

Afflictions and Attitudes

The image we have of the Imahot are women of extreme piety, sensitivity, and kindness. It is therefore difficult to understand how Sara Imeinu 'afflicted' Hagar (*Bereisheet* 16;6) to such a degree that Hagar fled to the desert. How was it possible for Sara Imeinu to cause another person pain? If Sarah did indeed afflict Hagar, why did she feel it was necessary?

Chazal teach us that after Avraham Avinu took Hagar as a wife, she immediately conceived. She then became haughty and lorded herself over Sara Imeinu. She told the women who would come to visit that Sara Imeinu was not as righteous as she appeared. The biggest proof was that she,

Hagar, conceived right away and Sara could not. Rabbi Eliyahu Ki Tov in *Sefer Haparshiyot* notes that Sara Imeinu was afraid that people would be influenced by Hagar's behavior and follow suit. She was even more concerned that a child born to a mother who lacked such basic *hakarat hatov* would imbibe this middah and the world would not be able to handle the effects of such a nation. Hagar therefore needed to be put in her place, to be humbled and appreciate the kindness that surrounded her. If one is unable to be strict when needed, then his kindness is simply a weakness of character. Overcoming a natural inclination towards compassion and acting harshly when appropriate is the true test of a quality's genuine measure. To treat Hagar with strictness was truly a *nisayon* for Sara Imeinu. In a sense, the harshness of Sara Imeinu towards Hagar was even greater than giving Hagar to Avraham Avinu as a wife. Here Sara Imeinu passes the test; she controlled her emotions and acted against her nature to preserve Hashem's will in the world.

Rav Yitzchak Isaac Sher in *Leket Sichot*



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Mussar shares an additional insight into this episode. He sees Hagar's role as similar to Eliezer's in the house of Avraham Avinu. Eliezer was tasked with teaching the doctrine of his master to the masses. Hagar was not just a 'maid', she was the chief disciple of Sara Imeinu. She was a very spiritual woman, charged with teaching the words of Sara Imeinu to the women of her generation. We thus understand why she was chosen to marry Avraham Avinu and how she was worthy to see angels when she fled from their home. Understanding this can help us appreciate the essence of this 'affliction'. When Hagar married Avraham Avinu she felt that she no longer needed to be in a position of 'translator', she wanted to create her own teachings and her own ideas. She felt worthy to be in a position of 'teacher'. Yet with deep wisdom, Sara Imeinu insisted that Hagar remain in her former position. It is therefore no wonder that although Hagar had a hard time being downgraded, the angel told her to go back and accept this affliction for it was a necessary means to improve her character and fulfill her G-d given role. ■

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