of the patriarchs. After sanctioning in chapter 144 the practice of marrying one's barren wife's maidservant for purposes of procreation, the Code proceeds to discuss the likely possibility of resulting conflict between the two wives (146-7:)

Should a man marry an infertile woman and she gives her maidservant to her husband, if the maidservant bears children and then equates herself with her mistress, the mistress may not sell her, since she has given birth to children [and it would constitute cruelty to separate the maidservant from her children]. Rather, she shall place upon her a sign of servitude and assign her as one of the maids. If she does not bear children, she may be sold.

The system apparently worked as follows: when a woman gave her maidservant to her husband, she retained her authority over the maidservant. In actuality, however, the maidservant's status has changed by very virtue of her being married to the master of the house, and she thus lived in the home as a free woman. This arrangement is maintained so long as she and the mistress of the house enjoy a warm relationship. If, however, the maidservant "equates herself with her mistress" - that is, her new status as mother of the husband's children leads her to forget her strict, legal standing of inferiority - then the law allows the mistress to return the maidservant to her previous condition of servitude. She may even affix upon the maid an external sign of subjugation. If the maid does not bear children, the mistress may even sell her.

Given the extent to which this world of masters and servants is far removed from our mentality, the following verses from Mishlei may be helpful, and sharpen in our minds the sense of degradation involved when a maidservant attempts to usurp the role of the mistress:

"The earth shudders at three things, at four which it cannot bear: a slave who becomes king; a sated with fo; an unloved woman who is married; a maidservant who supplants her mistress."
(Mishlei 30:21-23)

Upon her marriage to Avraham, Hagar no longer functions as Sarah's maidservant. (In fact, in verse 4, which describes Hagar's marriage to Avraham, Hagar's name for the first time appears without the appellation, "maidservant.") Upon her conception of a child, she "equates herself with her mistress," to borrow the language of Hammurabi's Code. Indeed, the Radak comments,

"She thought that whereas Avraham's offspring will be from her, she will become the mistress; she thus disregarded the commandments of her mistress, Sarah".

Avraham thus responds to Sarah's complaints, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." He reminds Sarah that although Hagar is now married to him, she is nevertheless "your maid," and Sarah thus maintains the right to relate to her as such.

II) LITERAL EXEGESIS: "AND SARAH TREATED HER HARSHLY"

These words - "Vate'aneha Sarai" (Sarah treated her harshly) - are essentially the key to our assessment of Sarah's behavior in this story. Radak interprets:

"She worked her unduly, and made her overburdened. She may have even beaten and cursed her. [Hagar] could not tolerate [the abuse] and she fled".

It is no wonder, then, that Radak arrives at the following conclusion:

"Sarah failed in this instance to live up to appropriate standards of ethics or piety. This was unethical, for although Avraham was willing to forgo his honor... she should nevertheless have restrained herself for his honor and not oppress her. This also violated standards of piety and good-natured conduct, for it is improper for one to do everything which is within his power. And the wise man [referring to author of "Mivchar Peninim"] said, 'How pleasant it is when one forgoes, even though he has the ability to enforce his will'".

It seems that the Ramban adopted Radak's interpretation. Although he does not explain the nature of Hagar's oppression, he does remark, "Our matriarch sinned through this oppression, as did Avraham by allowing this to transpire".

What motivated Radak to offer such an extreme interpretation of, "he treated her harshly?" Firstly, he unquestionably felt that the word "vate'aneha" connotes actual torment. Secondly, he presumably derived his interpretation from Hagar's extreme reaction of escape. Finally, the disciplinary methods open to a master with regard to his slave are actual oppression, painstaking labor, and even physical abuse.

However, in light of the aforementioned passage in Hammurabi's Code, we may adopt a more moderate explanation of "vate'aneha." The "oppression" spoken of in the verse refers merely to the reinstating of Hagar to her previous condition of subjugation. The enslavement of a free man is often referred to as "inuy," oppression. For example: "They set taskmasters over them to oppress them ['anoto'] with forced labor... But the more they were oppressed ['ye'anu']..." (Shemot 1:11-2). The very loss of freedom, even when it involves no strenuous labor or physical torment, constitutes "oppression," certainly in the emotional sense.

Despite Hagar's previous condition of servitude, and the fact that even during her short term of "freedom" she was legally considered Sarah's maid, the loss of her newfound independence (especially once she saw herself as the mistress of Avraham's home) became the source of terrible emotional anguish and distress.

Thus, not only does Sarah's conduct toward her maid not necessarily involve any excessive cruelty, it is done in precise accordance with the prevalent law of land, which reflected the social norms in Mesopotamia and its environs.

)See the commentary of Rabbeinu Chananel, who interprets our story in a similar vein, though he was not familiar with the Code of Hammurabi(.

