

**To facilitate group discussion, Public Affairs Television, Inc. has created the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.**

**Below is an excerpt from the chapter "A Family Affair". In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide contains reflections on motherhood, among other themes.**

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

### THE STORY OF ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND HAGAR: GENESIS 16-17, 21

Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abraham, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abraham slept with Hagar and she conceived. (Genesis 16:1-4, New International Version).

Now read the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in your Bible. As you do, consider the following questions:

- Why doesn't the experience of being oppressed make it impossible for us to oppress others?
- Does the story tell us anything about how the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah might work out their futures--together and peacefully--as the twentieth century draws to a close?

### SARAH AND HAGAR

by Tikva Frymer-Kensky

In her essay, Professor Tikva Frymer-Kensky focuses primarily on the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. Their story, Frymer-Kensky says, reminds us that a history of oppression is no guarantee that we will not become oppressors ourselves and that the destiny of one nation is always intimately bound up with the destiny of others.

The Sarah and Hagar story stands at the center of the Abraham-Sarah cycle, between the two covenants of Genesis 15 and 17 and midway between the "Lech lecha" ("Go!") of the call to Abraham (Genesis 12) and the "Lech lecha" ("Go!") of the call to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22).

The story revolves around the relationship of two women dependent on the will of one man, the head of the household. Powerlessness does not unite the powerless: It pits them against each other. Sarah and Hagar are rivals, and Sarah has all the advantages. She is the full, free wife; Hagar is a slave. When Sarah does not treat Hagar well, traditional readings find fault with Hagar and contemporary readers condemn Sarah for showing neither compassion nor solidarity.

The story begins as Sarah, who has not given birth, offers her Egyptian slave Hagar as her surrogate. Ancient Near Eastern texts from Assyrian Anatolia (1900 B.C.E.); from Nuzi in Syria (1600 B.C.E.); from Southern Babylonia (500 B.C.E.); and from Babylon (1900 B.C.E.) portray the same arrangement. As the laws of King Hammurabi of Babylon show, the wife's gift of a slave as her surrogate forestalls the husband's taking a second wife.

Neither Sarah nor Abraham nor the ancient texts obtain the slave's consent: Using another person's body as a surrogate for one's own is part of the fabric of slavery. The womb, like the muscles, could be utilized for the good of the master. So Sarah proposes to be "built-up" through the action of Hagar's womb; Abraham agrees and Hagar must comply.

But the plan goes awry. Hagar, who is supposed to be a neutral body, reacts: "her mistress is lessened in her eyes." This "womb with legs" is a person with her own viewpoint. She knows that she has something Sarah doesn't have--fertility--and she no longer considers Sarah's status exalted. Sarah's sharp indictment of Abraham--"My wrong is all on you . . . God will judge between you and me"--is, in a way, what feminists call a "click moment." She realizes that she has lost her status and can do nothing because her husband has authority over both of them. Abraham understands the power issue and restores her authority: "Your slave girl is in your hands." Neither Abraham nor Sarah ever calls Hagar by name--her personhood gets in the way of their plan.

Sarah wants to reassert her dominance, and as her last act in the story, she "oppresses" Hagar, she "degrades" her. The story never explains how she oppresses a slave, who, by definition, is oppressed. She may simply have ignored her pregnancy and treated her like an ordinary slave: Asking a pregnant slave concubine to draw water from the well would be oppression and degradation.

Once again Hagar reacts. Not wanting to be under Sarah's authority, she runs away. The story goes with her to the wilderness, the same wilderness where Elijah meets an angel. An angel addresses Hagar by name--"Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?"--and she simply answers, "I am running away from Sarah." The reader feels the pathos of the oppressed slave, but the angel says: "Go back to your mistress and continue to be oppressed under her hand." An informed biblical reader, ancient or modern, may be bewildered. Ancient Near Eastern laws demand that a runaway slave be returned to its owner. But biblical law requires everyone to help a runaway slave escape its owner. Why should an angel place the laws of property over the freedom of persons?

