

Sarah's Treatment of Hagar

Introduction

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

An Unwarranted Affliction?

Bereshit 16 shares how the barren Sarah decides to give her maidservant, Hagar, in marriage to Avraham. Hagar conceives, leading her to belittle her mistress ("וַתַּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ").¹ Sarah, in turn, reacts harshly:

(ה) וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרִי אֶל אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָה וְאֶקַּל בְּעֵינֶיהָ
יִשְׁפֹּט יְיָ בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ. (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל שָׂרִי הִנֵּה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עָשִׂי לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעֲנֶה
שָׂרִי וַתִּבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ.

(5) Sarai said to Abram, "This wrong is your fault. I gave my handmaid into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. Hashem judge between me and you." (6) But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your hand. Do to her whatever is good in your eyes." Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face.

Though the meaning of the phrase "וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרִי" and the exact nature of Sarah's actions are unclear, Sarah's treatment of Hagar was apparently harsh enough to cause Hagar to flee.² Elsewhere,³ the root "ענה" refers to oppression or abuse; is that what it means here as well? If so, did Hagar's haughty attitude really warrant such a severe response? Was Sarah justified in afflicting her to such an extent? Finally, what role did Avraham play in the episode? Did he condone or condemn Sarah's treatment of Hagar?

"כִּי שָׁמַע יְיָ אֶל עֲנִיָּהּ" vs. "וַהֲתַעֲנִי תַחַת יָדֶיהָ"

The text does not explicitly share Hashem's evaluation of Sarah's deeds, but it does provide a few clues via the angel's speech to Hagar.⁴ Unfortunately, though, the message relayed appears to be self-contradictory. On one hand, the angel tells Hagar to return to her mistress, "וַהֲתַעֲנִי תַחַת יָדֶיהָ". This would suggest that Sarah's treatment of Hagar was justified; otherwise how could the angel expect Hagar to return to be further mistreated? On the other hand, just two verses later, Hagar is told to name her son Yishmael, "כִּי שָׁמַע יְיָ אֶל עֲנִיָּהּ". This implies that Hagar really had suffered and was afflicted unduly! How is one to understand the contradiction, and which statement best reflects how we are meant to evaluate Sarah's deeds?

Blessing or Curse?

The tone of the rest of the angel's words is similarly ambiguous. After telling Hagar to return to Sarah, he makes several promises:

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מְלֵאךְ יְיָ הַרְבֵּה אֲרֻכָּה אֶת זִרְעֶךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מֵרֵב. (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מְלֵאךְ יְיָ הַנָּדָה
הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּת בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי שָׁמַע יְיָ אֶל עֲנִיָּהּ. (יב) וְהוּא יְהִיָּה פָּרָא אָדָם יָדוּ בְּכָל יוֹם
כָּל בּוֹ וְעַל פָּנָיו כָּל אֲחָיו יִשְׁכָּן.

(10) The angel of Hashem said to her, "I will greatly multiply your seed, that they will not be numbered for multitude." (11) The angel of Hashem said to her, "Behold, you are with child, and will bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because Hashem has heard your affliction. (12) He will be like a wild donkey among men. His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him. He will live opposite all of his brothers."

Though the promise of multitudes of offspring is clearly positive in nature, how is one to understand the prophecies regarding Yishmael? What does the image of a "wild donkey of a man" connote, and what is meant by the phrase, "יִדּוֹ בֶּלֵל וְיֵד כָּל בּוֹ"? Are these blessings or curses? Is the angel rebuking Hagar, telling her to return to be punished and promising her unworthy progeny because she, rather than Sarah, was the guilty party? Or, is the angel heaping on Hagar reward upon reward as compensation for having to bear unjust treatment?

Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael

A few chapters after this episode, when Yitzchak is born, Yishmael's "laughter" apparently prompts Sarah to expel both him and Hagar from her home. Here, too, the response seems out of proportion to the crime, yet in this case Hashem clearly takes Sarah's side, telling Avraham to do as Sarah demanded.⁵ Should one learn from Hashem's positive evaluation of Sarah in the second story back to our incident? Or, might the lack of Hashem's explicit sanction in Bereshit 16 suggest that the two cases are different?

