

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Ishmael and Hagar

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) As always, we would like to invite you to join us on a journey far away in time, in space, in imagination, in legend; and, in the course of that journey, we are going to meet a man, a woman: Abraham and Sarah. Who has not heard of Abraham and Sarah? Everyone loves them; they radiate goodness, nobility, human warmth. Who does not claim kinship with them? Humankind is what it is because they shape our destiny. He is the father of our people; she, the mother. Everything leads us back to them. [00:01:00] The Promised Land bears their seal. Faith -- our faith -- was kindled by theirs. A couple unlike any other. They arouse joy and hope and promise. Tormented by our own troubles, we recall theirs, which give ours a transcendent meaning. Abraham (laughter) -- Abraham had many problems; not this one (laughs). (laughter) Abraham, the first to be chosen, the first to choose God, and crown him God of the universe. Abraham, synonymous with loyalty, absolute fidelity, symbol of perfection. And yet, a shadow hovers over one aspect of his existence. In his exalted biography, we [00:02:00] encounter a painful episode which cannot but puzzle us, if not cause us to recoil.

We refer, of course, to his strange behavior towards his concubine, or companion, Hagar, and their only son, Ishmael. Let us read the text as we always do, shall we? The text tells us that Sarah, poor Sarah, is barren. She cannot conceive. Unhappy above all for her husband, who desires a son, an heir, she proposes that he have this child with his Egyptian servant, Hagar. The shidduch is successful. (laughter) Abraham and Hagar are together; Hagar becomes pregnant, and that is when the problems start. The servant becomes disrespectful towards her mistress, who [00:03:00] takes offense. Eventually, a persecuted Hagar takes flight. Proud, she prefers to die in the desert, rather than remain a slave in Sarah's house. By chance, we are told, an angel notices her, and he advises her to return home. Hagar obeys, goes back to Abraham, and gives birth to Ishmael. Many years later, Sarah finally gives birth to her own son, Isaac, and what must happen, happens. When Ishmael, like any other boy, plays tricks on his young brother, Sarah arranges for Hagar and her son to be sent away, and this time for good.

The text, of course, is more detailed, and contains some astonishing descriptions. We are given to see, and to feel, almost, Sarah's [00:04:00] state of mind, Hagar's character, Abraham's behavior -- it's all there. Sometimes a single word

suffices to paint a vivid picture; a silence, to portray the ambiguity of a situation. The more we re-read a story, the more it troubles us. It makes us feel ill at ease. We wish it had happened somewhere else -- in another book, to another people. (laughter) It has no place in our memory. How is it possible? Can Jewish history really begin with a domestic quarrel between an elderly matron and her young servant? And if so, why did the Bible bother to preserve it?

Naturally, none of this would have happened had Sarah not been barren for so many years. But then, why was she? Why did she have to be [00:05:00] so afflicted for so long? Actually, there are those who answer that Sarah has this in common with other matriarchs. Many had the misfortune of being sterile at first. The reason? One Midrashic author offers a generous explanation -- generous, that is, to the husbands, the patriarchs.

(laughter) The author says that, pregnant, the most beautiful wives appear less attractive, because they lose their figures. So, to be desirable to the patriarchs for as long as possible, the matriarchs had no children for years and years. (laughter) And the midrash adds that Sarah, who became a mother at the age of 90, still had the looks of a young bride on her wedding night. (laughter) In other words, the entire tragedy of Hagar and Ishmael would not have happened if God or the text had not

[00:06:00] decided to cater to the masculine pride of our forefather. (laughter) Is it possible? Is it plausible? For after all, let's not forget, if Sarah had had a son earlier, immediately after her marriage, Hagar would have remained a servant, and Ishmael would not have been born, and Israel today would not have an Arab problem. (laughter)

Well, let's be serious. This story belongs on a higher level. It has a deeper meaning, as all stories in the Bible have. Nothing in the beginning of Jewish destiny is frivolous. All doors open on metaphysical dilemmas and conflicts, as we shall see in our study this evening. But first, let us remain faithful to our tradition, and let us open parentheses. And first, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that what we are doing here, [00:07:00] for four consecutive Thursdays, is we study. But these encounters, these meetings, are preceded by a study session, led by Rabbi Levey Derby, who has done so for the last four or five or six years, with extraordinary success. I'm told that 200 people have been here this afternoon to study the Bible and the commentaries with Rabbi Derby. Only 200? I wish there were 800. For after all, the idea is to study. And in order for us to understand, and to enjoy the riches and the beauty of a text, is to study it well, as deeply as possible, for there is depth in that study.

Two, should we, in this nineteenth year of our encounters here, explain once again their meaning and their purpose? It is our intent to learn together, [00:08:00] to study together, ancient texts in the light of what we have learned or experienced. The prodigious adventure offered by study, in which literally imagination is combined with scrupulous examination of the sources, is -- is a refuge as much as a memory for us Jews who are anchored in that memory. Nothing is more exciting. Nothing is more stimulating. To enter into a text and be penetrated by its flame; to question its structure, its life, its future, its language, its destiny, its silences. To wander through its subterranean corridors, in order to discover a trace or track left there by some medieval commentator or Talmudic visionary. Is there, for a student or a teacher, a joy more profound?

[00:09:00] We enter into study as one enters into prayer: with a feeling of gratitude, and also, sometimes, of wonder, and of exaltation. And there, inside, our quest brings us face to face with familiar and unfamiliar friends, who also are seeking to understand, to know, to transcend time -- or at least, the perception of time. This, then, is the purpose of our exploration: to broaden the circle of friendship which study justifies and calls for. To give more depth and more intensity to the voice that lives in our memory, and to go forward --

always forward -- by looking back, always, to the mysterious beginnings.