Hagar's angel has a threefold message: "Return and be oppressed"; "I will multiply your seed so that it can't be counted"; "You are pregnant and you will give birth to a son and call his name Ishmael ('God hears') because God has heard your oppression, and your son will be a wild onager of a man." Hagar will have a glorious progeny who can never be subjugated if she voluntarily goes back to be exploited.

Some elements of the story ring bells. Hagar is an Egyptian slave. Egypt is the land where God had to rescue Sarah from the house of Pharaoh (Genesis 12); Sarah herself is a just-freed slave. Egypt is also the site of the future Exodus story that lies at the basis of Israel's self-understanding. The two words "slave" and "Egypt" together form the mantra of ancient Israel: "We were slaves in Egypt and God took us out of there." This mantra lies deep within Israel's consciousness. The story's identification of Hagar as an "Egyptian slave" is a direct allusion to the central myth of Israel's origins.

Another allusive detail: Sarah "degrades" Hagar in the same language used to describe the Egyptian treatment of their Israelite slaves in Israel's ancient creed: ". . . the Egyptians made us into slaves. And they oppressed us . . . and God heard our affliction and brought us out of there . . ." (Deuteronomy 26).

Another parallel: The angel demands that Hagar return and be oppressed; in the previous chapter, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and the people will enslave and oppress them, before God will redeem them. And another: God hears Hagar's affliction and Israel's. And another: God promises both Abraham and Hagar multiple progeny.

The story of Hagar is the story of Israel, and their close correspondence continues. After the birth of Isaac, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. They are not sold; they are freed. They leave Abraham's household as emancipated slaves and wander thirsty in the desert until, miraculously, God gives them water and pronounces the great future of Ishmael. The emancipated Israelite slaves also wandered thirsty till God brought water to the desert (Exodus 15-18). In slavery and in freedom, Hagar is Israel.

The story of Sarah and Hagar is not a story of the conflict between "us" and "other," but between "us" and "another us." Hagar is the archetype of Israel: She is us. Sarah is both archetype and mother of Israel: She is both us and the one from whom we are born. This story forces us to realize that the destiny of Israel is not utterly different from that of the people around it. Ishmael's God-given destiny of utter freedom may have looked very attractive to an often marginal and exploited Israel on the brink of destruction.

The story raises ethical questions. Why does God insist that we suffer before we are rewarded? Israel has to wait its turn until the "iniquity of the Amorites is complete" (Genesis 15), but why does Israel have to become degraded slaves? Abraham's descendants have repeated this scenario many times. The idea that

oppression is the path to redemption offers hope to those in the throes of calamity, but it is an unexplained aspect of God's behavior.

Sarah's behavior also disturbs us, for her experience as a slave does not make her more empathic to the slave in her home. It makes her want to assert her dominance so she won't lose it again. The story shows us how easily the oppressed can become oppressors.

We live in a world in which many peoples are experiencing their liberation. Once again the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah must work out their covenanted futures in relationship with each other. The issues raised by the Sarah-Hagar story play themselves out in our contemporary consciousness as we realize that a history of oppression does not guarantee that we cannot become oppressors and that the destiny of one nation is intricately intertwined with the destiny of others. The nuanced, nontriumphalist understanding of reality in Genesis can empower our own struggles.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky is Professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School and the author of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Transformation of Pagan Myth* and *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*.

#### ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

##### 1) BLESSED EVENTS

As a group, write Abraham and Sarah's birth announcement for Ishmael. Then write their birth announcement for Isaac.

##### 2) EULOGIZING ABRAHAM

The Bible tells us that Ishmael and Isaac, together, buried their father, Abraham (Genesis 25:9). Divide the group and have one half write Ishmael's eulogy for Abraham and the other half write Isaac's eulogy. Then choose two people to deliver them to the whole group. Ask: How are the eulogies similar? How are they different? Which son had the better relationship with his father? Which son do you identify with?

**From the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.**