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POLITICAL READINGS OF THE HAGAR NARRATIVES IN POEMS BY JEWISH WOMEN

Rachel Ofer

The biblical story of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant, whom she gave to her husband, Abraham, as a concubine, appears in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 16 and 20. This article discusses poems written by modern Jewish women poets that use the Hagar narrative to comment on the conflict between the Jews, the descendants of Sarah, and the Arabs, the descendants of Hagar. Two themes are prominent: The conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and their common motherhood. Through these themes, which are both manifest in the biblical story, the poets give expression to their own worldviews regarding the ethnic tensions between Jews and Arabs.

Some of the poems discussed here conceive of the Hagar narrative as symbolizing the root of the unending conflict between Arabs and Jews. They are interested in rectifying the historical injustice that began, as it were, when Sarah banished her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to the wilderness with her son Ishmael. Other poems offer a gentler understanding of Hagar, seeking to understand and empathize with her through a common femininity/maternity and in this way to overcome the political implications of the story. These themes stand in contrast with the midrashic tradition that sees Ishmael as a symbol of the enemy and Hagar as the symbolic mother of the enemy. A third group of poems uses the Hagar story to reflect on the dynamic between Arabs and Jews, moving between violence and eroticism.

This article will discuss poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zerubavel Sasonkin, Nava Semel, Bracha Serri, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen and Rivka Miriam.

Introduction

The biblical story of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant, whom she gave to her husband, Abraham, as a concubine, appears in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 16 and 20. This article discusses poems written by modern Jewish women poets¹ that use

the Hagar narrative to comment on the conflict between the Jews, the descendants of Sarah, and the Arabs, the descendants of Hagar.

The female perspective is conspicuous in these poems.² Female poets writing about Hagar express Hagar's silenced voice as well as their own. They use the biblical character to refashion their own identities, both as women and as members of their national/ethnic group.

Poems about Hagar by women relate to present-day concerns in a variety of ways. Two central themes can be discerned, with some of the poems revolving more around feminist or female concerns and others focusing more on ethnic or national issues—that is, the Arab–Jewish conflict. Although both are often present, and it is sometimes difficult to separate them, one or the other generally plays a more dominant role in the poem. In this article, I have chosen to focus on poems dealing directly or indirectly with the national theme. I will not discuss poems in which Hagar's story serves as a psychological model of femininity without it being related to the tensions between the peoples.³

The poems I discuss present the Jewish–Arab conflict from a variety of female Jewish perspectives. Most of them are by native Israeli poets who wrote in Hebrew. Bracha Serri immigrated from Yemen to Israel at the age of ten and wrote in Hebrew; Shirley Kaufman, who immigrated to Israel from the U.S., and American rabbi Lynn Gottlieb wrote in English. In discussing the poems, I shall point to the significance of the language in which they were written and the cultural background of the poets. Some of the poems integrate phrases from other languages: an English poem includes an Arabic phrase, while a Hebrew one includes phrases in English and Arabic. These choices have poetic, thematic and political significance.

Hagar, serving as an archetype of the Other not only vis-à-vis the patriarchal figure of Abraham but also in relation to Sarah, the “official” wife, provides an opportunity for innovative and fascinating literary-cultural discourse, both about female identity, in the context of the feminist struggle, and about Jewish-Israeli identity, in the context of nationalist conflict.⁴ Her banishment to the desert arouses our sympathy even as her disrespect for her mistress may be regarded critically,⁵ and this very ambivalence has inspired many literary works. Reborn in modern poetry, certain aspects of her character come to the fore, such as her courage and independence, as revealed in her flight into the desert.⁶ The figure of Hagar shifts form constantly within the variegated weave of poems in different styles.

This article will discuss poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zerubavel Sasonkin, Nava Semel, Bracha Serri, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen, and Rivka Miriam.

The Biblical Narrative

Hagar comes into the story in response to the barrenness of her mistress, Sarah,⁷ who was destined to be the mother of the “great nation” her husband, Abraham, was promised he would father (Gen 12:2).⁸ Without mentioning her name, Sarah tells Abraham: “Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid;

perhaps I shall have a child [lit: be built] through her” (Gen 16:2). Sarah’s demand expresses her objectification of Hagar: “So Sarai . . . took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian . . . and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine” (16:3).⁹ Hagar serves as a sort of surrogate mother for the intended child.

It appears that Sarah’s plan is successful; Abraham accepts her advice, and Hagar conceives immediately. However, difficulties ensue when pregnant Hagar’s attitude toward her barren mistress becomes one of disrespect: “her mistress was lowered in her esteem” (16:4). We are not told what she said or did to provoke Sarah’s harsh words about her to Abraham: “The wrong done me is your fault!” (16:5), to which Abraham replies: “Your maid is in your hand. Deal with her as you think right.” (16:6). With her actions thus condoned in advance, we read: “Sarai treated her harshly” (*ibid.*), and pregnant Hagar flees to the desert. A divine messenger reveals himself to her at a spring and asks her where she has come from and where she is going, to which she replies: “I am running away from my mistress Sarai” (16:8). The messenger instructs her to return to her mistress and “submit to her harsh treatment” (16:9),¹⁰ promising that she will have many descendants. Addressing her a third time, the messenger refers to the name that she will give her son, Ishmael (i.e., “God hears”—“for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering”; 16:11), and she acknowledges God’s revelation to her (16:13).

The second Hagar narrative takes place years later, after Sarah has conceived and borne her own son, Isaac. The celebration of Isaac’s weaning is followed by a renewal of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, this time between the two mothers: Sarah sees Ishmael “playing” (Gen 21:9) and asks Abraham to “cast out that slave-woman and her son.” Although Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s proposal, he accedes to it after God supports Sarah’s demand to banish Hagar and Ishmael (12:12–13).¹¹

Once again Hagar wanders in the desert, this time until her water supply is exhausted, but now the narrative focuses as well on her son Ishmael, whose life is threatened. In despair, Hagar casts him under a bush so as not to witness his death; sitting at a distance, she raises her voice and cries. A messenger of God again appears to her and asks: “What troubles you, Hagar?” and he goes on to reassure her: “Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is” (21:17, the word “heed” again playing on Ishmael’s name). Her eyes are opened, she sees a well, and she gives her son to drink. Hagar’s story concludes with her taking an Egyptian wife for her son (21:21).

Literary Works as Modern Midrash

Biblical narrative is characterized by brevity. Its style is laconic, and much is left unsaid, leaving multiple openings for interpretation.¹² The word *midrash*, from the root *d.r.sh* (ד.ר.ש), meaning “seek, enquire, require,” is used by Jewish scholars to refer to a wide range of early rabbinical exegesis of the Hebrew Bible.¹³ In a more specific and limited sense, “the Midrash” refers to a corpus of rabbinic works

containing halakhic, exegetical and aggadic material, usually based on an interpretation or extrapolation of verses.

In recent generations, the midrashic imagination has undergone a revival and shown itself capable of exercising a powerful influence on a new type of contemporary Jewish writing.¹⁴ The composition of poetic and literary works that reconfigure or reimagine episodes from the Bible as a form of modern midrash has become a phenomenon.¹⁵ As Wilda Gafney has written, midrashic readings

discern value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces [. . .] They reimagine dominant narrativel readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions.¹⁶

The conception of modern works as midrash has shed new light on the role of biblical stories in shaping modern Hebrew literature. More recently, we have witnessed the creation of a new literary genre in the form of feminist midrashim, retellings of biblical stories by contemporary feminist writers seeking to incorporate women's viewpoints into the textual tradition.¹⁷

Like midrash, modern poetry on biblical themes endeavors to fill the gaps in the narratives, using the biblical characters to give expression to the authors' own feelings, thoughts and beliefs, and retelling the stories to illustrate contemporary dilemmas.¹⁸ In this sense, the poems about Hagar to be discussed in this essay can be regarded as a kind of a feminist midrash.¹⁹ Both in modern poems and in traditional Jewish literary genres, including early midrash, medieval biblical commentary, and early and medieval Jewish liturgical poetry (*piyyut*), Hagar and Ishmael are often taken to represent the Arab nation. Ishmael is often conceived as a symbol of the enemy, and Hagar, consequently, as the mother of the enemy.²⁰ In a number of modern poems, this conceptualization may take on political significance in the context of the Jewish-Arab conflict.