But before we do that tonight -- before we embark on our journey into time [00:10:00] -- we must try to resolve a problem of space. And one that has confronted us for 19 years. What is that problem? We are told that the Torah had 40 doors. And all of them are open. We only have one -- and it isn't. (laughter) Let us open it. (laughter) (pause)

Nu? (laughter) Let us begin at the beginning. Abraham is not yet called Avraham, but Avram. Sarah is known as Sarai. They are the lonely couple whose life seems rather turbulent. Abraham has left the home of his parents [00:11:00] to follow the path leading to God. A dangerous path, full of obstacles and traps. Famine and war succeed each other, as do divine promises. Except, the earthly troubles are more real. Avram does not stop. His life is one long battle. Against neighboring kings, against the powerful unbelievers, against the cruel nature of some people, against doubt. Nothing comes easy to him. Everywhere he must fight, but everywhere he wins. After all, why shouldn't he win? Isn't God on his side?

But yet, on one front, he feels beaten. He has no child. But God has made promises, solemn promises. We can imagine his grief. [00:12:00] With no son, no heir, what kind of future is there? Who will continue his work? We can imagine Sarah's grief. When they were young, they had hope. Each day, each night could bring good news. Now, after so many years, it is more and more difficult. More improbable -- and why not even impossible? And so, what we feel in the relationship, what we feel in their life, in their breath, is uncertainty, anguish, agony without end. Then, Sarah, in a characteristic gesture of compassion, offers to lend her servant Hagar to her old husband. Hagar is young; she will bear him a child. Perhaps a son. And so Abraham will be the father of a child, even if she, Sarah, will not be a mother. Abraham does not refuse. [00:13:00] Hagar, with pregnancy, becomes arrogant, and Sarah makes her pay dearly. Hagar flees, returns, gives birth to Ishmael, remains for 15 years -- long enough to see the birth of Isaac, whose arrival overshadows all else. And then comes a drama. The final drama. The break-up, the explosion between the two women, the two brothers, and above all, between father and son. Sarah demands that her husband expel Hagar, and Ishmael, who provoke her. Abraham hesitates. Ishmael is his son. He feels he has neither the right, nor the strength, or the desire, to drive

away his son into the unknown. And divine intervention is needed to make him decide.

But what about pity in all this? What about compassion? And [00:14:00] the human heart? What about Jewish morality? These are troubling, painful, baffling questions. And there are others, many others, all of them inevitable. They call into question all the characters in the cast. Yes, all of them, without exception. Who are they? A father: Abraham. Two mothers: Sarah and Hagar. Two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Is that all? Surely not. For God -- yes, He, too, plays an essential role in the evolving plot. Except for Him, all the characters seem to be real, living beings, so full and colorful is their description. Abraham, submissive in his relationship to God, sure of himself in his relationship with those around him. He obeys heaven, but is obeyed on earth. We perceive [00:15:00] him as moody, impulsive, used to giving orders. Strong. Invincible. He appears vulnerable and soft only with Sarah. Inflexible with others, he is patient with his wife. He was able to resist his father Terach, but Sarah to him is irresistible. Whatever she desires, she obtains. It is Sarah, not Abraham, who comes up with the idea of a match with Hagar. Abraham never would have dreamed of living with another woman.

He loves Sarah -- too much, perhaps. She is his strength, and, perhaps, his weakness as well.

At this point, an obscure incident ought to be recalled. It happened in Egypt, which the two visited as tourists, though their interest was not tourism, but food. At home in Canaan, people were starving. [00:16:00] But as they entered Egypt, an unexpected problem confronted them. The king, Avimelech, liked beautiful women. And Sarah was so beautiful that Avimelech instantly fell in love with her. It was love on sight. And Abraham knew that kings have a way of getting their way. Avimelech, he knew, could easily eliminate the cumbersome husband and keep the widow. And so Abraham, with her consent, introduced Sarah everywhere as his sister. She spent a whole night with the king, who lo and behold, thanks to heavenly intervention, was struck by some illness, and was unable to touch her. (laughter)

Admit it. This strange episode smacks of unpleasantness. It has [00:17:00] always left me uneasy. Yet, even stranger, instead of separating the couple, it strengthens their bond. Bravo! But we don't understand Abraham. He, fearful for his life? And what about his honor? How could Abraham abandon his wife -- his adored, beloved wife -- to the whims of a king who

has an eye for women, especially strange women, other men's women? How could a hero like Abraham, who had defeated five kings, yield to a single one, without so much as a fight? How is it possible that a man of his stature thinks only of saving his own skin? Admittedly, he is preoccupied with theological questions. But is there no loyalty in him? Not to mention, chivalry? [00:18:00]

Again, we shall ask these questions, and we shall ask these same questions with regard to Hagar and Ishmael. He drives them away -- he who is famous, who is renowned, who is celebrated in our tradition for his hospitality. For love of his wife, he sacrifices his son. For sacrifice is what we are talking about. He sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, where death surely awaits them. Now how can Abraham be so cruel towards a woman who has loved him, be it for one night only, and towards a child -- his only child, at that? Sarah doesn't like them? Good. Let them stay at the neighbors. (laughter) Let them go and live with some distant tribe. But why condemn them to death? How are we to [00:19:00] explain these flaws in Abraham's character? To what shall we attribute them? Is this the same Abraham whose faith and goodness and kindness remain models for all time? Could he have committed such acts of heartlessness?

