

Hagar

D'var Torah by Geraldine Brooks

One day this November, on a date that will be determined by when it is first possible to discern the first crescent of the new moon, two and a half million people will be reenacting the experience of Hagar, the woman we read about today.

They will be in the Arabian desert, running between the hills of Safa and Marwa, reenacting Hagar's desperate search for water for her dying son. This reenactment is a rite in the Hajj, the pilgrimage that all able Muslims are commanded to make at least once in their lives. In the Torah, we read that Hagar gave up hope, and withdrew from her suffering boy, unable to bear witness to his death. It is a harrowing scene, relieved when God takes pity, opens Hagar's eyes, and allows her to find the spring she has missed in her desperation. The Muslim version, as given in the Koran, is that Ishmael in his agony strikes the ground with his heel, and a spring of water gushes forth. In the Hebrew bible, Hagar's story ends here. Muslim tradition continues it. The miracle spring becomes the well of Zamzam. Hagar, entrepreneurially, becomes its proprietress, and around it, a settlement forms. Abraham returns to visit his second family, and with his firstborn son, builds a small temple to the one God. That temple today is the Kaaba, the holiest place in Islam, and the settlement that Hagar founded is the city of Mecca.

When I was a news correspondent in the Mideast in the late 80s and early 90s, the question of what my religion was would

sometimes come up. When the person asking was from Hamas or Hezbollah or Islamic Jihad, it could feel like a delicate moment.

But I always answered. And I learned that the reaction would invariably be some variation on “Welcome, cousin.” Then the conversation or interview would suddenly dive to a deeper level of exchange, because my interlocutor now understood that I too had some skin in the game.

Later, as I delved into the study of Islamic women, Hagar, the Muslim matriarch, came to fascinate me. I compared what the Koran and the Torah had to say about her, and found the accounts accord in all significant respects. In both texts, the story is a gritty, heartbreaking, all too human one, full of familiar emotions of jealousy and rivalry and shifting status.

In the Torah, the very first thing we learn about Hagar is that she is Egyptian. Sarah’s Egyptian slave. To me, that plain fact conjures some interesting backstory. The time we are reading about corresponds to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. So Hagar, from a sophisticated society with flourishing towns, elegant buildings, beautiful art and elaborate social structures somehow finds herself in service to Bronze Age nomads in a goat hair tent, part of a society a great deal more primitive than the one she was born into. We read that Sarah, in despair at her inability to conceive, chooses Hagar to be her surrogate, to bear the child that she and Abraham will raise as their own. Sarah must have seen great qualities in Hagar. It is unlikely that she would have chosen her for this intimate and crucial

role unless relations between them were good, maybe even loving.

Yet after the birth of Ishmael, everything sours. Hagar treats Sarah with contempt; Sarah, with Abraham's assent, retaliates – so very harshly that Hagar decides to take her chances as a runaway in the desert, pregnant and alone. An angel –an inner voice?—sends her back. She humbles herself, as so many women do, for the sake of her child. She puts his future before her own.

But when Sarah bears Isaac, she suddenly can't stand the sight of the older boy, until so recently being raised as her own son. Abraham, deferring to Sarah, sends Hagar and his eldest son away, to likely death in the desert. He does what he believes is necessary to ensure the future of the Hebrew people.

But God has pity. He keeps mother and son alive. And so the two Abrahamic families survive, and multiply, and pursue their interlocking destiny, painful and troubled at the outset, painful and troubled today.

God had pity. He gave Hagar and Ishmael the means to survive. He gave them a place. And he gave them a future. We read in the Torah that when Abraham died in Hebron, Isaac and Ishmael both were there. They stood together.

If Isaac and Ishmael could do it, after enmity, after insult, in bitterness, with blame on both sides, let's hope that with a

little pity, a little empathy, their descendents in Israel and
Palestinian also will find a way.