The approaches of the women poets discussed herein to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and between their descendants over the generations, stand in notable contrast to the mainstream midrashic tradition, which tends to justify Abraham and Sarah and criticize Hagar. For example, by way of justifying the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the midrashic authors offer a variety of interpretations of Ishmael's "playing." According to Rabbi Akiva, "'Playing' is nothing but licentiousness . . . teaching that Sarah saw Ishmael . . . stalk married women and abuse them" (Genesis *rabba* 53:11). In modern parlance, Sarah was concerned that Isaac would be influenced by Ishmael's sexual harassment and abuse of women. Other interpretations report that Ishmael was engaged in idol worship or bloodshed, or that he sought to murder Isaac in order to inherit Abraham (Genesis *rabba* 53:11), situating Ishmael's behavior in the realm of those transgressions for which,

according to Jewish tradition, one must accept martyrdom rather than commit them.²¹ Some traditions take a dim view of Hagar's foreign origins—for example, interpreting the words “fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is” as indicating that Hagar had prayed to her father's pagan gods (*Pirkei deRabbi Eli'ezer* 30). Even after the miraculous revelation of the well, it is suggested, Hagar continued to doubt God's power and concern, as she was of weak faith (Genesis *rabba* 53:14).²²

Contrary to these ancient midrashim, most of the modern poets criticize Sarah and take the side of Hagar, whom they see as representing the weak, oppressed woman, and through whom they seek to understand and even empathize with the Arab Other. Some of the poems not only draw upon the biblical source but also make use of the early midrashic literature, by alluding to it or incorporating midrashic content into the poetic plots, while often seeking simultaneously to subvert or dispute it. For example, in Lynn Gottlieb's poem, Sarah admits her blindness and recognizes that it was Hagar, not she, who could see angels. This stands in contrast to the midrashic traditions that devalue the revelations experienced by Hagar, who, they claim, merited them only thanks to Sarah (Genesis *rabba* 45:10).²³

That said, these works remain in the poetic medium, condensed and abbreviated; their authors allude to their worldviews rather than explicitly articulating ideological positions. A few offer something like an attempt to create a new, more optimistic ending to the story, in which Sarah and Hagar are reconciled. The freedom to create a rectified narrative allows them to redefine both the past and the future.

The poems in the first group discussed herein (“Eternal Warfare”) conceive of the Hagar narrative as symbolizing the root of the unending conflict between Arabs and Jews. They are interested in rectifying the historical injustice that began, as it were, when Sarah banished her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to the wilderness with her son Ishmael. Those in the second group (“Overcoming the Political”) offer a gentler understanding of Hagar, seeking to understand and empathize with her through a common femininity/maternity and in this way to overcome the political implications of the story. These themes stand in contrast with the midrashic tradition that sees Ishmael as a symbol of the enemy and Hagar as the symbolic mother of the enemy. Those presented in the final group (“Violence and Eroticism”) use the Hagar story to reflect on the dynamic between Arabs and Jews.

Eternal Warfare

First published in 1977, “Jealous Woman” by Dalia Ravikovitch (1936–2005),²⁴ one of the greatest modern Hebrew poets, dwells on old Sarah's jealousy of the young Hagar.

אישה מקנאת

מאת דליה רביקוביץ

חריצים נצנצו בחלקת צוארה
מקנאה וחרון שמחתה נבללה
כל גבעל בגנה כצמחי קיקיון
כל שיר באזניה כרחש קללה.

שנתה נדדה ולבה נאטם
עיניה דלוחות מחשד ושנאה.
לפתע אמרה לו שרה: אברהם
גרש מביתי את הגר ואת בנה.

לא יירש עם בני יחד
גם בן האמה
שלח מלפני למדבר את השנים
ומי שהכה בו ביום תדהמה
האם יאשים את שרה כי מרה היא?

ובבקר שהוא עם הנץ החמה
גֵּרְשׁוּ אִם וּבְנָה וְצַפַּחַת הַמִּים
ומאז לא חדלו מלחמות על העיר
צעיר מכה בכור והבכור נד צעיר.

חרש שוררת אמנו שרה.
בקוץ שהוא בבקר הצח,
הלד ישמעאל אדמוני ומפנה
פרא אדם אדיר קברת
אך מי יגונן על בני יצחק
על בני הקטן מאד?

ידה לבצק היא שלחה כתמיד
ולפתע שטפוה דמעות עינים.
תשעים שנות חייה נתנו בה סימן.
הלבין השער וחלשו הידים.

מי יגונן על בנה הקטן
קשניע ימה לבית עולמים
ומה יהיה על יצחק היתום
בין הגר הפורחת
כפרי בבסתן
ועמה ישמעאל
אהובי אברהם.

Jealous Woman

by Dahlia Ravikovitch

Cracks sprouted on her smooth neck
Jealousy and rage confounded her joy
Every plant in the garden like Jonah's withered gourd
Every song in her ears like a whispered curse.

Her sleep disturbed and her heart closed
Her eyes stream with suspicion and hatred.
Suddenly, Sarah said to him: Abraham
Banish Hagar and her son from my home.

My son will not inherit together
With merely the son of a maidservant
Send the two of them away from me to the desert
And whoever was shocked that very day
Can he blame Sarah for being bitter?

And on that morning, with the rising sun
Mother and son and water flask, banished
Ever since, the wars have not ceased

Younger striking elder and elder striking younger.²⁵
Our mother Sarah stews silently
That summer, that clear morning
Ruddy, volatile Ishmael went
A wild man, of might arm
But who will protect my boy Isaac
My so very small son?

As always, her hands were covered with dough
And suddenly, her eyes were awash with tears.
Ninety years of life had left their mark.
Hair had whitened and arms become weak.

Who will protect her little boy
When the day comes for her final rest?
What will happen to orphaned Isaac
Between Hagar, blooming
Like a fruit orchard
And with her, Ishmael,
The beloveds of Abraham?

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

Beginning with the description of the wrinkles on the aging Sarah's neck and the jealousy that destroyed her joy in life, Ravikovitch offers a psychological justification for Sarah's harsh behavior toward Hagar and Ishmael. She empathizes with and even grants forgiveness to the suffering Sarah, who fears that no one will protect her son after her death.

The struggle between Sarah and Hagar turns into the war between their descendants, and Ravikovitch points to the heavy cost of Hagar's banishment, to be paid by the descendants of the two women, who will fight one another throughout history. Nevertheless, Ravikovitch finds it difficult to blame Sarah, fearful as she is of the threat posed by Ishmael, "a wild man, of mighty arm," to her small son. Ravikovitch presents Hagar as a woman in the bloom of youth, who, together with her son, has enraptured Abraham. The reader is inclined to identify with Sarah, overcome with tears, dealing with age and frailty and anxious about the fate of her son when she is gone. Interestingly, Malka Shaked claims that Ravikovitch did not include this poem in her volume of collected poems, published in 1995, because she was uncomfortable with its contents or concerned about its political implications.²⁶

Like Ravikovitch's poem, "Hagar's Oath in the Wilderness" composed in 1969 by Israeli poet, songwriter and actress Zerubavela Sasonkin (1929–2004),²⁷ refers to the political through the prism of motherhood and femininity. It is addressed, in the masculine, to Abraham.

Hagar's Oath in the Wilderness

by Zerubavela Sasonkin

שבועת הגר במדבר

מאת זרובבלה שסונקין

I will return to you
With the rising of the crescent
In a still small voice
And to Sarai
With the howling of jackals
At nightfall.

אני אשוב אליך
בעלות הסהר
בקול דממה דקה
ואל שרי
בילל-תנים
בחשכה.

I will come from the wilderness
To take that which you vowed
And from Sarai
Her dream
I will see my son
Grow up in the sand
Like a date palm
And your son led
To the binding.

אני אבוא מן המדבר
לטל את נדריך
ומשרי
את חלומה
אני אראה את בני
גדל בין החולות
קדקל
ואת בנד מובל
לעקדה.

I will give mine to drink
Tears from the waterskin
While your hand is raised
Against yours
And Sarai's throat is hoarse
With her grief.

אני אשקה שלי
דמעות מתוך החמת
בעוד ידך מונקת
על שלך
וגרון שרי נחר
ביגונה.