Let us read again the passage about the second character in the drama, Sarah, and we shall see that she, too, does not come off too well in a second reading. Negative traits appear. In Egypt, she is a willing accomplice in her husband's play-acting. Like a couple illegally crossing some dangerous border, they are united in trying to cheat the police. But have the police nothing better to do than wait for Sarah? Thousands upon thousands are without doubt pouring into Egypt in search of food, and Sarah [00:20:00] alone is threatened? On the other hand, it's inconceivable that King Avimelech could try to get all the women who entered Egypt. Why only Sarah? The answer is, Sarah is special. Why? Abraham tells us why. He tells us that she is very beautiful. Agreed. But to whom does Abraham say that? To the reader? No. To his wife. And she accepts the compliment without protesting. (laughter) And what about humility? What about modesty? Couldn't she -- shouldn't she -- answer her husband, "Really, my husband, you are very sweet. But there are women more beautiful. More attractive. Let's not play such a charade. We are married; let's remain married in the eyes of the whole world. Besides, what good is such a game? Why not ask God to save us?" [00:21:00]

No. Sarah accepts right away to go to the palace. And she accepts to pose as his sister. And therefore I conclude that

Sarah's role in Egypt does not become her. That grows even more evident later on in the conflicts with Hagar. No sooner has she persuaded Hagar to try to conceive Abraham's child than she seems to regret it. She is jealous, and keeps close watch over her servant, and looks for quarrels. The midrash tells us, and I quote, that "she slapped Hagar's face with her bedroom slippers," unquote. As soon as Hagar is pregnant, Sarah finds her arrogant. And what if she's mistaken? What if the servant's behavior is simply due to her pregnancy? Pregnant women have strange desires, [00:22:00] impulses, whims.

Everybody knows that -- everybody! But Sarah? In other words, it's quite possible the text is mistaken, and we are mistaken. And that's because Sarah herself is mistaken. Sarah may have imagined all sorts of terrible things. In other words, in this story, Hagar is Sarah's victim. Sarah was wrong to impose a role upon her, and then begrudge her for playing it too well.

Later on, things become inflamed. Hagar comes back with her son, then Sarah has a son, and instead of making peace with the servant, instead of being grateful to fate -- after all, her greatest wish had come true, she has become a mother -- Sarah continues to torment Hagar and her child. And the servant, in my view, acts with restraint. And I am convinced from reading the text that Hagar then watches her every [00:23:00] step, her

every gesture, her every word. It's clear -- you know why -- it's clear because Sarah no longer complains about her. And then suddenly, Abraham's wife, the mistress of the house, picks on little Ishmael. Now it's him she observes, it's him she scrutinizes. It's him she suspects. And this, too, is clearly indicated in the text: she sees Ishmael playing with Itzchak, and she gets upset. Why does that upset her? What could be more natural, more beautiful, more touching, than to see two children, two brothers, play together? Sarah finds this neither beautiful, nor touching. Had Ishmael done the contrary -- had he avoided his little brother, had he chosen not to play with him -- Sarah surely would have accused him of something else: of jealousy, of selfishness, of brooding, [00:24:00] of childish cruelty.

Sarah seems to hate Ishmael. Nothing about him pleases her. She dislikes the way he dresses, or eats, or speaks, or sleeps. In fact, she's jealous of his joy. And finally, she turns to her elderly husband, and demands that he expel the servant and the son. And she refers to them, mind you, not even by name. Send them away, she says, for I refuse to let the son of the servant share my son Isaac's inheritance. Her son has a name; the other does not. The apparent reason for this request? You won't believe it. Abraham's wealth. The text says so. And

most commentators emphasize the point. What? Sarah is concerned with earthly possessions? Sarah, [00:25:00] a materialist? A capitalist? Sarah, a woman who wants everything for her son alone? A mother to whom no one else exists in the world?

No. Her behavior towards Ishmael is not appealing at all. And our empathy, our sympathies, go rather to her victims, Hagar and Ishmael. Only there, too, we meet obstacles. In re-reading the text for the third time, our enthusiasm gets dampened for the servant and her son. Hagar and Ishmael are no saints either.

Let's take a closer look at Hagar. She has an unpleasant side; that much is certain. She's young, and vibrant, and appealing, and attractive -- but she knows it. And she knows many things. She knows of her mistress's misfortune, [00:26:00] but instead of showing some gratitude to this family which has taken her in, she sows discord between a husband and wife. And the text confirms it. There is muffled anger in Sarah's tone, not only against Hagar, but also against her own husband. "*Chamasi aleicha,*" she said. May God be the judge of which one of us is right. And the Talmudic commentators agree with Sarah, who reproaches Abraham for his silence, for his passivity. Oh yes, Sarah says to her husband, "you have seen Hagar behave badly

towards me, and you have said nothing, done nothing, to put her in her place. You did not take my side. You remained silent. May God judge you for that silence.”

Because of Hagar, the couple no longer appears united. Instead of humoring her childless mistress, [00:27:00] Hagar irritates her. And Rashi says so in his commentaries, in no uncertain terms. Hagar lacked respect for Sarah. Furthermore, she gossiped about her. That Sarah, she said, was a hypocrite, and that was why she was not allowed to have children. She appeared to be pious, she appeared to be virtuous, but in fact she was not; otherwise, she would have had children. Is that a way to repay kindness and generosity? Let us listen to the midrash. And I quote, “At first, Sarah introduced Hagar to her neighbors and friends, saying, ‘Look at this poor girl. Let’s help her to adjust, to find her bearings.’ But later, Hagar visited those same neighbors and friends alone, to tell them malicious stories about her mistress.” No wonder Sarah felt she had to take measures.