¹ It is not clear what form this belittlement took and how extensive or demeaning it was. The more negative one makes out Hagar's actions to be, the easier it will be to justify Sarah's severe response.

² Given Hagar's pregnant state, this should not have been an easy decision. The fact that Hagar would prefer an unknown fate in the wilderness to Sarah's rebuke suggests that at least Hagar viewed Sarah's treatment as particularly cruel.

³ See, for example, Bereshit 15:13, Shemot 1:11-12 and Shemot 22:21-22.

⁴ The verse speaks of a "מַלְאָךְ" which is understood by many to refer to an angel, but by others to refer to a human messenger or prophet of Hashem. [See, for example, Ralbag who consistently reinterprets encounters of humans with angels, suggesting either that they occurred in a vision or that the so-called angel was a prophet.]

⁵ For a full discussion of the story and varying evaluations of both Sarah and Yishmael's conduct, see Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.

Sarah's Treatment of Hagar

Exegetical Approaches

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Overview

Commentators evaluate Sarah's seemingly overly harsh treatment of Hagar in opposing ways. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of commentators justify Sarah's actions. Abarbanel sees in them legitimate rebuke of Hagar's inappropriate behavior. R. Chananel, in contrast, mitigates their severity by reinterpreting the word "וַתַּעַנֶּה", understanding it to mean that Sarah sought Hagar's subservience and servitude, but not that she abused or afflicted her. These sources find support for their position in the angel's admonition to Hagar that she return to Sarah and continue to be "afflicted".

A minority of sources disagree with this positive evaluation of Sarah and suggest that Sarah erred and was unjustly harsh in her reproof of Hagar. Ramban and R. Saba even suggest that Sarah is later punished for her actions measure for measure as Yishmael's descendants oppress Israel, just as Sarah had oppressed Hagar. These sources, too, find support for their position in the angel's words to Hagar, viewing the statement "כִּי שָׁמַע י"י אֶל עֲנִיָּהּ" as acknowledgment that Hagar was mistreated and understanding the angel's promises as blessings meant to compensate her for her travails.

Sarah Was Justified

Sarah's treatment of Hagar was justified.

SOURCES: Philo, Josephus, R. Saadia Gaon, R. Chananel, Ralbag, Abarbanel, Sforno, HaKetav VeHaKabbalah, R. S.R. Hirsch, and R. David Zvi Hoffmann

"וַתַּקַּל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ" – Most of these sources understand that Hagar grew haughty when she conceived, belittling Sarah and thinking herself more worthy than she.¹

"וַתַּעַנֶּה שָׂרָה וַתְּבָרַח מִפְּנֵיהָ" – These commentators differ in their understanding of the nature of this "עינוי" and, hence, why it was legitimate:

- **Affliction** – Philo maintains the simple meaning of the word, understanding that Sarah oppressed Hagar, but suggests that this is a legitimate form of rebuke.² Sometimes one needs to be harsh in order to correct inappropriate behavior. As this is for the good of the recipient, such rebuke should be viewed positively, not negatively.
- **Hard work** – Abarbanel and HaKetav VeHaKabbalah claim that Sarah worked Hagar harder than normal (but not that she physically abused her or the like). In order to diminish Hagar's pride, Sarah felt that she had to go to the other extreme, treating her more harshly than before.
- **Enslavement** – R. Chananel, R. Hirsch, and R. D"Z Hoffmann, in contrast, explain that "עינוי" means enslavement. According to R. D"Z Hoffmann, Sarah had freed Hagar when she gave her in marriage to Abraham,³ but once Hagar disrespected her, Sarah took her back as a maidservant.⁴

Why did Hagar flee? According to Philo, who maintains that Sarah oppressed Hagar, it is understandable why Hagar fled, but according to the other commentators who claim that Hagar was not treated so badly, how is her flight to be understood?

- Abarbanel explains that Hagar could simply not handle being rebuked, even if deserved.
- R. D"Z Hoffmann asserts that though Hagar was treated in the same way she had been before she was given to Avraham in marriage, once having tasted freedom, she could no longer endure her slave status.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels – N. Sarna⁵ notes parallels to our story in a law mentioned in the Code of Hammurabi. The law stipulates that if a maidservant is given to a man in marriage and she bears him children, leading her to "assume equality with the wife," then despite her having been given in marriage she may still be kept as a slave. This might support R. Chananel's reading of the story, that Sarah's "affliction" was really only the resumption of mistress-slave relations. Moreover, it suggests that this was the norm of the time and was considered both legal and legitimate.