I will sew for my son
A tunic of sand and sun
And on nights of frost, I will bring down
A blanket of stars
And never will be spent
The water from the skin
So long as is stored
In the cisterns of my two eyes
The power of life
The desert's eye is vigilant
And on my body are sharpened
Burning east-wind sparks
And blades of frost
My two burnt arms
Grasp the hands of the boy
His head bent in hallucinations
On the stone of my neck
With every step of mine
The desert's terror yields,
My son will live
His sons will multiply like the sand –
By this, today I
Hagar, swear to you
My witnesses—the desert
The sun in the sky.

אני לבני אתפר
כתנת חול ושמש
ובלילות קרה אוריד
שמיכת הכוכבים
ולא יכלו לעד
המים מן החמת
כל עוד אוגרות
שתי בארות עיני
כוחות חיים
עין המדבר דרוכה
ועל גופי משחזת
גצי קדים צורבים
וסכיני קרה
את שתי כתפי הנשרפות
לופתות ידי הילד
שמוט ראשו בהזיות
על אבן צוארי
עם כל פסיעה שלי
אימת מדבר נכנעת,
היה יחיה ילדי
ירבו כחול בניו—
את זאת היום אני
הגר, לך נשבעת,
עדים לי המדבר
השמש במרומו.

I will return, parched
In the midst of desert storm
Scorching your heels
I will sit opposite you
In shepherd's tents
I will look at you
As long as the sun traverses
As long the firmament ignites its stars.

אני אשוב צמוא
בתוך סופת מדבר
חורקת עקביך
אני אשב מולך
באהלי קדר,
אני אביט בך
כל עוד חמה מולקת
כל עוד ידליק רקיע
כוכביו.

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

In Sasonkin's poem, both the political and the feminist perspectives are more emphatic and fundamental. "Hagar's Oath in the Wilderness" has a belligerent and unforgiving tone. Hagar, the narrator, promises Abraham that she will return to take vengeance on him and Sarah for banishing her and her son. Already in the second line, Sasonkin alludes to contemporary reality. Hagar, mother of Ishmael, will return with the rising of the crescent, the symbol of Islam.

Like Ravikovitch's poem, Sasonkin's emphasizes the maternal perspective. The central conflict is expressed in the contrast of the two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. According to Sasonkin, Hagar is a paragon of motherhood, knowing how to protect her son, who grows like a palm tree, while Sarah does not have the strength to protect hers from being bound upon the altar. Hagar is an active agent, enlisting the entire cosmos in her maternal project. Her invocation of the sun and the stars echoes God's promise of descendants to Abraham, "I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17), intimating that it is Ishmael rather than Isaac who will inherit Abraham. Despite the terrible dangers she and her son encountered in the desert, Hagar swears that she will survive, and the very elements bear witness to her mythic oath.

Chaya Shacham has argued that the full meaning of this poem is revealed by bearing in mind the context in which it was written. Sasonkin was the daughter of Hebrew poet Alexander Penn (1906–1972), and her poem is in intertextual dialogue both with the biblical narrative and with her father's 1947 poem "Hagar," which relates to the laying of a water pipe for the communities of the Negev desert.²⁸ Penn took this event as an opportunity for reconciliation between the descendants of Isaac and of Ishmael. Sasonkin's poem, composed during the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt, suggests that the hope for peace and reconciliation expressed by Penn has dissipated.²⁹

Alongside its contemporary political theme, "Hagar's Oath" exhibits a notably feminist perspective. Hagar, silenced in the biblical narrative, has an assertive, powerful voice in the poem, and Sasonkin depicts her as a forceful, active character. Unlike Penn's Hagar, "whose eyes stream into the waterskin," Sasonkin's confident Hagar declares: "And never will be spent / The water from the skin."³⁰

The poems of Nava Semel³¹ (1954–2017), a member of the second generation of Holocaust survivors, often addressed the conflicts between Jews and non-Jews, especially but not exclusively in the context of the Holocaust. Her poetry collection *Mizmor laTanakh* (A Hymn to the Bible) expresses her deep connection to the Bible and rabbinic midrashim. In it, she utilizes Bible stories to express her yearning for peace between non-Jews and Jews in general, and particularly between Arabs and Jews. The poems in *Mizmor laTanakh* can be viewed as modern interpretations of the deeds of biblical characters, through which Semel articulates her political and social beliefs, as she does in the poem "Sarah, Sarah."³²

שרה

מאת נאוה סמל

ותרא שרה את-בן-הגר המצרית, אשר-ילדה לאברהם, מצחק
ותאמר, לאברהם, גרש האמה הזאת, ואת-בנה,
כי לא יירש בן-האמה הזאת, עם-בני עם-יצחק.
(בראשית כא, 9-10)

לספר בראשית אני רוצה להכניס
בפרק כ"ף-אל"ף לחולל איזה נס
להוסיף עוד שורה
ולומר כך לשרה:
אל תגרשי את שפחתך הגר
אל תגרשי אל המדבר.
את תחסכי מאתנו המון צרות.

שרה, שרה,
תני ליצחק, תני לישמעאל
להיות אחים מאשרים
שישחקו, שיגדלו יחד
שיהיו חברים
מקאן ועד סוף הדורות.

Sarah, Sarah

by Nava Semel

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.
She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of
that slave-woman shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."
(Genesis 21:9–10)

I want to enter into the book of Genesis
To work a miracle in chapter 21
To add another line
And to say this to Sarah:
Do not banish your maidservant Hagar
Do not banish to the wilderness.
You can save us a lot of suffering.

Sarah, Sarah
Allow Isaac, allow Ishmael
To be brothers happily

Let them play, let them grow up together
Let them be friends
From now until the end of time.

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

In rewriting the story, the poet seeks, as it were, to forestall the conflict between the two nations. Like Ravikovitch and Sasonkin, Semel holds Sarah accountable for Hagar's banishment.³³ If only she could change the biblical past, reenter the story and rectify it, she could change the historical events that followed—the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

The poet's sense of urgency, her yearning to act and change fate, is brought out in the poem through the intense rhyming in the first verse—*lehikanes* (to enter) / *nes* (miracle); *shurah* (line) / *Sarah* (Sarah); *Hagar* (Hagar) / *midbar* (wilderness)—and further emphasized by the rhyming of the closing words of each of the two verses, *tsarot* (suffering) / *dorot* (time, lit. generations), evoking the poet's feeling of an opportunity missed and a tragic past that cannot be changed. By using the future tense in her depiction of the two half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael playing and growing up happily together, the poet points to the gap between the difficult reality and what could have been.

Hebrew was not the first language of Israeli poet Bracha Serri (1940–2013), who was born in Sana'a in Yemen and immigrated to Israel with her religious family at age 10, but it was the language in which she was literate and educated. Serri was keenly aware of the historical marginalization of Mizrahi Jews—those of Middle Eastern and North African parentage—in Israeli culture and society. Her writing focused on Judaism, Mizrahi identity, feminism and left-wing politics. Her poems are interlaced with biblical texts and political themes and present the worldview of a Jewish Mizrahi woman provocatively and remonstratively re-examining traditional texts as she struggles to define herself. Like many of her poems, "Aliza Says"³⁴ relates to exclusion, alienation and being a refugee.

Aliza Says

by Bracha Serri

עליזה אומרת

מאת ברכה סרי

Aliza says
That everyone went to pray
At the Cave of Mahpela.
That everyone cries
For Sarah
Who did not remain barren.
That everyone is in the great womb
The doubled
In the war of the twins

עליזה אומרת
שכולם הלכו לתפילה
במערות המכפלה.
שכולם בוכים
על שרה
שלא נשארה עקרה.
שכולם ברחם הגדולה
הכפולה
במלחמת התאומים

Over possession and inheritance.	על הירושה ועל הנחלה
But I remained a girl	אבל אני נשארת ילדה
With Isaac	עם יצחק
At the binding	בעקדה
And for me, he	ובשבילי הוא מעולם
Never rose	לא קם
From there.	משם.
And I remained in the desert	ונשארת במדבר
With Hagar	עם הגר
And with her child Ishmael	ועם ילדה ישמעאל
Thirsty, dry	צמאה יבשה
Seeking the well of the Living One	מחפשת באר לחי
Who sees me, to slake	רואי, לרוויה
To give the boy to drink	להשקות את הנער.
And I remained a maidservant	ונשארת שפחה
Escaping	נמלטת
Immigrant	מהגרת
Retarded	מפגרת
Concubine	פילגש
Apathetic	קפואת רגש
Tortured	מעונה
Without bitterness	בלי טינה
Without hatred	בלי שנאה
Persecuted	נרדפת
Fleeing	בורחת
Refugee	פליטה
Stranger	זרה
Jew	יהודייה
Without essence	בלי מהות
Without identity	בלי זהות
Frozen	קפואה
Barren.	עקרה.

