



The God of Hagar

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There is a script for mothers of sick children.

There are imperatives: do everything. Seek a second opinion, and a third, and a fourth. Learn to sleep sitting up. Show up to doctors appointments prepared with a binder the size of a local phonebook. Ask every question, pursue every option.

And never, ever give up.

Mothers who give up are our collective societal horror. We need to know that we were once loved unconditionally, and a mother who leaves—even if only for a moment, even if only for a night of rest, even if only to look away from the chaos around her—makes us wonder if we ever really were.

And so mothers of sick children stay silent about the moments when they fail. When you are the mother of a sick child, there is no one to tell about the day you left the NICU too early because one more second of beeping machines and sudden alarms would have been too much, or the moment you looked away from your own child because the sight of your baby



hooked up to tubes was unbearable. When you are the mother of a sick child, you become afraid to admit those moments to anyone, even to yourself.

For those mothers, when our world offers nothing, the Torah offers the God of Hagar.

Hagar is unique among the mothers in Bereishit. She is, according to so many of our societal standards, a dubious mother at best. She does not long or pray for a child like other matriarchs. Her pregnancy is planned, but not by her. Her child was a dream to fulfill someone else's destiny, and the day that she is banished, the day that her son becomes, according to everyone's understanding, truly hers, may have been the worst day of her life.

Alone with her son, expelled from Avraham's house, Hagar wanders alone in the desert. When the water runs out Hagar places her son under a tree and walks away, because she can't bear to see her child die.

בראשית כא:טו-טז

...וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים: ¹⁶וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לֵה מִנְגֵד הָרְחֵק כְּמִטְחָוִי קִשְׁת כִּי אָמְרָה
אֶל־אֲרָאָה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְגֵד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ:

Bereishit 21:15-16

¹⁵...she placed the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶She went and sat a bowshot's distance away, because he said, "I will not see the child's death." She sat away, lifted her voice, and cried.

In a book of believers—men who follow God to unknown lands and offer their long-awaited children up for sacrifice, and women who pray for babies at any cost—Hagar is the first parent to despair.



In our world, we might expect Hagar to be met with frowns and whispers. In the world of the Torah, we might expect divine reproof. Reading the story for the first time, we have every reason to expect this moment of weakness to be met with anger and disappointment by the God who issued Hagar promises that she no longer believes.

Instead, God offers compassion:

בראשית כא:יז

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מִלֶּאךָ אֱלֹקִים אֶל-הַגֵּר מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶה-לָּךְ הֲגֵר אַל-תִּירָאִי
כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם:

Bereishit 21:17

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

God guides Hagar back to her son, teaching her how to be with him. In this moment, before He is an issuer of promises, God is the gentle presence Who teaches a frightened mother how to hold her own child’s hand. For Hagar, God is the One Who understands human frailty and maternal fear. In this story, God becomes the One Who will sit at a child’s hospital bed when a mother needs to walk away, and Who will welcome her back without judgment.

The God of Hagar is the God of every mother who has flinched, every mother who has stolen an extra five minutes outside the hospital room. The God of Hagar is the God of failed believers.

The God of Hagar is the God of all of us who have violated the ultimate imperative: never give up.



Most of us, thank God, are not mothers of sick children. Most of us fail in our faith in quieter, more socially forgivable ways.

But we are all, in our own ways, even if only for short moments, failed believers.

In those moments, when our faith wavers—faith in ourselves, in the lives we’ve built, in the commitments we’ve made—the other paradigms we are given in Sefer Bereishit can seem inaccessible. We cannot always be Avraham, believing in impossible promises.

Some days we are Hagar, hopeless in a way the world around us cannot tolerate.

On those days, Hagar’s story becomes a promise: God’s love for us is not dependent on our strength. God is with us even when we flinch, even when we look away. God is with us even in the moments when we have given up. God is with us even when, if only for a moment, we have walked away from the people we love most.

And God will be there, when we are ready, to teach us how to walk back in and hold their hands again.