Later on, we see Hagar and her son in the middle of the desert. There is no water, and Ishmael becomes [00:28:00] ill. What does Hagar do? She casts her son far away from her, so as not to see him die. Now, is this the attitude of a mother? Surely

she loves him, and cannot bear the site of his illness, or of his slow and cruel agony. But why doesn't she think of him? Of his needs? Doesn't Ishmael need her, now more than ever?

To emphasize the generally negative side of Hagar, the midrash interprets the expression "she went astray in the desert," quote unquote, in this way: "She strayed away far from the faith and the customs and the laws she had learned in Abraham's house. She returned to her pagan ways, and to her pagan gods."

According to the midrash, it was her way of protesting against her fate. And this was her personal response to what she had suffered: to refute, [00:29:00] to reject faith in God, to reject God, to reject her past with Abraham. And in this, too, she is different from our ancestors, who were able to draw greater strength from their trials, and additional reasons to believe in God, from their sufferings. As for Hagar, she bends in the face of suffering, so much so that one almost understands why the Torah turns against her.

Now for the fourth character, Ishmael. No one can fault him. He's almost outside the play. Object rather than subject of his story, which is beyond him, he could have remained uninvolved. He could have not been there. He's there by accident; a model victim, there is no way he can be happy. One could say that

happiness escapes him. He knows very well that it was not him his father desired for a son -- and if he didn't know, [00:30:00] he's constantly reminded. I always think of a cartoon I saw once, marvelous cartoons, describing a man saying, "All my life, I wanted to be somebody. But now that I am somebody, it's not me." (laughter)

Ishmael knew that Abraham wanted a son. He has a son, but not him. What is Ishmael called at home? The son of the servant. Not the son of Abraham. Yet he, too, is linked to a divine promise, which his mother received from an angel during her pregnancy. But the same angel had predicted the nature and the social standing of the son to be born. *Pereh adam* -- he would be a wild man. And the expression is, "*yado ba-kol, ve-yad kol bo.*" He would have his fingers in everything. The commentators did not hesitate to explain he would be a vagabond; a thief; a highway robber. [00:31:00] Violent, anti-social, bad. Poor thing. He isn't even born, yet he already is being accused of crimes and sins as vague as they are unfair. He isn't even born yet, and already he is being made an outcast.

From the moment he arrives, what does he see? Helpless, he is witness to some painful scenes at home. His mother is humiliated without end. What must he think of the system in

which he grows up? What must he think of the patriarch Abraham, whose reputation transcends borders, and even reaches the heavens? Or of his God, to permit so much injustice within His human family? And later, in the desert, what must he think of his own mother, who casts him far away, to let him suffer alone, agonize alone, and die alone?

However, [00:32:00] Ishmael, too, has had a bad press among the commentators, who cannot admit that Abraham and Sarah are capable of gratuitous cruelty towards him. And when the text says that Sarah saw Ishmael *m'tzachek*, have fun, the Talmudic commentators, always suspicious of fun, (laughter) say that *m'tzachek* means something worse. That Ishmael indulged in idolatry, and even murder. In other words, *m'tzachek* means that Ishmael ridiculed the faith and the laws of Abraham. He indulged in debauchery by word and deed. One commentator said that he had a bad influence on Isaac, doing what? By climbing the fences of neighbors in order to seduce married women. (laughter) No wonder Sarah was against him. Worse, much worse, we are told that *m'tzachek* means also he [00:33:00] showed a taste for hunting, which is not a Jewish profession. (laughter) He never went into fields or the street without bow and arrows, the most deadly weapons of the time. Those good old times. Did he try to teach Isaac how to use them? Sarah caught him

shooting an arrow in the direction of her son without hurting him. Frightened, Sarah decided to get rid of Ishmael.

A more charitable commentator translates *m'tzachek*: he discussed with Isaac the question of inheritance. Again, inheritance! And the text says that they were discussing it in a way that Ishmael told Isaac that as first born, he would receive the larger portion of Abraham's estate. In short, whatever the version, Ishmael's role is less glorious than what might have -- one might have thought. Victim -- he victimized Isaac, [00:34:00] who indeed was innocent in this whole drama. He really was too young.

But there remains one more character about whom not much has been said. God. What is his -- what is his role in all of this? Is he also innocent? Why did he prevent Sarah from conceiving? And why did he advise -- no, order -- Abraham to obey his wife, and banish Hagar and her child? He could have at least abstained from voting! (laughter) He didn't have to be involved directly in this business. In fact, Abraham and Sarah could have put the whole blame on him! It's his fault, and human beings could do nothing. It's he who holds the secret of suffering, he who dispenses joy and happiness; he, also, who takes them away from whomever, and whenever he wishes. If

Abraham and Sarah have committed an injustice toward Hagar and Ishmael, it is because they were caught in a situation willed [00:35:00] and ordered by God.

In other words, in this drama, none of the characters is entirely without blemish. All are wrong, because each and every one of them finds himself at a certain moment, and for various reasons, in conflict with the others. But at which crossroad did this tragedy begin? Who committed what first mistake, and when? Hagar, when she accepted Sarah's suggestion? Sarah, in making it? Abraham, when he submitted with surprising passivity? God, when he made too many promises to too many people at the same time? (laughter) In going deeper into the text, we realize that the tragedy unfolds on more than one level. At first sight, it's a drama of a childless couple. On a more social level, the text tells us about the troubles of a [00:36:00] servant. A third reading gives psychological implications: a couple is affected by the presence of a stranger. And then, on the theological level, God appears and disappears in order to endow simple gestures and words with hidden meaning, and justifies exaltation or despair.