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

Serri, whose poems express her opposition to war, patriarchy and capitalism,³⁵ identified herself religiously and nationally as a stranger and refugee. Via the character of Hagar, she uses political imagery in expressing her socially conscious feminist protest,³⁶ pointing to Sarah, buried in the Cave of Machpela (“cave of pairs” or “doubled cave”), as the guilty party in the conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael “over possession and inheritance.” She chooses to identify, rather, with Isaac, bound on the altar, who, though saved from slaughter, never recovered from his sacrificial fate; and with Ishmael and his mother, with whom she “remained in

the desert.”³⁷ Among these characters, each a victim whose suffering evokes her empathy, she feels a special affinity for Hagar, who symbolizes the exiled outsider of inferior social status. Her national identity, which would separate her, a “Jew,” from Hagar the Egyptian (“and I remained a maidservant / . . . Jew”) is negated, in a manner reminiscent of other poems by Serri in which the contrast between national identities is inverted.³⁸ Instead, as several other Mizrahi Jewish writers have done, she examines her Judeo-Arab identity and the cultural connections between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs.³⁹

As an immigrant from Yemen, Serri feels as though she had “remained in the desert”; as it were, she has never entered the promised land. Her use of the vulgar word “retarded” (*mefageret*) reflects the Mizrahi immigrant girl’s sense of inferiority (“maidservant,” “concubine”) over against the patronizing Israeli-Ashkenazi elite. The consequent emotional damage (“persecuted”) has become trauma (“frozen,” “apathetic”), giving rise to the dullness characteristic of depression (“without bitterness, without hatred”) and to loss of identity and meaningfulness (“without essence”). The structure of the poem, with almost every word in the last part set on its own line, emphasizes the poet’s despair, as do the many repetitions—“without bitterness,” “without hatred,” “without essence,” “without identity”; “I remained in the desert,” “I remained a maidservant”—and the musical intensity of the penultimate stress rhyming of *nimletet* (escaping) with the chain of adjectives *mehageret* (immigrant, migrant), *mefageret* (retarded), *pilegish* (concubine), *nirdefet* (persecuted).

Overcoming the Political

In contrast to the poems in the first group, which highlight the conflict and violence between the descendants of Sarah and Hagar, the poems in the next group have a more optimistic tone, all expressing, in one way or another, the poets’ empathy for Hagar. The poems by Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb and Lally Alexander all play on the theme of overcoming the political and nationalist conflict through empathy. Treating Hagar or Ishmael as individuals deserving of empathy, they creatively reinterpret the biblical narrative in an attempt to repair the relationship between its female protagonists or their present-day descendants. Kaufman’s poem projects the biblical story into the present day and gives it a new conclusion, in which Hagar is not merely a victim but an empowered individual. In Gottlieb’s, Sarah expresses her contrition, turning to Hagar and addressing her as her sister. In all three, the treatment of Hagar and her descendants is founded on the solidarity of Sarah and Hagar as women and mothers.

American-Israeli poet Shirley Kaufman (1923–2016) was born and raised in the United States and immigrated to Israel in 1973. Her poetry, in English, expresses her self-consciousness as a woman and her strong connections to her family and her Jewish identity. Kaufman wrote a series of poems about biblical women, including not only Sarah and Hagar, but also Rebecca, Rachel, Leah,

Michal, Abishag, Yael, Moses' wife and Joab's wife, describing their inner lives and trials and often setting these characters in a modern Israeli setting. As an immigrant, she often expressed feelings of uprootedness and ambivalence about place, culture, language and identity. She was troubled as well by the political and security situation in Israel, as expressed in the poem "Déjà Vu," first published in 1984.⁴⁰

Déjà Vu

by Shirley Kaufman

Whatever they wanted for their sons
will be wanted forever, success,
the right wife, they should be
good to their mothers.

One day they meet at the rock
where Isaac was cut free
at the last minute. Sara stands
with her shoes off under the dome
showing the tourists with their Minoltas
around their necks the place
where Mohammed flew up to heaven.
Hagar is on her knees
In the women's section praying.

They bump into each other at the door,
the dark still heavy on their backs
like the future always coming after them.
Sara wants to find out what happened
to Ishmael but is afraid to ask.
Hagar's lips make a crooked seam
over her accusations.

They know that the world is flat,
and if they move to the edge
they're sure to fall over. They know
they can only follow their own feet
the way they came.
Jet planes fly over their heads
as they walk out of each other's lives
like the last time, silent, not mentioning
the angels of god and the bright

miracles of birth and water. Not telling
that the boys are gone.

The air ticks slowly. It's August
and the heat is sick of itself
waiting all summer for rain.
Sarah is in her cool villa.

She keeps her eyes on the pot
so it won't boil over.
She brings the food to the table
where he's already seated
reading the afternoon paper
or listening to the news,
the common corruptions they don't
even speak about now.
Guess who I met she says talking
across the desert.

Hagar shops in the market.
There's a run on chickens, the grapes
are finished and the plums are soft.
She fills her bag with warm bread
fresh from the oven thinking
there's nothing to forgive,
I got what I wanted from the old man.
The flight in the wilderness
is a morning stroll.
She buys a kilo of ripe figs. She
climbs the dusty path home.

Kaufman transports both biblical women, Sarah and Hagar, into modern Israeli reality: Sarah (or Sara) is an Israeli tour guide, Hagar an Arab woman praying in the Dome of the Rock—in Jewish tradition, the site of the binding of Isaac; for Muslims, the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven, making it a locus of political and religious tension between Sarah's descendants, the Jews, and Hagar's, the (mostly Muslim) Arabs. Their motherly solidarity is expressed in their common hopes for their sons. In a dramatic coincidence, their paths cross, generating a sense of remembered trauma for both women, as Sarah stands in the place where her son was bound and nearly slaughtered by Abraham, and Hagar recalls her banishment at the hands of Abraham and Sarah.

It appears that Sarah wants to approach Hagar and reconcile with her. She is curious to know what became of Ishmael but is afraid to ask Hagar, whose

“lips make a crooked seam / over her accusations.” The reader’s expectation of a dramatic reconciliation is not realized, and Sarah and Hagar “walk out of each other’s lives,” each returning to her comfortable daily routine: Sarah goes back to her “cool villa” to cook dinner for her husband, and Hagar “shops in the market.” The poem concludes with Hagar’s surprising thought (“The flight in the wilderness / is a morning stroll”), ironically relating to the conflict in the biblical past. Retrospectively, Hagar is not merely a victim and does not regard her banishment as having been so terrible, and so “there’s nothing to forgive.” Sarah’s desire for reconciliation from her socially superior position can be read as patronizing. Hagar has her own narrative that is not dependent upon or even interested in Sarah’s perspective.⁴¹

Lynn Gottlieb (b. 1949) is an American rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement. Her poems express her feminist worldview as well as her political views about the Jewish–Arab conflict. “Uchti,” written in English, symbolically highlights the Arabic expression *uchti*—my sister.⁴²

Uchti

by Lynn Gottlieb

Uchti,
I am pained I did not call you
By the name your mother gave you.
I cast you aside,
Cursed you with my barrenness and rage,
Called you “stranger” / Ha-ger,
As if it were a sin to be from another place.

Uchti
They used me to steal your womb,
Claim your child,
As if I owned your body and your labor.
I, whom they call “See Far Woman” / Sarah,
Could not witness my own blindness.
But you, my sister,
You beheld angels,
Made miracles in the desert,
Received divine blessings from a god,
Who stopped talking to me.
Only at the end,
When I witnessed my young son screaming under his father’s knife,
Only then

Did I realize our common suffering.
And I called out, "Avraham, Avraham, hold back your knife!"
My voice trumpeted into the silence
of my sin.

Forgive me, Uchti
For the sin of neglect
For the sin of abuse
For the sin of arrogance
Forgive me, Uchti,
For the sin of not knowing your name.