III) THE COMPLETE STORY: THE ANGEL'S WORDS

At this point, we will proceed to study the story as a whole in search of an answer to our initial question: Is this story intended as a criticism of Sarah, or does it sanction her conduct?

Hagar's conversation with the angel of God serves as an important source for our discussion, as it reflects the position of the Almighty Himself. The angel speaks to Hagar four times: the first two remarks (verses 8-9) deal with the maid's escape, whereas the final two (10-12) relate to her future, both near and distant. As such, the critical statements for our purposes are the first two, both in terms of their content as well as their location in the story - right in the middle, implying special emphasis upon their significance.

So let us examine the angel's comments to Hagar and see how they correspond to our approach:

"Hagar, Sarah's maidservant - this is your proper, legal status, and therefore, "where have you come from, and where are you going?" Consistent with his general approach to questions like these from God and His angels, Rashi explains that the angel clearly knew the answers, but "gave her an opening to begin speaking with her." To this, we may add that this type of question invariably introduces some rebuke on the part of God to the questioned party. (God asks Adam, "Where are you?" and challenges Kayin, "Where is your brother Hevel?") Here, too, the angel accuses Hagar: Why are you here? Why are you not serving your master? "Look from what kind of place you left - you were in a sacred location, in the home of the righteous!" (Seforno). Where are you going - to the desert, a barren wilderness?

Hagar answers, "From my mistress Sarah," who has once again enslaved me, after I had already achieved my freedom, "I am running away," as I cannot tolerate my indentured status any longer. Significantly, Hagar doesn't relate to the angel any incident of mistreatment; she bases her decision to flee on the very fact that Sarah has again become her mistress.

The angel then orders, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment." This verse calls into question the approach of the Ramban and Radak, who understand this "harsh treatment" as actual torment and thus conclude that Sarah sinned in this regard. If she indeed burdened her maid with slave labor, beat her and tormented her, then how and why does God's angel order Hagar's restoration to this state of unethical maltreatment? Would God's angel sanction or legitimize such cruelty?

According to our approach, however, this "harsh treatment" refers merely to the perfectly legal lifestyle of servitude to which Hagar is to be subjected. The angel here endorses Sarah's decision to restore Hagar to her previous condition of subjugation and demands Hagar's compliance.

The angel's concluding remarks, which promise the emergence of a great nation from Hagar's son, help Hagar come to terms with the demand that she return to Sarah. The reinstating of her status as maidservant understandably involves intense frustration and emotional torment. The angel therefore stresses the bright future that will result from her marriage to Avraham.

Two further points related to the angel's concluding remarks must be addressed.

First, the angel bids Hagar to name her son Yishmael, "For God has paid heed to your suffering" ("onyeich"). The Ramban and Radak interpret "onyeich" as "suffering," and thus see this verse as proof for their contention that Sarah abused her maidservant. As noted, however, this interpretation begs the question of how the angel could possibly order Hagar's return to Sarah's mistreatment. Furthermore, if the "suffering" mentioned here to Sarah's abusive behavior, then the appropriate wording should be, "God has SEEN your suffering," rather than "HEARD your suffering." The "suffering" here thus refers to her present crisis, her helpless, isolated, nomadic life in the desert, with no direction or means of livelihood. It refers as well to her future wandering in the desert of Be'er Sheva with her son, who nearly died of thirst (21:15-17). There, we are told, God "heard the voice of the boy," and presumably for this reason he is called "Yishmael".

If our interpretation is correct, then the ang's revelation to Hagar serves to save hefrom her present lthreatening condition of aimless wandering in the desert. When she gives birth to Yishmael, she will feel a deep sense of gratitude to God, Who heard her cries in the wilderness and sent His angel to direct her back to Avraham's home.

The angel informs Hagar that her son will be a "pere adam," generally understood as a derogatory term for a wild, unrestrained and barbaric man. (This popular interpretation evolved because of its similar usage in modern Hebrew.) The Ramban explains that Yishmael's belligerence, to be directed primarily against Sarah's descendants, comes as a result of Sarah's mistreatment of his mother. However, the angel never connects Yishmael's temperament to Sarah and her offspring.

The context and literal analysis of the expression "pere adam" lead us to a different interpretation. The context is the angel's rebuke of Hagar, which also contains a blessing for her future. The word "pere" in Tanakh denotes a certain type of donkey that cannot be domesticated or trained. This animal has become the Biblical symbol of lack of restraint, free and uncontrolled life in the wilderness (Yirmiyahu 2:24), and the refusal to be subjected to the demands of civilized life (Iyov 39:7). "Pere adam," therefore, means the "pere" among people, or the human "pere." This is how Ibn Ezra interprets: "free among people... meaning, that no foreigner will rule over him".

