

Parashat Vayera
A Well in the Desert

by David Katzenelson on Friday November 14, 2008

16 Cheshvan 5769

Genesis 18:1 - 22:24

They are at it again. Sarah and Hagar simply can't stop fighting. Last week, in *parashat Lech Lecha* Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that she ran away (Genesis 16:6). Hagar came back after a while. This week, in Genesis chapter 21, we find out that the situation is no better. This time, Hagar gets no warning. There is no harsh treatment, no time to run away. Possibly Sarah has learned a little lesson: as long as Abraham will accept Hagar back, there is little point driving her away.

This time Sarah takes matters up directly with Abraham. G-d takes Sarah's side. The next morning Abraham throws Hagar and Ishmael (her son via Abraham), out into the desert. The only mercy he shows is to provide "some bread and a skin of water."

Do not be fooled. It may seem that Abraham had no choice after Sarah and G-d ganged up on him, but this is the man who haggled with G-d about the lives of the people of Sodom. This time he didn't even try to argue. Abraham did not like doing this "for it concerned a son of his" (Genesis 21:11, JPS translation), but did he care about the women who, for at least one night, served as his sexual partner?

I try to imagine what Hagar must have been thinking as she wandered through the desert of *Be'er Sheva*.

"Sarah, that b%&**! This must be her doing! First she forced me into sleeping with her husband, than she gets angry when I get pregnant! So self-centered and petty! And what kind of man is it who can't put her in her place! Prefers to throw his first born son into the desert than to tell his wife to shut up! Pity the great nation that they bring into the world... And that angel, the one I met when I tried to run away, the fool told me to go back to them!"

Hagar may think whatever she wants, but there are a few things she just can't take away from Sarah. Sarah is Abraham's first and only wife. Hagar, the mother of his first born, could never be more than a concubine and maid. Sarah has been chosen by G-d to be the first mother of the Jewish People. Like it or not, Sarah is the world's first kosher housewife.

After some hours in the desert, Hagar is forced to think of something else. She has run out of bread and water. With the desert sun hitting harshly, the anger becomes irrelevant. Justice is also irrelevant. This is about survival and Hagar has little hope. She puts her son in the shade of a bush and sits far away. Here she can cry without having to see the boy die. Maybe someone, human or G-d, will hear.

As the text tells us, no one heard Hagar's tearful prayer. But Ishmael was heard. G-d was listening. G-d's angel calms Hagar down and G-d opens her eyes. There it is, in front of her eyes, a well of flowing water. Enough water for both of them to drink and to sustain them over time as they continue their journey. A well in the middle of the desert, not beside the road to *Shur*, or any other road. A well without a name. Hagar's own personal well, the source of her own strength and survival, the source and sustenance of her own great nation.

Many modern day GLBT Jews have been treated like Hagar. Many of us have wanted to live within a Jewish community that was just perfect, where Shabbat and holidays were celebrated exactly the way our parents said they should be. No one could doubt that the rabbi really was a rabbi. No one could claim that some of the members were not real Jews. We didn't want to bother anyone. We volunteered to help out when the community needed it and kept our lifestyle to ourselves. The help and membership fees were accepted with thanks. Some of us even could get an *aliya* every so often.

But there was always someone who had a comment. Someone didn't like the *faigle* coming over for the Seder. Someone didn't want the big butch of a girl over at *Shabbes*. What would the neighbors think? Might my son or daughter be influenced by them? The rabbi, who could any day inspire *t'shuva*, may have seen our loneliness but he never gave a sermon about this. He believed he was responsible for every Jew in town, but he had to play it safe.

So we got enough inspiration and spiritual energy to get by. And on difficult days that inspiration and energy went dry. But do we really need this? Do we need to bow down to the gossip and pettiness of others? Do we need to pay attention to what some people say or think? Do we need to settle for a community where we can help out, pay fees but cannot be wed? Do we want to be concubine and maid, or wife?

There is another source of inspiration and spiritual energy. Our own source may be located in a place someone may consider to be the middle of the desert, but it can sustain growth also when times are difficult. Some of us have seen it and drink of its water, while others are still unaware. All of us need to open our eyes, find it and drink of the good, life sustaining water. We can use this water to find our own way, together with those who care for us the way we are.



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It might take G-d to open our eyes so that we may see this source, but that is no more divine intervention than is readily available in everyday life.



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