

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

The Suffering of Hagar and the Enslavement in Egypt

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In parashat Lekh Lekha we read of God's promises to Avraham that his numerous descendants will inherit the Land. Later on, we read of how God and Avraham make two covenants sealing these promises: first the "berit bein ha-betarim" (Covenant between the Parts) in chapter 15, and then berit mila in chapter 17. The reason for two separate covenants and their respective significance is worthy of our attention, but this discussion lies outside the scope of this essay.

I would like to focus on the narrative which is found in between the two covenants - the oppression of Hagar and her flight (chapter 16). This story contains three major parts: a. Avraham takes Hagar as a concubine; her pregnancy (1-4) b. Oppression of Hagar by Sarah and her flight (5-6) c. Hagar's encounter with the angel at the spring (7-14)

At the conclusion of the account we read of the birth of her son and the name given to him by Avraham - Yishmael.

Let us turn our attention first to the third part of the story, which takes place in the middle of the desert. Thereafter we shall go back to the previous parts. When the angel meets Hagar he blesses her as follows:

"AND THE ANGEL OF GOD SAID TO HER: Return to your mistress and submit yourself to her hand.

AND THE ANGEL OF GOD SAID TO HER: I shall multiply your seed greatly, such that they will be uncountable for multitude.

AND THE ANGEL OF GOD SAID TO HER: Behold you are pregnant and shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Yishmael, for God has heard your affliction. And he shall be a wild man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brothers."

In the course of this blessing we are surprised to find three clauses each introduced separately by exactly the same words, even though nothing interrupts the blessing, no-one else is speaking, and there seems no apparent need to repeat the introduction: "And the angel of God said to her...."

Perhaps this repetition is meant to emphasize Hagar's unwillingness to accept the angel's words. She is not convinced, and perhaps is inclined not to fulfill the angel's demand that

she return to Avraham's house and submit herself once again to unpleasant treatment at Sarah's hands. For this reason the angel must repeat again and again, in clause after clause, his promises in order to convince her to obey.

Rashi (following the line taken by Bereishit Rabba, chapter 45:7), interprets the situation differently, claiming that three different angels appeared to Hagar at the spring, and therefore the Torah introduces each different part of the blessing separately - one introduction for the opening of each angel's words. Rashi draws our attention to the fact that the three clauses are independent of each other, and should be dealt with separately. (This is reminiscent of the three angels that visit Avraham and Sarah in their tent, bearing a promise of the birth of Yitzchak. There, too, Rashi emphasizes that three separate angels were required because "one angel cannot fulfill two tasks" [commentary on 18:2, following the interpretation of Bereishit Rabba chapter 50:2]).

I would like to explore Rashi's explanation further. In essence, what he is saying could apply even if there was only one angel who uttered all three clauses. It is irrelevant to our present discussion how many angels Hagar encountered; the crux of our inquiry will be the Torah's intention that we focus on the three separate clauses contained in the angel's words and their respective themes:

The first clause: "Return to your mistress and submit yourself to her hand." This demand is obviously a difficult one for Hagar to fulfill - she has just run away from her mistress and the unkind treatment she received. Therefore the angel continues with another clause, presenting a convincing reason and reward if she fulfills his request: The second clause: "I shall multiply your seed greatly, such that they will be uncountable for multitude." This promise is an attempt to encourage Hagar to do as she is being asked. Hereafter the angel describes the personality of the specific child about to be born to her: The third clause: "And he shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brothers." This promise is not entirely clear, and requires some explanation.

Some commentators interpret the angel's description ("a wild man; his hand ... and everyone's hand against him") in a negative light (e.g., Rashi, following the line taken by Reish Lakish in Bereishit Rabba, ch. 45:12). Before analyzing the exact meaning of the words of this promise, I believe it should be pointed out that Rashi's explanation contains a fundamental methodical problem: The context in which the words are spoken do not allow for a negative and critical interpretation of Hagar or her descendants. The angel has asked her to return to her suffering at Sarah's hands, and is now attempting to convince her to fulfill this request; therefore he makes various promises. It makes no sense to claim that in the midst of a string of promises and attempts and convincing Hagar, the angel is mentioning something negative about her descendants. On the contrary - it would seem logical to interpret his words in the most positive light possible, in the context of an attempt to help Hagar to overcome her reservations owing to her personal suffering.

Let us therefore attempt to understand the content of the angel's words and their positive, encouraging nature: First of all, the angel informs Hagar that her son will be a "wild

man." The word "wild" (pere) is mentioned in a number of places in the Torah as a desert animal not able to be tamed. See e.g., Yirmiyahu 2:24: "A wild ass used to the wilderness, snuffing the wind at will, who can return her from the ways of her desire," or Iyov 24:5 - "Like wild asses in the desert they go to their work, rising early for food," and later, emphasizing most clearly the free spirit of the wild animal, "Who has sent out the wild ass free, or loosened the bonds of the onager, whose house I have made wilderness and his dwelling place salt? He scorns the multitude of the city, and pays no heed to the call of the driver." (29:5-7)

In other words, a wild animal is the symbol of eternal freedom; a type of freedom which man cannot curtail by means of chains and bonds. The wild animal scorns at the sound of the multitude of hunters coming to trap him; he knows that they will not succeed.

Returning to our parasha, and keeping in mind the angel's words to Hagar and the specific situation at hand, the significance of the blessing is immediately apparent: Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, is being asked to return to her oppression by her mistress. The most prized blessing that can be bestowed, and the promise most likely to encourage Hagar at this moment, is that this subservience will not be eternal; that the situation will change in the future. Her son will remove the yoke of servitude from upon his neck and will be a "wild animal" - a man as free as an animal of the wild.