Here everything is complicated. Everything is complex. The angel orders Hagar to name her son Ishmael, but it is Abraham

who gives him the name. Hagar weeps, but it is the voice of a silent son that got her tears. First, it is an invisible angel who speaks to Hagar, but she speaks of a vision. Miracles play an important part in this tale. By a miracle, Sarah becomes a mother; by a miracle, Ishmael is saved from death. One might say that God, in a good mood, has decided [00:37:00] to help everybody. To ward off evil from everywhere, to intervene in favor of all his creatures, and lead them towards a bright future.

But there is another way to read the story, one relating to historical facts. Scientific, scholarly facts. In the eyes of secular scholars, the plot is actually natural and accurate, for it reflects the spirit and the law of the Code of Hammurabi. As illustrated in documents originating with the Nuzi tribes in the northeast of Iraq, for example, and I quote a text from that law, "If Gilimniu, a woman, bears her husband Shenima children, he will not take another wife. But if Gilimniu is unfruitful, it is she who will choose a woman for her husband," unquote.

Which is precisely what Sarah did in giving Hagar to Abraham.

[00:38:00] The Code of Hammurabi adds another provision to this law. And I quote again, "If the woman chosen by the wife becomes disrespectful, she loses her new status, and becomes a slave again," unquote.

Here again is exactly what happened to Abraham's family. Seen from this angle, that of the ancient culture and environment to which Abraham belonged, the biblical story evolves according to the logic and the law of the time. And all the characters are right. Except, of course, for Hagar. On the simplest level, she is guilty of arrogance. She got what she deserved. She had only to respect the rules of the game. Arrogance must get its due; social transgressions must be punished. Had Hagar not shown disdain towards her mistress, she would have remained in her home, respected and happy. By violating the customs, she put herself in jeopardy, and Sarah was [00:39:00] right when she turned to Abraham, the master of the house, the supreme and all-powerful judge, to mete out just punishment to the guilty, disrespectful woman. Since she knew the law, she also knew the nature of the punishment, and she had the right, if not the duty, to remind him of it. We therefore have here a clear and simple situation. Dramatic, no doubt, but without any problems.

Only, we prefer to follow our own tradition. A story is studied in terms of its own values, coming from its own depth, and the Code of Hammurabi is of interest to us, but the Torah alone can explain the Torah. *Moshe kibel Torah mi-Sinai* -- and Moses received the Torah at Sinai -- is what characterizes Judaism.

Everything connects us to Sinai, because everything comes from Sinai. The light must come from the [00:40:00] text itself. *Hafoch bah, ve-hafoch bah, de-kholah bah* -- you turn, and return every page in the law in the Torah. Everything is in it. It means the questions and the answers are all in the text. And I therefore suggest that we read the story once more.

Let's take a closer look at Hagar. The Code of Hammurabi aside, Hagar seems to us the most attractive of the characters. Of all the characters on stage, she is the most appealing. She is beautiful, young, dynamic, and proud. The moment she feels offended by her mistress, she goes away. It has nothing to do with the fact that she spent the night with Abraham. That's the way she is. Proud by nature -- I would almost say, by birth. She is not a nobody, our Hagar. [00:41:00] As a matter of fact, there is a Midrashic legend which describes her as an Egyptian princess. And this legend links the adventure of the biblical couple in Egypt to the drama of Hagar. Listen briefly. You remember when Abraham misled the Egyptian king Avimelech while presenting Sarah as his sister, Avimelech, as we remember fell ill, and could not approach Sarah. Learning the truth, the next day he apologized to Sarah, and gave her his daughter as a gift. The name of his daughter? Hagar.

So lest we judge the royal father too harshly, the midrash attributes this thought and sentence to him, and I quote. "It is better, my daughter, that you be a servant in the house of Sarah and Abraham than a princess in some other royal palace," unquote. In spite of this so-called [00:42:00] consolational reward, Hagar's servitude was a terrible humiliation for this young woman, who was above all in love with freedom. And that is why she refuses to yield to Sarah's wishes.

In fact, Sarah had to make considerable effort, we are told in the Talmud, to convince Hagar to accept Abraham as lover. For Hagar had no taste for such an arranged and hasty match. She didn't like blind dates. (laughter) Once persuaded, she continues to bear herself with dignity. Although a servant, and a stand-in, she does not forget that she is a royal princess, and when Sarah is too hard on her, she chooses freedom. She goes into the desert -- the desert, she knows. It's her homeland. The desert to her means total freedom, for her imagination, for her dreams, for her memories. [00:43:00] Better to die in the desert in freedom than to live in security in servitude. So imagine her alone with her anger, alone with her wounded pride, in the desert near a well. In Hebrew, the word is *ayin*, an eye. The same word for both things. Because images are reflected in it, and because the eye, like the well,

attracts friend as well as stranger. One cannot live without water, or without light, or without dreams. Or without hope. And as the eye and the well cry of hope and hope itself, Hagar, in her extremity, with no hope left, gazes at her image in the well. And suddenly a voice calls to her. An angel has found her. It is a beautiful line. Quote, "She fled her mistress, and was found by an angel of God," unquote.

And this is not one of those wandering angels, who roam around the cities looking for [00:44:00] surprises, or who crisscross the desert, measuring its wonders. No. This angel is on a special mission. He must find the fugitive. To save her? Not exactly. Rather to bring her home first -- that is, back into servitude. And then, to console her. Listen to the dialogue. "Hagar," says the angel, "servant of Sarah, where do you come from, and where are you going?" And she answers, "I am running away. I am running away from my mistress Sarah." Our commentators try to explain this answer by emphasizing Hagar's slave mentality. I think they are wrong. But they say, she ought not to have said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarah," but simply, "I am running away from Sarah."