On account of her willingness to return to her previous condition of servitude, Hagar is promised that her progeny will enjoy unprecedented freedom. Her son will struggle with all his neighbors to achieve this freedom, but will emerge victorious in the end: "His hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen." This refers to the characteristics of Yishmael's descendants, the proud and freedom-loving nomadic tribes of Arabia, who wander with their flocks in search of grazing land (see Yishayahu 32:14) and are always prepared to fight. It bears no connection to Arab-Jewish relations in either the past or the present.

Thus, not only does the angel's address to Hagar not lend support to the interpretation of the Ramban and Radak, it actually points in the opposite direction. The angel sanctions Sarah's restoration of her maidservant to her service, and urges Hagar to comply. Understanding the emotional trauma involved, the angel includes in his remarks words of encouragement and promise for a bright future.

IV) OUR STORY AS A TEST FOR AVRAHAM AND SARAH

An ongoing theme throughout the stories involving Avraham and Sarah is the test of their faith, the growing tension between the divine promise and a reality far from its fulfillment.

From the moment they are designated as the joint progenitors of God's nation, Avraham and Sarah encounter a practically unbroken chain of trials and setbacks. The question reemerges throughout - will they remain steadfast in their belief in God's promise of their begetting a great nation, or will their frustration lead them to look for substitutes and other means of realizing their hopes? After Lot leaves Avraham, his lone potential heir is his servant, Eliezer, whom God had specifically stated will not inherit his master. Eventually, after ten infertile years in Canaan, Sarah offers her maidservant to Avraham for the express purpose of bearing children. Does this not reflect the conclusion that God's promise will not be fulfilled through Sarah? The Radak (16:1) unequivocally answers in the affirmative, adding that Avraham shared Sarah's feelings of hopelessness. The Ramban, however, argues, contending that Avraham and Sarah never gave up their longing to have children together. He even suggests

that one purpose of Avraham's marriage to Hagar was to yield merit, through which Sarah may be granted children of her own.

This argument yields important ramifications regarding Sarah's embittered reaction to Hagar's pregnancy and consequent sense of superiority (or at least equality to Sarah). According to Radak, Hagar isn't the only one who saw her pregnancy as an indication that she has become Avraham's partner in the building of God's nation - Avraham and Sarah themselves feel this way. Thus, Sarah's treatment of Hagar - no matter how we understand it - is but an expression of Sarah's feelings of personal insult at having her role been usurped by her maid. According to the Ramban, however, Sarah's reaction evolves from her steadfast and unwavering faith and conviction that she shares Avraham's God-given destiny as the progenitor of His nation. If so, then this entire incident entails yet another trial for the chosen couple: will they see Hagar's son as replacing God's promise? Will they incorrectly interpret the promise as applying to Avraham alone, or will they continue to affirm their belief in their joint destiny?

Through her subjugation of Hagar, Sarah declares her reaffirmation of her belief in God's promise. She insists upon being Avraham's sole partner in the establishment of his family.

Herein lies the significance of this story. Sarah remains faithful to God's promise that she will bear Avraham's inheritor. This promise is confirmed in the very next story, chapter 27, when Avraham and Sarah's names are changed and the divine promise is administered one again.

And so, we have assessed four aspects of this story, and have concluded that it in fact speaks the praise of our patriarch and matriarch:

"Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, you who seek God: Look to the rock you were hewn from, to the quarry you were dug from. Look back to Avraham your father and to Sarah who brought you forth..." (Yishayahu 51:1-2)

)Translated by David Silverberg(

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

.1 Although the Ramban and Radak agree that the story should be viewed as condemning Sarah's conduct, they argue on several crucial points. Study their commentaries to this parasha and identify the differences in their approaches to the following issues:

-)i) the assessment of Avraham's conduct throughout this episode;
-)ii) the precise critique of Sarah;
-)iii) the general purpose of the story.

.2 We cited the explanation of Rabbeinu Chananel, and noted that it strongly resembles the approach presented in our shiur.

-)i) How does his interpretation nevertheless differ from our approach?
-)ii) What in the story led Rabbeinu Chananel to his interpretation?
-)iii) How can we explain that point differently?

.3 There are about one hundred instances in Tanakh where a speaker's comments are interrupted by the term "vayomer" ("and he said"), despite the apparent absence of any cause for a break. A rare phenomenon occurs in our story, where the angel's address to Hagar is interrupted twice with "vayomer." Try to explain why.

.4 Why does the angel order Hagar to return to her mistress? Why can't she continue her new life of nomadic wandering and give birth to her son in the desert? After all, Hagar and her son are eventually driven to the desert anyway (Bereishit 21:(