Gottlieb uses the biblical narrative to express her belief that our pain and suffering should inspire us to hear that of the other side. Sarah, in her view, is also a victim of the patriarchal society, which demanded that she "steal the womb" of her servant. She accuses that society of not valuing the life of a barren woman.⁴³ The repeated address to Hagar as *uchti* becomes something of a mantra, a gesture to her by Sarah, the narrator, in (what the poet imagines to be) Hagar's language, Arabic. Gottlieb proposes a new ending to the story, an alternative narrative to rectify the original. Years after Hagar's banishment, Sarah feels that the time has come for reconciliation. She confesses to Hagar that she objectified her and made her into a surrogate mother.

In the poem's central name motif, Gottlieb, drawing upon a midrash in *Genesis rabba* (53:14), takes the name "Hagar" to mean "the stranger."⁴⁴ However, in contrast to the midrashic tradition devaluing Hagar's experiences of angelic revelations, Sarah, announcing that her own name means "See Far Woman" (deriving it from the root *s.w.r.*, "see"), admits her blindness, recognizing that it was Hagar and not she who could see angels.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the binding of Isaac opens Sarah's eyes to her unjust banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. In Gottlieb's retelling, it is Sarah, not the angel of the biblical narrative, who calls out and restrains Abraham at the last moment. Finally, Sarah apologizes to Hagar for calling her "the stranger" and confesses to her "For the sin of not knowing your name."

Lally Alexander (b. 1959) is an art therapist, group dynamics facilitator and therapist for victims of sexual assault⁴⁶—a professional background that presumably plays a role in her identification with Hagar. Hagar's inferior status as a maidservant tasked with carrying a baby for her mistress, and then as a single mother banished to the desert with her son, awakens the poet's empathy. Alexander's poetry, which engages in complex dialogues with biblical (and talmudic and midrashic) texts reveals her as reexamining women's place in the world, particularly the Jewish world. Her poem "Maidservant"⁴⁷ emphasizes the solidarity of women and mothers.

אמה

ללי אלכסנדר

באותו היום, קד אָני זוכרת,
היה מדבר באר שבע שקט ומתעתע.
הדברים היו הולכים וכלים,
הכלים הולכים ונשברים,
המישורים הגדולים
הולכים וסוגרים,
עליך.

ואני,
אינני מזהה את העקבות,
אינני מכירה את הדרך,
לא השלכתי ילד תחת שיח,
לא אמרתי אל-אֶרְאֶה.
אך עקול גבד הנשבר
וחמד וחם המדבר
סתר עקבך, נשכח,
נושק לעקבי.

Maidservant

by Lally Alexander

Through summer haze shimmered Beersheba—an illusive desert memory,
Of the wordless wilderness, witness mute and deceptive,
Of things that deplete,
Bereft, incomplete,
The endless plains,
Now constrain,
You.

And I
Flail blindly in search of a trace,
Of a footstep outlined within mine which to place,
I did not forsake my child under a bush,
Nor say “On his death Lord, let me not look.”
But the curve of your breaking back,
The warmth of the desert into yours has grown,
The forgotten crescent of your heel,
Caresses my own.

Translated into English by Jeremy Kuttner

Hagar is not mentioned by name but only by her description, “maidservant,” emphasizing her inferior status. The rhyming of *hanishbar* (breaking) with *hamidbar* (desert) in the second verse join Hagar’s aching body with the desert: The heat of the parched desert and that radiating from her body are one. The crescent, the symbol of Islam, is a metaphor for Hagar’s footprint; the narrator follows in her footsteps out of a female solidarity that crosses religious and national borders.

Violence and Eroticism

The third group of poems depicts the complex relationship between the two peoples living together in a relationship of both connection and conflict, violence and eroticism. In both poems, the love/hate relationship between the groups is modeled by the relationship between the characters in the biblical story.

Hava Pinhas-Cohen (1955–2022), a noted Jerusalem poet, lecturer and editor, was born in Israel to a family of immigrants from Bulgaria. The last line of her poem “Menahem my Beloved” ties it to the story of Sarah and Hagar by alluding to Sarah’s entreaty to Abraham: “perhaps I shall be built through her” (Gen 16:2).⁴⁸ The poem’s integration of Arabic and English words into the Hebrew text reflects a widespread style of communication between Jews and Arabs living side by side today in the land of Israel, but, as in Gottlieb’s poem, it also becomes a vehicle to express a call for reconciliation. The poem contains strong erotic overtones that bear upon nationalist issues in the present. Like many of Pinhas-Cohen’s poems, it addresses the Jewish–Arab conflict from the perspective of a woman and a mother. Hagar’s story becomes a means by which Pinhas-Cohen navigates the complexities of the relationships between Israeli Jews and their Arab neighbors, expressing her desire for a messianic redemption of peace based upon the love that Jews and Arabs share for the land and its fruits.

מנחם, אהובי

מאת חוה פנחס-כהן

בְּסִכַּת הַדְּרָכִים עַל כְּבִישׁ גּוֹלָנִי כְּרַמִּיאל
טַפַּח לְמִלּוֹן שְׂבָקִשְׁתִּי עַל פְּנֵיו וְקָרָא לוֹ: בְּלָדִי
וְלִתְּאֵנִים שְׁנָאֶסְפוּ אֶל הַסֵּל: בְּלָדִי
וְשָׁכְנָע אוֹתִי בְּמִתְקֵי שְׁפָתַי שְׁזָה הַבְּלָדִי
וְאֵין בְּלָתּוֹ, קִנְאֶת הָעוֹבְרִים עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ
לֹא עֲמַדְתִּי בַּפֶּתַי וְנִעַצְתִּי שָׁנִים בְּסִגְלֵי בְּשָׂרָה
שֶׁל תְּאֵנָה וּבְלִשׁוֹנִי אֶסְפְּתִי וְהִפְנַמְתִּי הָעֵדֶן הַמְתוֹק
אֶמַר לִי חִילוֹ תֵּאֲנִי הַבְּלָדִי
וְקָרָאתִי אֵלָיו וְאֵל הַמְכוֹנִיּוֹת עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ

בָּלָדִי bloody
בָּלָדִי bloody
גַּא, אַחִי, יָחוּל אוֹתֵנוּ הָאֲלֵהִים.
וְהוּא סֹדֵר אֶת הַמֶּלּוֹן הַבָּלָדִי וְהַתְּאֵנִים הַבָּלָדִי
וְהָעֲנָבִים הַבָּלָדִי בְּקָרְטוֹן
וְשָׁם בְּמוֹשָׁב הָאֲחוּרֵי שֶׁל הַמְּכֻנִית
אֶמְרָתִי לוֹ שׁוֹקְרָן אֶמַר לִי תִפְאֵדִי
קִנְחָתִי אֶת פִּי וְעִגְלָתִי עָגוּל עַל בִּטְנִי
וְאֶמְרָתִי לוֹ, אֵינִשְׁאֲלָהּ
אוֹלֵי אֲבָנָה מֵאֲלָה הַפְּרוֹת. וְנִסְעָתִי.

Menahem My Beloved

by Hava Pinhas-Cohen

At the roadside stand on the Golani-Carmiel highway
He tapped on the melon I asked for and called it: *baladi*
And the figs that had been gathered in the basket: *baladi*
Sweetly convincing me that this is the *baladi*
And none other, the object of jealous desire for all passersby
I could not withstand the temptation and I sank my teeth into the purple flesh
Of a fig, and with my tongue gathered and imbibed the edenic sweetness
He told me “Be sweet, be sweet [*hīlu*], my *baladi* fig.”
And I called out to him and to the cars on the way
bloody, *baladi*
bloody, *baladi*
Ho, my brother, may God sweeten [*yaḥul*] us.
He placed the *baladi* melon and the *baladi* figs
And the *baladi* grapes in a carton
And put them in the back seat of the car
I said to him: *shuqran* [thank you] and he said to me: *tfadali* [you’re welcome]
I wiped my mouth and rubbed a circle on my belly
And I said to him: *Inshallah* [God willing]
Perhaps I will be built from this fruit. And I drove off.

