

The birth of Isaac and exile of Hagar and Ishmael

Today we celebrate the anniversary of creation. It might seem appropriate, then, to read one of our dramatic creation myths - we could discuss the radically egalitarian implications of one God creating one world and populating it with one couple, so that no one can say my ancestors have more *yichus* than yours or that we are complete strangers with no responsibility to one another, and so that we should understand that killing one person – even by refusing to fund basic medical care, drone or state-sponsored execution – is to destroy an entire world. We could discuss the extraordinary *lésé majesté* of Avinu Malkenu – *ein lanu melekh aleh atah* (we have no king but You). Or we could discuss the lesson we are to draw from Genesis's contention that in the eyes of our God the difference between humans and animals are so insignificant that He thought anyone of the animals might have turned out to be an acceptable spouse for Adam. Or we could focus – appropriately, in light of the climate summit now failing to do much of anything some miles north of us – on the early Rabbinic *drash* of God's blessing to Adam in the Garden of Eden: Take care of this world, for if you destroy it, there is no other.¹

But someone, sometime long ago, decided otherwise. Today, on the birthday of the world, we read a different origin myth, narrower and more tragic.

Tragic in the Greek sense. Indeed, this story could have been retold as a Greek tragedy by Sophocles [Oedipus] or Aeschylus [Orestia], with a chorus emphasizing the Greek point: what goes around comes around, there is no escaping fate, a wrong done once reverberates forever afterward, crimes are crimes even if done for the best of motives, to appease the gods or completely unknowingly. Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, itself meant to appease the gods for an earlier insult, will follow the family until it is no more; Oedipus's parricide and incest – even though resulting from his efforts to avoid the prophecy -- condemns him and his descendants, just as he was cursed by the actions of his father.

Biblical style is terser, however; the Chorus is silent. We have just the outlines of a play:

Sarai, a few chapters earlier, despaired at the age of 75 of ever having a child – although she was still sexy enough for two kings² to take her into their harems after Avram passed her off as his sister. In any event, she told Avram to take her Egyptian slave (*shifcha*), Hagar, and “build her up through her” and gave him Hagar as a wife. But Sarai quickly discovered the limits of property in human beings: when Hagar got pregnant, Sarai didn't feel lifted at all. Bitter and angry, she convinced Avram to “put her slave in her hand”, and treated her so harshly that Hagar fled to the desert, before returning with God's promise -- that she would have numberless descendants and her yet-unborn son Ishmael would become a “wild ass of a man” “dwelling in the face of all his brothers.”

¹ **Kohelet Rabbah 6.28 (p 195 in the Soncino edition):** “When God created אָדָם *adam* he took him to see all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: See how good they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Pay attention that you do not destroy my world for if you destroy it, there is no one to fix it afterwards.”

² Pharaoh, Gen. ch 12, when they first left Haran (age 75); Avimelech, Gen. ch 20, apparently while she was pregnant at the age of 89.

This is the background. Our parasha today takes place 14 years later. Avram and Sarai have changed their names, Abraham has circumcised himself (at age 99) and Ishmael (for his bar mitzvah present), and Sarah, at the age of 90 has given birth to Isaac – whose name means he laughs -- amidst great laughter, both of the ironic and happy, or perhaps gloating, sort.

Shortly after Isaac is weaned, Sarah sees Ishmael playing – or laughing: the word has the same root as Isaac's name, and some interpreters have heard in this a suggestion that he was playing at being Isaac, the true heir. Or perhaps he was just enjoying himself, as 13 year olds will, in violation of the natural order of things in which he – as the child of a slave and the dispossessed first born – ought to be miserable. In any event, Sarah demands that Abraham exile them back to the desert, which he does – with regrets for his son, but none, so far as we are told, for Hagar, his wife and Sarah's slave. Sarah ensures, I suppose, that the joke will be on them. Or perhaps on her descendants, who will have to deal with the ancient animosities with the desert dwelling Ishmaelites.

I started by saying this is an origin story – the birthday not of the world, but of a great tragedy, violence in the world that, before the taming of the Furies could only be avenged by more violence, begetting more violence still. In the Biblical style, as opposed to the Greek, it is a story of peoples, not just people, morality and not just decency.

Hagar is Egyptian and her name is a pun on *Ha Ger* – the stranger. She is Sarah's slave and Sarah treats her harshly, oppressing her. The story foreshadows our own primary origin story, when Abraham's descendants became strangers in the land of Egypt, enslaved and oppressed.

We hear no more of Hagar the person, but her son Ishmael is the ancestor of desert dwelling raiders who must have put fear into the hearts of their more settled neighbors who told this story of his origin in their own wrong.

We hear no more of Hagar, but we hear her name and her memory in the central – and most often repeated – commandment in the Torah, the one that Hillel would have quoted when teaching Torah on one foot had he had the nerve to start a political debate with a Roman: Do not oppress the Stranger – *HaGer* – for you were strangers in Egypt.

In Aeschylus' version of the myth of Iphigenia, the cycle of violence finally ends when Athena convinces the Furies that civil society – trials before a judge and jury – can replace vengeance and to accept Orestes' acquittal, even though he did indeed murder his mother.

We have no such resolution to our tale. Our commandment seeks a similar end: recall that you were Hagar and a slave, not that Hagar was first your ancestor's slave; do not seek revenge or to enslave the slaveholders, but refuse to take your place in the endless cycle of violence. But Athena created the polis to replace the violence of vengeance. We still seek the agreement that will allow us to live peacefully with the descendants of those whom we oppressed and who oppressed us.

- Daniel Greenwood