Comments the Talmud, when you call someone an ass, at least let him use a saddle. And I prefer to see in this answer -- really,

I oppose our commentators in this -- I prefer to see in Hagar's answer evidence of [00:45:00] frankness and sincerity and pride. Hagar does not lie. She is a slave, and she says so. If the slave feels ashamed, her owner must feel even more so. Hagar's response is therefore an accusation pointed against Sarah. She treats me as a servant, she humiliates me -- it's her fault, not mine. And that is why I decided to run away. But listen carefully. She answers the first part of the question, and not the second. She says where she is coming from, but not where she is going. Comments the Malbim, a great commentator of the Bible, this is the fate of the fugitive, always. He knows where comes from, but not where he may go.

In this respect, nothing has changed since then. In our time, refugees cannot tell for sure whether they will find a place to rest and establish roots. With this difference: the refugees of my generation did not even know where they had come from.

[00:46:00] They came from so many countries. Persecuted by so many oppressors. Tormented by so many destructive angels. Unlike us, Hagar had but one enemy, and had been exiled from only one place.

But her divine messenger, the angel, surprises us with his answer. He sends her back into servitude, and at the same time,

predicts that she would continue to suffer. Only he finds a way of reassuring her: her suffering will have a purpose. She is pregnant, and she will bear a son whom she must call Ishmael, because *ishma Kel* -- God has heard your pain. Moved, overwhelmed, Hagar suddenly expresses herself as a poet. A mystic. She seems to refute the angel. Surely God hears, but that's not all -- God sees. And Rashi adds, [00:47:00] God sees the pain of the afflicted. "You are the God who sees all," says Hagar. "And I myself have seen it here." That is why she calls the well, or the spring, *Be'er Lachai Ro'i* -- the Well of the Living Vision, of one who sees life.

Well, she is somebody, Hagar. So much so that a very great sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who in this, only in this area of the story of Hagar, Ishmael, and Abraham and Sarah, the only here does he disagree with Rabbi Akiva, who is very harsh on Hagar and Ishmael. And Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai envies Hagar, and he says so in public. When he is in Rome on behalf of his brethren in occupied Judea, he exclaims, and I quote, "Hagar, a servant of my ancestors, [00:48:00] was three times privileged to see an angel bearing a blessing, and I am here on a humanitarian mission for my people, and I have seen no angel at all." Is that fair? Actually, the promise given to Hagar recalls the one given Abraham. Hagar, too, receives the

assurance that her offspring would be numerous, even innumerable. According to the midrash, Balaam, poor prophet that he was, understands it very well. Of the 70 nations created by God, he says, only two will bear his name: Yisrael and Ishmael. And, I quote, "At the end of days," says the midrash, "it will be the sons of Ishmael who will wage wars in the Holy Land against the [00:49:00] sons of Isaac," unquote.

And this war is especially, these days, a tragic war. A bitter war. A war that cannot but provoke sadness and outrage. It is impossible for me to speak about Abraham and Ishmael without referring to the present as well, and without bringing everything back into the present. What we have seen today, what we have read today, about the murder, the vicious murder, of an old Jew by some vicious, vile, absurd people. I cannot understand that. And I have been used -- we have been used -- to witness cruelty in our time. But this cruelty today, or yesterday -- [00:50:00] for them to kill a helpless, sick, disarmed man in a wheelchair, and throw him in the water -- for what? My God, for what? What did they try to prove? That they were strong? That they were glorious? What was the meaning of it? What did they try to achieve? If they claim that they did it for some good reason, I doubt that reason. Nothing in the world can justify such murder. Is it part of the war that is

being waged now by the children of Ishmael against the children of Isaac? I would rather think that it's part of some other war, too ugly to be even conceived and considered by Scripture.

Stimulated and encouraged by the angel of God, [00:51:00] Hagar returns to Abraham and Sarah. She has a son. Abraham names him Ishmael. He's an old man, our grandfather, when his son is born, 86 years old. Thirteen years later, God tells him that for the second time he will become a father, and Abraham laughs. Sarah laughs. God changes their names. Avram becomes Abraham, Sarai is called Sarah. And meanwhile, things are happening in the world. Sodom attracts a little too much attention in the press. (laughter) And Sodom disappears. (laughter) Lot and his two daughters are saved. His wife, too curious, is unwittingly discovering the art of sculpture. (laughter) And she turns into one herself. (laughter) Abraham again leaves for Egypt and returns from Egypt. Isaac is born, and the second chapter of the drama brings back Hagar, [00:52:00] who during these last years has dwelled somehow behind the scene. We don't see her. We hear Ishmael, who is playing, but not Hagar. And we never know who she is, what she is, how old she is. You know, her age is never given in the Bible. Sarah, yes, but not Hagar.

The plot unfolds during the great feast Sarah and Abraham are giving to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. While the adults are drinking and eating and signing, or telling funny stories, Ishmael *m'tzachek* -- literally, he laughs with Isaac, or makes him laugh. Sarah gets angry, and the servant and her son are thrown out of the house for good. Let us add another interpretation of the word *m'tzachek*. One commentator says that Ishmael tried to pervert Isaac by initiating him into idolatry, and this is Rabbi Akiva's view. But his disciple, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whom I already mentioned, takes the liberty of contradict it -- contradicting him. I quote. [00:53:00] "This is one of the rare times when I disagree with my master," he says. "It is inconceivable that Ishmael, Abraham's son, could have practiced idolatry in the house of his father, our grandfather."