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

The poem describes a meeting in a commercial setting—a highway fruit stand belonging to an Arab. The dialogue is laden with symbolism: Tapping the side of a melon, the fruit seller describes it, in Arabic, as *baladi*, local or authentic; his fruit is “*baladi* and none other.” With “sweetness” he presents his wares, tempting her to buy. Her response, as she tastes the fruit, is laden with erotic overtones: “I could not withstand the temptation and I sank my teeth into the purple flesh of a fig”

“Be sweet, be sweet, my *baladi* fig,” proclaims the fruit seller in Arabic, calling to the narrator’s mind the English word *bloody*, a wordplay that focuses our attention on the combination of sweetness and blood that flashes through contacts between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land. As purple blood drips from the “flesh of a fig,” the poet calls the fruit seller “my brother” and blesses him in a combination of Hebrew and Arabic: “Ho, my brother, may God sweeten us.” The alliteration of *ahī*—my brother, in Hebrew, and *hīlu*—be sweet, in Arabic, calls to mind a different Hebrew word: *hīl*, fear or trembling. The picture thus evokes both brotherly solidarity and anxiety.

Reminding us of the fruit seller tapping the round melon at the beginning of the poem, the poet concludes by “wiping her mouth,” symbolizing the sexual act, and rubbing her belly, while alluding to Sarah’s hopes to be “built” through Hagar. The theme of a hoped-for pregnancy is brought out by the string of verbs in the first person: ‘*amarti* (I said), *kinaḥṭi* (I wiped[]), ‘*igalti* (I rubbed a circle), *nas’ati* (I drove off) and the phonic effect of their rhyming.

The poem “Menahem my Beloved” was published in a collection entitled *Messiah: Poems Told to Me by Menahem My Beloved*. “Menahem” is a traditional Jewish name of the messiah.⁴⁹ The poem’s title identifies the Arab fruit seller with the messiah, conjoining its erotic overtones with a transcendental theme. The Jewish poet’s hope “to be built” from the fruits of the Arab fruit seller is a religious aspiration for transcendental rectification, for redemption and peace.

There is also feminist rectification in the poem. In the biblical story, Hagar the Egyptian maidservant is treated as an object, “taken” by Abraham and serving Sarah as a surrogate mother. In the poem, by contrast, Abraham is absent, and the sexual encounter between Abraham and Hagar, initiated by Sarah, is between the poet, the descendant of Sarah, and the Arab fruit seller, the descendant of Hagar. The edenic sweetness that he offers her, *ha’eden hamatok*, symbolizes the forbidden fruit of Eden.

Poet, artist and educator Rivka Miriam was born in Jerusalem in 1952 to a family of Holocaust survivors. Like Pinhas-Cohen’s, her poetry displays both a strong connection to the Bible and midrashic sources and a daring eroticism that bears upon Jewish life and contemporary events in the national context, as may be seen in her poem “Were Israel and Egypt.”⁵⁰

הָהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְרַיִם
מֵאֵת רִבְקָה מִרְיָם

הָהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְרַיִם לְפִוְתוֹת זֶה בָּזוּ כְּשֶׁנִּי מִתְאַבְּקִים
אוֹ כְּאוֹהֲבִים שְׁחוּמְדִים זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְהֵם נְסוּגִים
וְדִבְקִים, נְסוּגִים וְדִבְקִים

כְּשִׂישְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵת לֹחֶשֶׁת בְּסַעְרָה, "הָגֵר, הָגֵר הַמִּצְרִית" —
 כְּשֶׁם שֶׁלַחשׁ אֲבָרְהָם אֵי-אֶז, נִכַח שֶׁפָּחְתוּ הַצְעִירָה
 —הָהָרָה
 וּמִצְרִים בְּחִשָּׂאֵי מְשִׁיבָה לָהּ, דּוֹבְרֵת עֲבָרִית
 גּוֹנַחַת "שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה" —
 כְּאִנְקָתוֹ הַמְקַטְעֶת שֶׁל פְּרָעָה בְּיָמִים רְחוּקִים
 כְּשִׁשׁוֹקֵק הַבֵּית בָּהּ, אֶת קוֹלָהּ חוֹמֵד, אֶת לִבּוֹ בְּשָׂרָה —
 הוּא, הַמִּנְגֵּד שְׁחֹר וְנִשְׁנָה
 כְּשֶׁהַשּׁוֹט רַק חוֹט מְקַשֵּׁר, כְּשֶׁפִּיתָם וְרַעַמְסֵס רַק אֶבֶן פֶּנֶה
 בְּגַעְגּוּעַ שְׂאִינָנו פּוֹסֵק, בְּגַעְגּוּעַ הַמִּטְלָטֵל, הַיּוֹרֵד וְנוֹסֵק
 שְׂאִין בּוֹ כְּסוֹת וְשִׂאֵר וְעוֹנָה.

Were Israel and Egypt

by Rivka Miriam

Were Israel and Egypt clinched one with the other like two wrestlers
 Or like lovers who desire one another, and they retreat
 And conjoin, retreat and conjoin.
 While Israel constantly whispers in a frenzy "Hagar, Hagar the Egyptian" –
 Just as Abraham whispered way back when to his young maidservant
 Who was pregnant –
 And Egypt secretly responds to her, speaking Hebrew
 moaning "Sarah, Sarah" –
 Like Pharaoh's broken cry in distant days
 When he looked at her, desirous, and covets her voice, the whiteness of her flesh
 Oh, "from afar," that repeated over and over
 When the whip is just a connecting strand, when Pitom and Raamses are just
 a cornerstone
 With unending longing, disconcerting longing, that sinks and soars
 That does not include garments, food or conjugal rights.

Translated into English by Joshua Amaru

The nations of Israel and Egypt are "clinched with one another," and whether that clinch is one of love or hatred is left unclear, as the back-and-forth movement of conjoining and retreating generates an ambivalent image of sexual desire and union, on the one hand, and violent physical struggle, on the other. Taking the relationship between Israel and Egypt as a consequence or a reflection of the relationship between their legendary ancestors, the poem connects the story of the Egyptian Hagar being "taken" into Abraham's household (Gen 16) with that of Sarah being "taken" by Pharaoh (Gen 12), a connection that already appears in midrashic literature.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai said: “Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw the miracles performed for Sarah, he took his daughter and gave her to her. He said: Better that she be a maidservant in this household rather than a mistress in a different household.” (Genesis *rabba* 45:1)⁵¹

The contemporary dialogue between Israel and Egypt resonates with dialogues imagined by the poet in the two biblical stories: between Abraham and Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant who became pregnant with his son, and between Pharaoh and Sarah, whom he “covets.” Abraham’s whispers are heard from Israel’s mouth, while Egypt, speaking Hebrew, sounds Pharaoh’s broken cry. These two morally complex stories become the paradigm for the ambivalent relationship between Israel and Egypt. The intense rhyming in the first verse—*mit’abkim* (wrestlers), *’ohavim* (lovers), *homedim* (desire), *nesogim* (retreat), *devekim* (conjoin)—emphasizes the ambivalence of the lovers/enemies, while the rhyming in the second verse—*se’arah* (frenzy), *tze’irah* (young), *heharah* (pregnant), *Sarah* (Sarah), *besarah* (her flesh)—emphasizes their mutual erotic attraction.

The “connecting strand” between Israel and Egypt is the whip, representing the Egyptians’ abuse of their Israelite slaves. Alongside the whip, however, there is attraction, “disconcerting longing that sinks and soars.” “Pitom and Raamses,” the cities that Israel built in Egypt (Ex 1:11) are “just a cornerstone,” the foundation of a building that is incomplete. The relationship between Israel and Egypt does not include “garments, food or conjugal rights,” the basic obligations of a husband to his wife. The relationship between the two nations is compared to that of two people who are unwilling to commit to one another and build a substantial connection. Instead, they fluctuate between sexual attraction and abuse.

Conclusion

The poems about Hagar discussed in this article can be regarded as a kind of modern feminist midrash. The approaches of these female poets to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and between their descendants over the generations stand in notable contrast to the mainstream midrashic tradition that justifies Abraham and Sarah and criticizes Hagar. Most of the modern poets criticize Sarah and express empathy for Hagar, who, to them, represents the weak, oppressed woman, the Other, standing in their poems for the Arabs, her descendants. The poems touch in different ways on the ethnic tensions between Jews and Arabs within Israel. They relate to the war that has extended for generations between the two ethnic groups, to how empathy for Hagar might change the modern political dynamic, or to the complex erotic-violent dynamic that has emerged between the descendants of the two women.

