

**So Sarai, Avram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant... and gave her to Avram... she conceived... her mistress was lowered in her esteem... and Sarai dealt harshly with her, so she fled from her... and an angel of Hashem said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination." (16:3,4,6,9)**

The narrative concerning Sarah *Imeinu* and Avraham *Avinu* regarding Hagar, followed by Sarah's anger, Hagar's running away, and the angel's instruction that she return, even if it meant submitting to Sarah's domination, is confounding. Clearly, the profundity escapes the superficial reading of the story. Sarah has been recognized in our sacred tradition as a woman who represents the epitome of all good and noble virtues. To think that all this goodness dissipated when Hagar conceived and gave birth to Yishmael, especially when it was Sarah's idea that Avraham take her on as an additional wife, is unacceptable. Furthermore, if Sarah was indeed beside herself, why would the Heavenly angel instruct Hagar to return and face the music?

*Horav Aryeh Levin, zl*, explains this with an analogy to a classic *Rebbe* who dispatches his *chassid* to carry out an errand for him. Ostensibly, the *chassid* feels honored that the *Rebbe* chose him to perform this task – regardless of its meniality. Nothing is too difficult, if it is at the behest of, or for, his revered *Rebbe*. If, however, this same task would come at the request of an ordinary person, with whom he does not enjoy such a relationship, the response would probably be quite negative. He would take offense and bristle, "Am I your servant?" Furthermore, if he would be compelled to carry out this ordinary person's request he would kvetch and complain constantly, whereas if he were to do it for his *Rebbe*, he would be excited and exalt in every aspect of his performance. One's attitude depends on the mission, and upon whom it is that is asking him to perform the task.

This, explains the Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, gives meaning and lends rationale to the Torah's narrative. All along, until she conceived as Avraham's additional wife, Hagar regarded Sarah for what she was: a virtuous woman whose impeccable character traits were without peer. Thus, serving her in any capacity was an untold honor for which there was no substitute. Now, in her perceived state of equality, or even superiority, to Sarah (since she was now a mother, a status that still eluded Sarah), however, her attitude changed. Now she reverted to the pagan DNA that prevailed within her. She no longer regarded Sarah as reverential and virtuous, but rather as an ordinary person, a "boss lady" who did not deserve her respect. All of a sudden the honorable Sarah *Imeinu's* work load became cruel and harsh treatment, which she would not accept. It was drudgery for her to serve Sarah, because "who" was Sarah to lord over her? Unable to bear the cruelty, she fled to the wilderness – when, in fact, Sarah's demeanor toward Hagar had not altered one iota.

This is why the angel instructed her to return home. Nothing had changed other than Hagar's attitude: "Regardless of what has transpired, you must view Sarah as your mistress. She is the same noble, righteous, exalted Matriarch as she has been in the past." Except, Hagar's susceptible mind had rewritten the "past" in accord with a new narrative.

A Jew's positive attitude should be rooted in his *emunah*, faith, in Hashem. *Horav Mordechai, zl, m'Lechowitz*, teaches: "Without Hashem, one cannot cross the threshold of his house. With Hashem, however, one can split the sea." Faith in Hashem means much more than mere lip service. It should also not be our "between a rock and a hard place, last minute ditch attempt," when we see that the gates are closing and all our "other" endeavors have proven fruitless. Believing in Hashem should be a Jew's first address, the anchor upon which he relies, the "go to" to Whom he knows he can always turn.

*Reb Lipa* was the wealthiest man in a small town in Belarus. In addition to his enormous wealth, *Reb Lipa* possessed exceptional *middos tovos*, refined character traits. *Reb Lipa* shared his wealth with those less fortunate than himself. One day, as he was taking a walk through town, he tore one of his shoes. He immediately stopped at Chaim's shoe repair to have his shoe fixed. Chaim dropped whatever he was doing in order to pay specific attention to the needs of *Reb Lipa*. When he was done, he handed the shoe to *Reb Lipa*, who promptly paid him for his work. Upon leaving the shop, *Reb Lipa* noticed that the shoe was sewn in a crooked manner. Upon further perusal, he saw that the repair was a botched up job, very unprofessional for a man with Chaim's expertise. When *Reb Lipa* complained about the repair, Chaim broke down in bitter weeping, "You do not understand. My work is a reflection of my bitterness. I have eight daughters at home, whom I must marry off. I am stretched financially to the point that days pass and there is no food in the house to sustain my family. Do you understand that when one goes to work with such hardship on his mind, his hard work will be far from appealing?"

*Reb Lipa* listened to Chaim's tale of woe and said that he wanted to help. "Come with me," he said, "I will help you." He brought him to his mansion where he took him to the vault where he kept his money. He took a gold brick, handed it to the shoemaker, and said, "This is for your immediate and all future expenses. Whenever you Hagar regarded Sarah for what she was: a virtuous woman whose impeccable character traits were without peer. Thus, serving her in any capacity was an untold honor for which there was no substitute. Now, in her perceived state of equality, or even superiority, to Sarah (since she was now a mother, a status that still eluded Sarah), however, her attitude changed. Now she reverted to the pagan DNA that prevailed within her. She no longer regarded Sarah as reverential and virtuous, but rather as an ordinary person, a "boss lady" who did not deserve her respect. All of a sudden the honorable Sarah *Imeinu's* work load became cruel and harsh treatment, which she would not accept. It was drudgery for her to serve Sarah, because "who" was Sarah to lord over her? Unable to bear the cruelty, she fled to the wilderness – when, in fact, Sarah's demeanor toward Hagar had not altered one iota.

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Understandably, Chaim was overjoyed. His newly found mirthful attitude showed in the manner that he worked and in the products that he produced. Soon, his exceptional skills became the talk of the town and the whole area. He began producing shoes of such excellent quality that people came from far and wide to purchase his wares. Chaim was no longer a *nebach*, unfortunate man. He had worked his way up the economical ladder, married off his daughters, and was now living quite comfortably.

One day, Chaim took a stroll in the market, when he chanced upon a dejected, clearly impoverished beggar. The man was crying bitterly. “How can I help you, my friend?” Chaim asked. The poor man related his tale of broken promises from would be benefactors, failed business

opportunities, which had left him destitute and bitter. He had nothing with which to support his family. Chaim said to him, "Come with me. Let me help you." Chaim figured that he could share his good fortune with someone in need, and this man was definitely in need: "Here is a gold brick which I received years ago from someone. It helped me; now it will help you." The man was profoundly grateful, took the brick and went home. As soon as he arrived home, he took a hammer and struck the brick with it. His intention was to immediately split up the gold. How shocked he was to discover that it was actually a brick of steel with a thin gold covering. Angry, he returned to Chaim's house to complain. After all, he had been cheated!

Chaim looked at the brick, listened intently to the poor man's harangue, thought for a moment, and then spoke up: "Interestingly, years ago, I received this same brick from a kind-hearted benefactor. I believed in it; I neither asked questions, nor did I attempt to investigate whether it was truly gold or simply gold overlay. I returned to my profession with added hope and excitement, worked hard, and earned an honest and successful living. During this entire time, I never once doubted the value of the brick. To one who has faith, the brick is gold; to one who does not believe, nothing will make him happy." The lesson for us is obvious and requires no added commentary.