But whatever the relations between the two brothers, more important is the fact that Hagar and Ishmael become exiles, refugees, uprooted. We imagine them abandoned, in danger, on the threshold of death. Ishmael is ill, he has temperature, he has a fever; and his mother is sick with despair. So, she leaves her child in the bushes. Cruel behavior? Let us not judge too severely. She distances herself so she can weep aloud. As long as she is near her son, she manages to hold back

her tears, so as not to frighten him, not to [00:54:00] distress him. What could be more natural, more human on the part of a mother?

An interesting detail. In her speech, Ishmael is always called a *yeled*, a child. For the angel and the text, Ishmael is always *ha-na'ar*. A boy. Though he's 17 years old, he is, in his mother's eyes, a child. A sick and unhappy child. And so we love Hagar in the Bible, and also in the Talmud. We cannot help but love her. With all her faults, she remains a perfect mother -- though not a Jewish mother.

Abraham is another story. Ishmael is his son, yet he banishes him. What kind of father is he, this father of the Jewish people? But again, in re-reading the story, we shall see that we ought not to be too hasty. [00:55:00] Who are we to judge Abraham? Caught between his duty as a husband and that of a father between two loves, he waivers. For the first time in his life, he cannot make up his mind. Also, for the first time, we detect a misunderstanding between Abraham and Sarah, a painful rift. Sarah calls Ishmael the servant's son. Abraham continues calling him his son. And in the end, it is God himself who must prompt him to act -- to act against his own heart. Against his own conscience. "Listen to the voice of your wife," God tells

him. Had God not insisted, Abraham would not have given in to Sarah. Even so, he feels uncomfortable. He knows that he is making a mistake.

Let us read the text. "*Va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker,*" and those of you who know the Bible know that this is exactly the [00:56:00] same sentence that is used for Abraham when he gets up in the morning to go and bring his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. "*Va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker,*" and Abraham rose early in the morning, very early. He took some bread and a pitcher of water, and handed them to Hagar. Like a thief, one might say. Why so early in the morning? For two reasons. First, he wanted Hagar and her son to set out before sunrise. Before the great heat, where it is still possible to walk on the sand. Second, Abraham wanted to say farewell to his son and the boy's mother without Sarah being present. Sarah was still asleep. This was the right moment to see his son off. What if he were to get too emotional? If he were to burst into tears? Worse, what if Sarah were to look for a quarrel and say that he was giving them too much bread? Too much water? No -- it's better that she [00:57:00] not be there.

Our Talmudic sages are extremely generous and understanding with regard to Abraham. They find a lot of excuses for him.

Besides, they are convinced that Abraham continued to think lovingly of his son, even after he and Hagar had left. One midrash says that Abraham tied the heavy pitcher to Hagar's hip, so it would drag in the sand and leave a track, and thus Abraham would be able to find his son. He often thought of him, and Sarah did not like that. Three years after dramatic separation, Abraham could bear it no longer, we are told, and he decided to find Ishmael. Sarah must have made a scene, because she exacted from Abraham a promise to go only as far as Ishmael's house, but not to enter it. In fact, he promised Sarah he would not get down from his camel. And so Abraham set out, following the traces in the sand. He reached his destination. [00:58:00] Towards noon, a woman welcomed him. It was Ayesha, the Moabite wife of Ishmael. "Where is your husband?," he asked.

"He has gone to gather fruit and dates."

"I am thirsty and hungry," said Abraham, "and exhausted from the journey; please give me some water and a bit of bread."

"I have neither bread, nor water," said Ayesha. Then Abraham said to her, "When your husband comes home, please tell him that an old man came to see him from the Land of Canaan, and the old man was displeased with the threshold of his house." And Ayesha

gave her husband the message. He understood what it meant, and at once repudiated his wife. Hagar then sent him to Egypt to find a new one, and he did. Fatimah.

Three years later, Abraham, overwhelmed with yearning, came back. "Where is your husband," he asked Fatimah. "He is not here," she said. "His mother and he went to look after the camels in the desert."

"I am hungry, I am thirsty," said Abraham, [00:59:00] "and I am exhausted from the journey."

"Of course," she answered, and she went quickly to bring bread and water. Then Abraham prayed to God on behalf of his son, and at once Ishmael's home was filled with every possible delicacy. "When your husband gets home," said Abraham to Fatimah, "give him this simple message. An old man came from the Land of Canaan, and he very much liked the threshold of your house."

The moral of this tale: Abraham cared for his son. He loved him. But I doubt whether he ever saw him again. Some sages believed that he even cared for Hagar. The proof? After Sarah's death, Abraham remarried. He remarried -- he married a woman called Keturah, who bore him six sons. Who was this

Keturah? Rashi reveals her identity: Hagar. [01:00:00] Keturah and Hagar are one and the same person. To quote a midrash, "Abraham took Hagar back, for she was a woman of distinguished bearing." What? Of distinguished bearing? A former servant? Well, she had been a king's daughter. By marrying her, Abraham rehabilitated her. And the midrash adds, during all those years of separation, Hagar had remained faithful to him; she had not taken up with any other man. Abraham had remained the only man in her life. And so the circle was closed. Abraham and Hagar were reunited, and were happy, perhaps. Did they ever think back to their first encounter? Let us do it for them.