Avraham's role – These sources disagree regarding whether Avraham condemned or condoned Sarah's actions:

- **Felt that Sarah was too harsh** – R. Saadia and R. Chananel learn from Sarah's words "וְיָשַׁפְטוּ יְיָ בֵּינִי וּבֵין אֲדָמָה" that Avraham and Sarah had disagreed about how to treat Hagar. Avraham felt that Sarah was too harsh.⁶
- **Agreed that Hagar deserved rebuke** – According to Abarbanel, in contrast, Avraham had never disagreed that Hagar deserved rebuke. He had only refrained from acting on his own because he felt that it was Sarah's place to chastise, as Hagar was her maidservant.
- **Reluctant to punish** – R. D"Z Hoffmann takes a middle position, suggesting that Avraham did not want Hagar punished, only that she learn her proper place. As such, he suggested that Sarah resume treating Hagar as a servant, but not that she treat her harshly.

"מִפְנֵי שָׂרִי גְבוּרָתִי אֲנִי בָרוּחַ" – R. E Samet⁷ notes that in explaining the reason for her flight, Hagar says nothing of undeserved affliction, but only that she was running away from her mistress, suggesting that what bothered her was her slave status. He further points out that the angel makes a point of referring to Hagar as "שִׁפְחַת שָׂרִי," as, he, too recognized that this (and not unwarranted oppression) was the core issue.⁸

"וְהִתְעַנִּי מִסֵּת יָדֶיךָ" – R. Saadia proves from this verse that Sarah did not sin in oppressing Hagar, for if Sarah's actions were problematic, how could the angel tell her to return for more of the same treatment? In fact, one might even suggest that the angel is rebuking Hagar for fleeing in face of warranted chastisement. Her belittling of Sarah made her deserving of Sarah's "עֲיִנוֹ" and so the angel tells her to return to get her just due.⁹

"כִּי שָׁמַע יְיָ אֶל עֲנִיךָ" – These words are somewhat difficult if one maintains that Sarah's treatment of Hagar was justified.

- These sources might respond that the angel is speaking from the perspective of Hagar who felt oppressed because she could not appreciate that her chastisement was deserved or that her slave status needed to be reinstated.¹⁰ Though Sarah was justified, Hashem still had mercy on Hagar.
- R. Samet¹¹ alternatively suggests that the angel is referring to Hagar's present afflictions in the wilderness rather than any at the hand of Sarah.

Angel's promise: "וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פָּרָא אָדָם" – This approach might read the angel's promises in one of two ways:

- **Blessing** – Many of these sources read the promises as blessings. Despite the fact that Sarah's actions were warranted, Hashem recognized Hagar's suffering and encouraged her:
 - **Freedom** – R. Hirsch,¹² following Ibn Ezra, explains that a "פָּרָא אָדָם" refers to a person who is free.¹³ The angel might be telling Hagar that despite her resumption of slave status, her son will eventually be a free man.
 - **Return to civilization** – Abarbanel reads the angels statement as a rhetorical question, "will your son be a man of the wilderness?" According to him, the angel is encouraging Hagar to return home to civilization. Since Sarah had not meant her any real harm and was chastising her for her own benefit, it is preferable to return there than to face the dangers of the desert.
- **Curse** – These sources could have alternatively read negative traits into the angel's description of Yishmael, seeing in it a promise that he was to be a wild man, living by the sword and in constant strife. According to this reading, the angel's words served to curse and not bless. As it was Hagar, not Sarah, who was in the wrong, it is she who is rebuked and punished.¹⁴

Were Avraham and Sarah punished? Avraham and Sarah did nothing wrong, so they deserved and received no punishment.

Relationship to the banishment – These sources are consistent in justifying Sarah's later banishment of Hagar and Yishmael as well. See Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael for details.



Sarah Sinned

Sarah's treatment of Hagar was unduly harsh and constituted a sin.