Some of the poems seek to rectify the biblical narrative. They describe Sarah and Hagar or their descendants reconciling, their proposed “happy ending” to the biblical story expressing their wish for a happy ending in the present. The imagined reconciliation often involves transforming Hagar from a foreign woman into one whose language and culture are made accessible to the reader. Gesturing toward Hagar and her descendants, Gottlieb calls Hagar “Uchti” (my sister), in Arabic; Pinhas-Cohen includes Arabic words—*shukran* (thank you), *ifadali* (you’re welcome), *inshallah* (God willing), *baladi* (local, authentic)—in her poem; and Rivka Miriam has Egypt speaking Hebrew. Other poems invoke symbols or places associated with Islam, such as the crescent, in the poems by Sasonkin and Alexander, or the Dome of the Rock, in Kaufman’s poem. All of these choices have political significance.

Two themes stand out, and both already appear in the biblical story: the conflict between the two women, Sarah and Hagar, and motherhood, which lies at the heart of it.⁵² For the poets, the motherhood motif is a key to the roots of the conflict: In Ravikovitch’s poem, Sarah banishes Hagar and Ishmael because she is anxious about her own son’s fate after her death; Sasonkin expresses empathy for Hagar as the ultimate mother figure, successfully protecting her son in the wilderness; in Gottlieb’s poem, Sarah apologetically admits that only the experience of her son’s near-sacrifice has led her, belatedly, to realize the injustice she had done to Hagar and Ishmael.

Concern about the tension between the two peoples, expressed through new female interpretations of the biblical texts, gave birth to these poems. Might these literary works, expressing a female perspective, change reality for the better and promote peace between the two peoples? Let me conclude with the words of Pinhas-Cohen’s narrator: “*Inshallah* [God willing] . . . / Perhaps I will be built from this fruit.”

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Notes:

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1. Modern male poets, including Aharon Amir, Aharon K. Bartini and Israel Eliraz, have also written about Hagar; see, e.g., Malka Shaked, *Lanetzah 'anagnek: Hamikra bashirah ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (I'll Play You Forever: The Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry; Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth–Sifrei Hemed, 2005), I: *Antologiyah* (Anthology), pp. 404–407. Aliza Shenhar discusses characteristics of the male voice in poems about Hagar in “Do to Her as You Like: The Exiled Maidservant,” in: eadem, *Ahuvot usnuot* (Love and Hate: Biblical Wives, Lovers, and Mistresses; Haifa: Pardes, 2011), pp. 17–56.
2. See Alicia S. Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 211–213; Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” in: eadem (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 243–266; and Tova Cohen, “Within the Culture and Outside It: On the Appropriation of the ‘Father Tongue’ as a Means of Intellectually Shaping the Female Self,” in: Ziva Shamir (ed.), *Sadan, II: Selected Chapters in the History of Hebrew Women's Poetry* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997), pp. 69–110.
3. The poems concerned mostly with feminist issues deserve their own treatment. See Chaya Shacham, “The Desert as a Metaphor: Aspects of Female Apprenticeship in Women's Poems on the Figure of Hagar,” in: eadem, *Nashim umasekhot* (Women and Masks; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), pp. 104–128. See also Wendy Zierler, “Suppressed Voices: Hagar as Poetic Foremother,” in: eadem, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), pp. 112–119. Bakinaz Khalifa Abdalla addresses the ethnic perspective in “Womanhood Supersedes Racism: Hagar, the Egyptian Surrogate Mother,” in eadem, “Reconstructing the Jewish Woman: Image Reversal of Female Biblical Characters in Modern Hebrew Women's Poetry” (M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, 2010), pp. 100–135.
4. Phyllis Tribble reads Sarah as a cruel mistress who takes the active role in Hagar's oppression. See eadem, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM Press, 1984), p. 16. Savina J. Teubal, in *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press–Ohio University Press, 1997) argues that the biblical story conceals an entirely different story about the women's relationship and social status. The allegedly jealous competitiveness described in Genesis covers up a much more complex institution of childless priest[ess]es and their social and economic rights and duties. See Esther Fuchs's review in *Women In Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2/2 (Spring 2001), at: <http://sites.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/journal/vol2n2/documents/teubal.pdf>. According to African American feminist Bible critic Renita J. Weems, Hagar's story expresses the need for women who are “abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished” for “a sister who will respond with mercy.” Eadem, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988). Anna Fisk claims: “Hagar—slave, surrogate and

- survivor—has been a paradigmatic figure in African American womanist theology. Sarah's treatment of her has also been read as representative of privileged white women's oppression of women of colour." Eadem, "Sisterhood in the Wilderness: Biblical Paradigms and Feminist Identity Politics in Readings of Hagar and Sarah," in A.K.M. Adam and Samuel Tongue (eds.), *Looking through a Glass Bible: Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 113–137, esp. p. 114.
5. Jonathan Grossman has argued that both Hagar narratives express ambivalence about her character. In the first, when she flees her mistress, the sympathy for her plight is stronger than the implied criticism of her actions, while in the story of her banishment there are strong overtones of disapproval for her behavior. See idem, "Hagar's Characterization in Genesis and the Explanation of Ishmael's Blessing," *Beit Mikra*, 63 (2018), pp. 249–286, esp. p. 256 (Hebrew).
 6. Yael Shemesh discusses the ways in which Hagar is empowered in the biblical narrative and draws attention to her courage and the biblical narrator's admiration for her. See Yael Shemesh, "Stories about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Genesis, Chapters 16 and 21) from a Gender Perspective," *Beit Mikra*, 63 (2018), pp. 287–319, esp. p. 303 (Hebrew). Shemesh examines the two biblical stories that relate to the triangle of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar from a gender perspective and questions Athaliah Brenner's claim that they express a masculine voice. Despite the tension and hostility between Sarah and Hagar, both stories, according to Shemesh, contain elements that empower Sarah and especially Hagar.
 7. Esther Fuchs argues that Genesis stories of rivalry between wives form part of a "literary strategy serving patriarchal ideology," especially in that the preferred wife is infertile, whereas the unfavored wife is able to bear children. Eadem, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in: Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 160. See also Yairah Amit, "And Why Were the Mothers Barren?" in: Ruth Ravitzky (ed.), *Kor'ot mibereshit: Women Read from the Beginning: Creative Women Write about the Book of Genesis* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1999), pp. 127–137.
 8. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all look to the figure of Abraham as "the founding father of an extended family of believers." See Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, "Unto the Thousandth Generation," in eadem (eds.), *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 1.
 9. The midrash subversively interprets the verb "took" in Gen. 16:2—"Sarai, Abram's wife took Hagar . . . and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife"—as indicating that Sarai convinced Hagar to marry Abraham: "'Sarai, Abram's wife took Hagar . . . '—took her with words. She said to her, 'happy are you that you are attached to a sacred body'" (Genesis *rabba*, *Lekh Lekha*, 45:3).
 10. The Hagar story is challenging to what Delores Williams calls "the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation," because God does not, in this case, help the African slave to escape; rather, she is told to return and submit to oppression. See Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 2.

11. Susan Niditch makes the insightful point that the narrator of Genesis “works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah.” Eadem, “Genesis,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 18.
12. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 10–11; James Adam Redfield, “Behind Auerbach’s ‘Background’: Five Ways to Read What Biblical Narratives Don’t Say,” *AJS Review*, 39/1 (Apr 2015), pp. 121–150; James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts*, 1/3 (1981), p. 219; Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Poetics Today*, 7/2 (1986), pp. 275–322.
13. See Jacob Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), p. xi.
14. See David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998).
15. See Wendy Zierler, “On Account of the Cushite Woman that Moses Took: Race and Gender in Modern Hebrew Poems About Numbers 12,” *Nashim*, 19 (2010), pp. 34–61.
16. Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
17. See, for example, Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (eds.), *Dirshuni: Israeli Women Writing Midrash* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2009).
18. D. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 6; D. Curzon, “Introduction,” in: idem (ed.), *Modern Poems on the Bible—An Anthology* (Philadelphia–Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), pp. 3–27; Malka Shaked, “The Figure of Moses in Modern Hebrew Poetry,” *AJS Review*, 28 (2004), pp. 157–172, esp. p. 158.
19. The feminist reader who pays close attention to what elements in a narrative are addressed cannot help but see that the female characters in the Hebrew Bible tend to remain obscure. See Leslie Cushing Stahlberg, “Introduction,” *Nashim*, 24: Feminist Receptions of Biblical Women (Spring 2013), pp. 5–10; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3.
20. For example, see Rashi on Gen. 21:17, s.v. *ba’asher hu sham*. For further examples see the *piyyut* of Yehuda Halevi (1075–1141), *Yerushalayim lemogayikh*: “He would cry—and the son of the maidservant / the Egyptian opposite him is laughing,” in: Hayyim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1950), I, Part 2, p. 420; and the *piyyut* of R. Yisra’el Najara (1555–1628), *Yeruham Yatom—’aviv hai*: “The mistress’s son sits below / and the maidservant’s son rules over him,” at: <https://benyehuda.org/read/15074>.
21. Notably, medieval Jewish biblical exegetes Nachmanides and R. David Kimḥi, in their commentaries to Gen. 21:10, criticize Sarah’s behavior. Nachmanides sees Sarah’s banishment of Hagar as a sin and the actions of Ishmael’s descendants as a punishment visited upon her descendants.
22. Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible throughout the generations has generally taken a negative attitude toward Hagar. For example, on the verse “she went and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba” (Gen. 21:14), Rashi comments: “she went back to the