It took place when Hagar was still a little girl, and Abraham a young man. In Egypt. Again the story in Egypt. You remember that unfortunate Egyptian adventure -- we mentioned it before. [01:01:00] When Abraham and Sarah played a dangerous game of being brother and sister. Because of their lie, Avimelech, the King of Egypt, is punished. But that night, what did Avimelech do? He decided to give his daughter as a gift to Sarah. And that was their punishment. Their punishment was Hagar and Ishmael. Had they not lied, the King would not have felt the need to offer his daughter to Sarah, and the history of the Jews and of Islam might have been so different. (laughter)

I mentioned the akedah -- the binding of Isaac, the high point of Jewish experience throughout the ages -- and I always believed that the akedah is a punishment for the suffering of Ishmael. And here again we find a Midrashic text that says, Abraham was [01:02:00] wrong when he preferred Isaac to Ishmael! No father has the right to favor one child over another. And thus when God orders Abraham to take Isaac and bring him to Mount Moriah, the sentence read in Hebrew, I quote, "*Kach na et bincha et yechidcha asher ahavta, et Yitzchak*" -- "Take your son, your only son, the one you have loved, Isaac."

But that is wrong! Isaac is not his only son. But I feel the punctuation needs to be changed, that as I see, the sentence should read as follows: *Kach na et bincha,* comma. Take your son. *Et yechidcha asher ahavta* -- the only one you have loved -- comma, and that's Isaac. And therefore, the command contains a reproach, as well as an explanation of the order. The akedah, the supreme test a father and a people can face, is therefore the result, the consequence, of the [01:03:00] injustice committed by Abraham and his wife towards the unloved son Ishmael. Sarah hated him? Too bad. Abraham should have explained the situation to her. God sided with Sarah? Too bad. Abraham should have argued with Him, as he had done for Sodom. But Ishmael did not bear a grudge against his father at all.

That is clear from the text. Having lived a rich and full life, Abraham died at the age of 175. And his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, came to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah. Yes, Isaac and Ishmael were both there for the funeral. Together. Reconciled. For the Talmud, that is proof that Ishmael had, quote, "repented of the sin that he may have committed against his brother when he was young."

Additional proof: he allowed his brother to precede him in the biblical protocol description. Had Ishmael seen [01:04:00] his father again while he was alive? No doubt he had, but I am not sure; I don't find any trace of it in the Bible. But after all, we do know that Abraham married his mother. The text says nothing of such meetings. Ishmael reappears only at Abraham's death, as if to remind us that the eternal truth is always true. Death often resolves the most difficult problems. In the face of death, most conflicts look childish.

But that is not all. The reunion of the two brothers before their father's grave also reminds us of a truth too many generations have tended to forget. Isaac and Ishmael -- both of them -- are Abraham's sons.

In conclusion, it is sad to say, and even sadder to repeat, but the so-called possible villain in the story is Sarah. Our beautiful and [01:05:00] noble matriarch, so warm towards strangers, so hospitable to the needy, so welcoming to all women seeking faith. Too intense, too jealous a mother? Of course she desired a glorious future for her son -- who can blame her? But she was wrong to do so at the expense of another mother, another son. Mind you, and this is the beauty of our study, it is not I who says so. I love her too much. It was said by the great Rebbe Moshe ben Nachman, the Ramban, whom we call Nachmanides. When our ancestor Sarah persecuted Hagar, says he, she committed a sin. And Abraham, by not preventing her, became an accomplice to that sin. That is why God heard the lament and the tears of Hagar, and gave her a wild son, whose descendants would [01:06:00] torment the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. The sufferings of the Jewish people, said the Ramban, derive from those which Sarah inflicted on Hagar. And the Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi, also does not hesitate to blame Sarah for her immoral behavior, for her lack of charity and compassion. The term *va-te'aneha* -- and she, Sarah, made her, Hagar, suffer -- was to hound our history for centuries upon centuries, according to Radak.

Of course, one could invent or formulate all kinds of excuses to white-wash our matriarch. We have mentioned a few: Hagar's arrogance, the bad influence Ishmael had on his little brother, the fate and future of Israel. If we try hard, we can exonerate Sarah. But apologies no longer have a place in our tradition. We are sufficiently mature to admit our [01:07:00] shortcomings, especially since Scripture itself chooses not to conceal or censure them. The patriarchs are neither infallible saints, nor angels. That is the beauty of our history -- that they are human beings, with impulses of grandeur and weakness. They laugh. They know fear. They hate and say so. They try to go beyond their condition and share in God's vision of creation. When Sarah is hurt, she admits it; when she's jealous, she shows it. Whatever she is, she's no hypocrite. There, Hagar is unfair towards her mistress. Sarah was never two-faced. She loved her husband, and therefore gave him Hagar. She believed in God and in his promise; therefore, she suffered for her own kindness. And because she suffered -- it's human! -- she inflicted suffering. Was she wrong? Maybe. But we love her nevertheless. I would say we love her even [01:08:00] more.

In other words, because she was wrong and knew it, but could not help it, it becomes our duty to do the impossible, and correct her fault, today, without diminishing our admiration for her.

We are her children. That is the least children can do for their mother. Ah -- if only she could have shared her love between Isaac and Ishmael. If only she could have brought them together instead of setting them apart, today's tragedies would have been avoided. Well, you know, the Palestinian problem is always the mother's fault, you know. (laughter) And yet -- and yet -- having read the text and all its commentaries, having studied the question and all its ramifications, we cannot but feel sorry for Hagar, and sorry for Sarah. And we love Isaac, and respect Ishmael. [01:09:00] And we love Sarah, and we love Abraham. Oof, if only Ishmael had learned to overcome suffering, even discrimination, and turn both into a desire to fight suffering, wherever it exists. Our story tonight, a story in which all participants are profoundly human. Their present is not only our past; their present is our present. Thank you. (applause)

M:

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