SOURCES: Radak, Ramban, R. Avraham Saba

"וְתִקַּל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ" – According to Radak, both Sarah and Avraham had despaired of Sarah ever bearing children, leading them to conclude that Hashem's promise was to be fulfilled through a different wife. When Hagar conceived, she assumed that her children were to continue the line and that she was now to take the status of primary wife. As such, she stopped heeding Sarah's commands. Considering that Sarah herself had basically come to similar conclusions regarding her status and it was she who proposed the marriage in the first place, one wonders if it was not unjust of Sarah to react so harshly to Hagar's behavior.

"וְתַעֲנֶנָּה שָׂרִי וְתִבְרַח מִפְּנֶיהָ" – These commentators read "וְתַעֲנֶנָּה" as oppression or affliction. Radak claims that Sarah worked Hagar extremely hard and possibly even hit and cursed her until she ran away, unable to bear the suffering any longer. Opinions in Bereshit Rabbah go further to suggest that Sarah was abusive, did not allow Hagar further relations with Avraham, and that Sarah's actions even caused Hagar to miscarry. [See Hagar – How Many Pregnancies for the textual motivations behind this reading.]

Avraham's role – Radak and Ramban blame Avraham not for actively oppressing Hagar, but for not interfering and thereby condoning Sarah's mistreatment of her. R. Saba goes further and faults Avraham for giving Hagar back into Sarah's hands to begin with, quoting the prohibition against returning a slave to his master.¹⁵ He views this as an act of cruelty not becoming of Avraham.¹⁶

Were they punished? Ramban and Tzeror HaMor maintain that Avraham and Sarah were punished measure for measure for their actions. Yishmael's descendants were a source of affliction to Avraham and Sarah's descendants, tormenting them just as Sarah had tormented Hagar.

"כִּי שָׁמַע י"י אֶל עֲנִיָּהּ" – This verse supports the idea that Sarah's "עינוי" was not justified. The angel tells Hagar that Hashem has heard of her afflictions and will compensate her.

"וְהִתְעַנִּי תַחַת יָדֶיהָ" – This verse is difficult for this position, as it seems to justify Sarah's actions, suggesting that they were not overly harsh. For, if Sarah's actions were indeed problematic, how could the angel tell Hagar to return to be further abused?

- R. Saba suggests that returning was the first step in Hagar's ultimate revenge and paved the way for her descendants to be able to oppress Israel in the future.¹⁷
- Radak, instead, suggests that the angel encouraged Hagar to return so as to reap her reward; it was only via Avraham that she would merit to become the mother of multitudes.¹⁸

Angel's promise – As above, these sources differ in their readings of the angel's various promises:

- **Compensating Hagar** – According to Radak, the angels' words constituted a blessing. In compensation for the oppression, Hagar was to have many descendants from Avraham. In addition, her son Yishmael was to live in the wilderness,¹⁹ and though he would have spats with others, he would stand his ground and not flee, but rather "עַל פָּנָיָהּ כָּל אֶחָיו יִשְׁכָּן".
- **Paving the way for Sarah's punishment** – R. Avraham Saba views these promises, too, is as the beginning of Avraham and Sarah's punishment. Hagar is told that she is to bear descendants who would later torture the Children of Israel, measure for measure. According to him, "פָּרָא אָדָם" might refer to a wild, unrestrained man and "יָדוּ בְּכָל יוֹם לִפְנֵי" to a nation of warriors, always ready to attack others.

Relationship to the banishment

- In contrast to their evaluation of Sarah here, in Bereshit 21, both Radak and Ramban justify Sarah's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.²⁰ The difference might stem from the fact that there Hashem seems to explicitly side with Sarah, telling Avraham, "כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלַיךְ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ".
- Tzeror HaMor, however, is consistent in viewing Sarah's actions as unjustified and suggests that in Bereshit 21, too, Sarah sinned. See Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael for further discussion.

Biblical parallels – R"Y Grossman²¹ points to several parallels between this incident and the Covenant Between the Pieces and its prophecy regarding the enslavement in Egypt. In both cases, there is oppression followed by a promise of freedom,²² compensation, and inheritance.²³ In both chapters, too, there is a promise of progeny whose great numbers will not be able to be counted. Finally, Hagar is an Egyptian who runs away to the desert, while Israel flees Egypt to the wilderness. R"Y Grossman suggests that through the parallels to an overtly problematic oppression, the text subtly relays its discomfort with Sarah's actions.