- idolatry of her father.” Nineteenth-century commentator R. S.R. Hirsch, commenting on verse 15, sees in her behavior a lack of motherly devotion, which he attributes to her origins: “All of Hagar’s behavior is entirely characteristic of a child of Ham who had not undergone a process of refinement. An Israelite mother would not abandon her child.”
23. The midrash praises Sarah for hiding her face out of modesty, so that she did not see the angel, while it criticizes Hagar, who not only looked immodestly upon the face of the angel but bragged about it afterwards. According to Genesis *rabba* 45:7, angels were regular visitors in Abraham’s household, and its members, among them Hagar, developed the capacity to perceive them. By attributing Hagar’s ability to her residing in Abraham’s household, the midrash bolsters Abraham’s status at the expense of Hagar’s.
 24. Dalia Ravikovitch, “Jealous Woman,” *Iton 77 Literary Magazine*, July 1977 (Hebrew); reprinted in Shaked, *Lanetzah ’anagnek* (above, note 1), I, pp. 413–414. On Ravikovitch see Zafira Lidovsky Cohen, “Dalia Ravikovitch” (updated by Giddon Ticotsky), in: *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, at: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ravikovitch-dalia>.
 25. The description of constant warfare between the brothers recalls Nachmanides’ interpretation (see above, note 21). However, in contrast to Nachmanides’ focus on Ishmael’s violence against Sarah’s descendants, Ravikovitch describes a state of mutual violence between the two sides.
 26. See Shaked, *Lanetzah ’anagnek* (above, note 1), II: ‘*Iyyun* (Commentary), p. 515, note 16. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Ravikovitch expressed her identification with the suffering of the Palestinian people in many of her poems. For example, see Dahlia Ravikovitch, *Complete Poems Until Now* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), pp. 249–252.
 27. Zerubavel Sasonkin, *Shekifuyot* (Reflections; Tel-Aviv, 1992), pp. 28–29.
 28. Alexander Penn, “Hagar,” *Roofless Nights* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985), pp. 139–142. Penn was a member of the Israeli Communist Party and editor of the literary supplement of its newspaper, *Kol ha’am*.
 29. Shacham, “Desert as Metaphor” (above, note 3), p. 122.
 30. *Ibid.*, pp. 122–123.
 31. See the page on Semel on the website of The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, at: https://www.ithl.org.il/page_13244 (accessed September 14, 2022).
 32. Nava Semel, “Sarah, Sarah,” *Mizmor laTanakh* (Ra’anana: Even Hoshen, 2015), p. 34. Semel’s poem “Blood Brothers” (*ibid.*, p. 17), on the theme of Cain’s murder of Abel, is another example of a poem based on a biblical narrative in which Semel expresses her frustration at the absence of peace in the world. Semel’s poem calls to mind the poem “Hagar and Ishmael” by German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945); see <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/801202/summary>.
 33. Hagar is also mentioned in another poem by Semel, “Stranger,” which focuses on Ruth the Moabite while relating to contemporary Israeli issues. Eadem, *Mizmor laTanakh* (above, note 32), p. 88.
 34. Bracha Serri, *Sacred Cow* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Breirot, 1990), pp. 10–11. The poems are not vocalized in the original.
 35. See Yael Hazan, “The Reality Is Greater than the Poems: War and Protest in the Poems of Bracha Serri,” in: H.D. Kaleb (ed.), *In Blessing Secret: The Poetry of Bracha Serri* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Carmel, 2013), pp. 230–262.

36. Sarah and Hagar also appear in another poem by Serri; see eadem, *Bat yayin* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ha'or Haganuz, 2007), pp. 72–73.
37. See Hazan, “The Reality” (above, note 35), p. 252.
38. A number of Serri’s poems invert the status of Jews and gentiles: The Jews are gentiles, because they are oppressors, while the Arabs are “Jews,” because they are downtrodden. Serri treats Jewishness not as a religious or ethnic category but rather, humanistically, as a means of pointing to power differences between groups.
39. See Yoḥai Openheimer, “Ani palit ‘Aravi: Shira politit Mizrahit” (I am an Arab refugee: Mizrahi political poetry), in: Assaf Meydani and Nadir Tsur (eds.), *A Voice Calls with Vigor: Politics and Poetry in Israel* (Hebrew; Herzliya: Israel Political Science Association, 2012), pp. 85–107.
40. Shirley Kaufman, “Déjà Vu,” in: Miriyam Glazer, *Dreaming the Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women Writers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 365–366; first published in eadem, *Claims* (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1984). On Kaufman see Lois Miller Bar-Yaacov, “Shirley Kaufman,” in: *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, at: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kaufman-shirley> (accessed September 14, 2022).
41. Anat Kopolowitz-Breier understands this ending differently, reading Hagar’s description of her flight into the wilderness as a “morning stroll” as an expression of how, from her perspective, the present is much worse than the past; see eadem, “Déjà Vu: Shirley Kaufman’s Poetry on Biblical Women,” *Religions*, 10/9 (2019), 493, at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090493>.
42. Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 89. On Gottlieb see “Lynn Gottlieb,” on the Jewish Virtual Library website, at: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lynn-gottlieb>. For her views on Israel/Palestine, see eadem, “Nonviolence, BDS, and the Dream of Beloved Community in Palestine/Israel,” *Tikkun*, 30/4 (2015), pp. 23–25, at: <https://doi.org/10.1215/08879982-3328733> (accessed September 14, 2022).
43. See Amit, “And Why Were the Mothers Barren?,” (above, note 7), pp. 127–128.
44. See also R. Hayyim David Azulay’s commentary *Penei David* on Gen. 16:2. For more on the meaning of the name Hagar, see Chana Safrai, “The Figure of Hagar in Classical Rabbinic Literature,” in: Ravitzky (ed.), *Kor’ot mibereshit* (above, note 7), p. 165 (Hebrew).
45. See above, note 23.
46. See her Hebrew page on the Betipulnet website, at: <https://www.betipulnet.co.il/profile/חלל> (accessed September 14, 2022).
47. Lally Alexander, *Stones* (Hebrew; Haifa: Pardes, 2018), p. 33.
48. Hava Pinhas-Cohen, *Mashiah* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003), p. 25. On Pinhas-Cohen, who passed away as this article was going to press, see her website, at: <https://havapinhascohen.co.il/en/home/> (accessed September 14, 2022). She also refers to Hagar in her poem “Signs” (*Simanim*), in: eadem, *Mostly Color* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), pp. 56–57.
49. See BT *Sanhedrin* 98b: “Some say, Menahem son of Hezekiah is his name, as it is said: For Menahem, restorer of my soul, is far from me.” *Menahem* means “consoler,” and it is the messiah’s name because he will console Israel and bring an end to the Exile.

50. Rivka Miriam, *Moshe: Poems* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2011), p. 28. On Rivka Miriam see the page on her on the Poetry International website, at: https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-25000_Miriam (accessed September 14, 2022).
51. Also in *Pirkei deRabbi Eli'ezer* 30.
52. In poems about Hagar that focus on explicitly feminist issues, rather than on the national/ethnic issue, these two themes—motherhood and the Sarah/Hagar conflict—are notably absent. Chaya Shacham points out that women poets who discern “processes of feminine initiation” in poems about Hagar tend to distance themselves from the stereotypical image of woman as mother, while the struggle between the two women over a man bolsters his privileged status. See Shacham, “Desert as Metaphor” (above, note 3), p. 126.