The following words of the angel, "His hand shall be against everyone (or, an alternative interpretation, "in everything"), and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell among all his brothers," should be interpreted in accordance with the Bekhor Shor and the Chizkuni, who understand these words in an economic sense, meaning that he will be capable of engaging and succeeding in many and diverse fields. Perhaps there is even a special emphasis on the aspect of negotiation, as a trader whose wares pass between everyone: "His hand shall be in everything" - in all types of wares; "and everyone's hand against him" - in haggling over the wares (Chizkuni, Bereishit 16:12).

Yishmael, then, holds the promise of liberation from the yoke of subservience and an econosuccessful life. These words may also be interpreted as containing a promise as to settlement in the land: "And he shall dwell among all his brothers."

The angel is therefore telling Hagar the following: a. Return to subservience b. Promise of a multitude of descendants c. Your son will be released from subservience and will succeed economically at whatever he does; he will even merit settlement in an autonomous portion of land.

This analysis of the angel's promise recalls another parasha, one which appears just before ours and which is immediately followed by Hagar's flight: the 'berit bein ha-betarim.'

Surprisingly enough, all the parameters of the angel's blessing to Hagar are included there too, in a similar manner, as promised to Avraham with regard to Israel's descent to Egypt: 1. There, too, God is revealed to Avraham and makes similar promises, but prior to their

fulfillment the nation has to take on the yoke of subservience to another nation which is destined to oppress them. Corresponding to "Return to your mistress and submit yourself to her hand" we read there "Your descendants will be foreigners in a land not theirs, and they shall serve them, and they shall be oppressed." (15:13) 2. Alongside this oppression, Avraham is also promised a multitude of descendants (verses 5-6), just as is the case with Hagar. 3. Ultimately God promises Avraham that his descendants will be freed from the yoke of servitude and oppression and will become a free nation, and that this release will bring in its wake economic success: "And also the nation which they serve shall I judge, and thereafter they shall go out with great bounty... and the fourth generation will return here" (14:16). The same idea is transmitted to Hagar - her son will be freed, and will succeed economically. 4. Following the release from the yoke of servitude, Avraham's children are destined to inherit the land - this, too, corresponds to the conclusion of the angel's promise to Hagar. 5. Our comparison should also include the introduction to the story: "And she (Sarah) had an Egyptian handmaid," who flees to the desert, just as Israel will escape from Egypt and head for the desert.

What is the Torah indicating to us by means of this parallel between the berit bein ha-betarim - the promise of the descent to Egypt and the redemption from their servitude there - and Hagar's flight, with the promises made to her by the angel?

Very often we find no explicit judgment of deeds or characters in the Torah itself. However, the Torah has many ways of conveying an evaluation of people and their actions. Sometimes the Torah uses one story - in which it is quite clear who is acting morally and who is not - to illuminate, by comparison, the characters in another instance. By means of such comparison (using similar wording or a similar circumstance), when one story reveals quite clearly the Torah's criticism of a specific character, then the other story also hints at a similar view of the characters concerned. Thus we find an evaluation - if not explicit then at least hinted at.

It would seem that our parasha represents an example of such a comparison. In the story before us the Torah wishes to convey dissatisfaction with Sarah's actions in the sphere of her treatment of her handmaid. It should be borne in mind that it is Sarah who suggests that Hagar be taken as Avraham's concubine, and the Torah emphasizes this, almost with irony: The term "take" is often used in the Torah to signify taking a wife ("If a man should take a woman..."). In our narrative this term is used because it concerns, after all, a certain level of marriage, although it is not Avraham who takes a woman as wife but rather Sarah who initiates the action: "And Sarah, the wife of Avram, took Hagar, her maidservant ... and gave her to Avram her husband as a wife." (16:3) After Sarah's initiation of this "marriage" of Avram and Hagar, her maidservant begins to relate to her with disdain, and therefore Sarah oppresses her.

Some of the medieval commentators criticize Sarah sharply for this behavior. The Ramban, in his commentary to verse 6, writes as follows: "Our mother (Sarah) sinned in this oppression (of Hagar), and Avraham too, in allowing her to act so, and God heard her (Hagar's) suffering and gave her a son who would be a wild man, to inflict the seed of Avraham and Sarah with all types of suffering."

In an even more severe tone the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi) writes: "'And Sarah oppressed...' - She was too hard on her and made her perform hard labor, perhaps she even struck her and cursed her, such that she (Hagar) could bear it no longer and ran away. **AND IN THIS MATTER SARAH BEHAVED IN A MANNER WHICH WAS NOT MORAL AND NOT RIGHTEOUS**; not moral - for even though Avraham was prepared to forgo his own respect that was at stake and said, "Do to her as you see fit," it would have been appropriate for Sarah to extend her hand to Hagar for Avraham's sake and not to oppress her. And not righteous or demonstrative of a good heart - for it is not worthy for a person to do everything that he has the power to do... And that which Sarah did was not good in God's eyes, as the angel said to Hagar, 'For God has heard your suffering, and shall bless you for your suffering'... and this whole story is recorded in the Torah in order for a person to acquire thereby good traits and to distance himself from bad ones." (Commentary on 15:6)

It seems to me that in drawing a parallel between Hagar's suffering and the subjugation of Israel in Egypt, the Torah concurs in this criticism. Just as God promised Avraham that his descendants would eventually come forth from the servitude in Egypt and would once again be free, so the angel makes a similar promise to Hagar. These promises are given in light of the unbearable servitude which the receivers of the blessing endure. The nation of Israel is answered in its plea from the depths of Egyptian servitude because "God heard their anguish" (and not only because of the covenant He had made with Avraham). In other words, because of the harsh, unfair servitude God found it necessary - as a moral God and righteous Judge - to redeem His people.