Purpose of the story

- Radak suggests the story comes to teach good virtues, that readers learn not to emulate Sarah's acts of oppression.
- R. Avraham Saba asserts that the story comes to explain why the Children of Israel were exiled; this was a punishment for Avraham's marriage to Hagar and the ensuing oppression by Sarah.²⁴

¹ It is possible that this in particular bothered Sarah who might have always harbored fears that her barren state meant that she was unworthy of being the mother of the chosen nation. When Hagar taunted her, she did not take it as a personal affront, but was dismayed that Hagar might take her place as the spiritual head of the nation. See R. Ezra Bick, "פרשת לך לך", who develops this idea through a comparison of our story with the story of Rachel's giving of Bilhah to Yaakov.

² Cf. Ralbag who does not explain what form the "עיניו" took, but appears to similarly justify it as a legitimate form of reproof.

³ See Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) who also has Sarah freeing Hagar in order to marry Avraham.

⁴ Even if one maintains that Hagar had not been set free when she married Avraham, one could still suggest that Sarah's "affliction" entailed letting Hagar know her proper place as maidservant.

⁵ See N. Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (New York, 1966): 128-129.

⁶ See below that these sources maintain that Hashem's judgement came via the angel's words to Hagar "שובי אֵל גְּבִרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי פֶתַח יְדֶיךָ". If Hagar was told to return to Sarah and continue to be "oppressed", then Sarah's treatment of her must not have been problematic. If it had been, how could the angel have directed Hagar to return?

⁷ See his article, "ותענה שר' - האם חטאה אמנו בעיניו הזה?".

⁸ Moreover, in calling her "שִׁפְחַת שָׂרִי" the angel lets Hagar know her true place, implying that Sarah was totally justified..

⁹ See Josephus who adds that the angel further told Hagar that if she did not return she would perish in the wilderness.

¹⁰ R. Hirsch notes the unique language of "hearing" rather than seeing Hagar's oppression. He explains that since Sarah had not actually treated Hagar cruelly, there was nothing to see. It was only Sarah's words to Hagar, that reminded her of her slave status, which bothered Hagar.

¹¹ See the article cited above.

¹² Cf. R. D"Z Hoffmann who writes that Hagar's descendants will be "אוהבי חופש".

¹³ Ibn Ezra notes the free nature of the wild donkey, pointing to לyyov 39:5, "מי שלח פרא חפשי".

¹⁴ It is not clear, though, why this would be prefaced with the promise of progeny and a large nation.

¹⁵ R. Avraham Saba writes, "ואיה תורתו שלמד שכתוב בה לא תסגיר עבד אל אדוניו".

¹⁶ He further claims that the Avraham and Sarah's first mistake was even prior to this, when Sarah gave Hagar in marriage to Avraham. Avraham should have refused to marry an Egyptian concubine and instead trusted in Hashem who had promised him children.

¹⁷ Ramban takes an almost opposite approach, suggesting that returning to be oppressed was a sign for the future, that Sarah's descendants would ultimately rule over Yishmael forever. This, though, is very difficult in context. If Sarah had sinned, why is it Hagar who is given a punishment? One might respond that both Sarah and Hagar were in the wrong, and thus, both were to be punished. However, it is still difficult to understand how being given such news would encourage Hagar to return to Sarah's home.

¹⁸ This, though, suggests that on her own, Hagar would not merit compensation for her woes.

¹⁹ He understands the phrase "פא אדם" to mean "אדם מדבר כפרא".

²⁰ See Radak.

²¹ See his article, "שעבוד הגר ושעבוד מצרים".

²² He reads the blessing of "" like Ibn Ezra above, that the angel promised Hagar that Yishmael would grow into a free adult.

²³ Avraham is told that his descendants will inherit Israel and Hagar is told "וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל אֶחָיו יִשָּׁנָה".

²⁴ Cf. Sforno who learns the opposite, that anybody who degrades the Children of Israel will be put in place, as was Hagar.