Political Readings of the Hagar Narratives in Poems by Jewish Women[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

# Abstract

The story of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant whom she gave to her husband Abraham as a concubine, appears in two chapters of the book of Genesis (Gen 16 and 20). This article discusses poems written by modern Jewish women poets about Hagar that use the Hagar narrative to comment on the conflict between the Jews, the descendants of Sarah, and the Arabs, the descendants of Hagar. Two themes are prominent: The conflict between Sarah and Hagar and their common motherhood. Through these themes, which are both manifest in the biblical story, these poets give expression to their own worldviews regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Some of the poems discussed here conceive of the Hagar narrative as the root of the unending conflict between Arabs and Jews. They are interested in rectifying the historical injustice that began, the poet claims, when Sarah banished her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to the wilderness with her son Ishmael

. Other poems offer a gentler understanding of Hagar, seeking to understand and empathize with her through a common femininity/maternity and in this way to overcome the political implications of the story. These themes stand in contrast to the midrashic tradition that sees Ishmael as a symbol of the enemy and Hagar as the symbolic mother of the enemy. A third group of poems uses the Hagar story to reflect on the dynamic between Arabs and Jews that moves between violence and eroticism.

This article will discuss poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zerubavela Sasonkin, Nava Semel, Bracha Serri, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen and Rivka Miriam.

# Introduction

The story of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant whom she gave to her husband Abraham as a concubine, appears in two chapters of the book of Genesis (Gen 16 and 20). This article discusses poems written by modern Jewish women poets[[2]](#footnote-2) about Hagar that use the Hagar narrative to comment on the conflict between the Jews, the descendants of Sarah, and the Arabs, the descendants of Hagar.

The female perspective is conspicuous in these poems.[[3]](#footnote-3) Female poets writing about Hagar express Hagar’s silenced voice as well as their own, as disclosed by their art. These poets’ female voices seek to make use of the biblical character of Hagar in order to refashion their own identities, both as women and as members of their national/ethnic group.

Poems about Hagar relate to present-day concerns in a wide variety of ways. Two central themes can be discerned: There are poems whose main concerns are feminist or female themes while others are concerned mainly with ethnic or national issues, that is to say, the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although both themes are often present and it is sometimes difficult to separate them, one or the other generally plays a more dominant role in a poem.

In this article, only poems dealing with the national theme (directly or indirectly) were selected. I will not discuss poems where Hagar’s story serves as a psychological model of femininity without that being related to the tensions between the peoples.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The poems I discuss present the Israeli-Arab conflict from a variety of female Jewish perspectives; these perspectives are an important element in that conflict that is usually silenced. Most of the poems discussed are by native Israeli poets who wrote in Hebrew. Bracha Serri immigrated from Yemen to Israel at the age of ten and also wrote her poetry in Hebrew. Two of the poets (Shirley Kaufman and Lynn Gottlieb) immigrated to the land of Israel or lived there for a portion of their lives and wrote in English. In discussing these poems, the language in which they were written, and the cultural background of the poets are significant. Some of the poems discussed here were written in one language and integrate phrases from other languages (one English poem includes an Arabic phrase; a Hebrew poem includes phrases in English and Arabic). The choice to mix in a poem written in one language phrases from other languages has poetic, thematic and political significance.

The biblical character Hagar, serving as an archetype of the Other, provides an opportunity for innovative and fascinating literary-cultural discourse, both about female identity in the context of the feminist struggle and about Jewish-Israeli identity in the context of nationalist conflict. Hagar represents the Other not only vis-à-vis the patriarchal figure of Abraham but also in relation to Sarah, the “official” wife.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The biblical story of Hagar, whose banishment to the desert arouses our sympathy even while her disrespect for her mistress is liable to be regarded critically,[[6]](#footnote-6) has provided inspiration for many literary works. Hagar is reborn in modern poetry, and the poets emphasize certain aspects of her character, like her courage and independence,[[7]](#footnote-7) as revealed in her flight into the desert.[[8]](#footnote-8) The figure of Hagar shifts form constantly within the variegated weave of poems in different styles.

This article will discuss poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zerubavela Sasonkin, Nava Semel, Bracha Serri, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen, and Rivka Miriam. This study will discuss poems by famous poets alongside those written by lesser-known authors, granting equal status to all.

# The Biblical Narrative

The story of Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant, arises as a response to the barrenness of her mistress,[[9]](#footnote-9) who was destined to be the mother of the nation when her husband was promised that he would be “a great nation” (Gen 12:2).[[10]](#footnote-10) Because she was barren, Sarah advised Abraham: “Behold now, the Lord has kept me from bearing: Consort please with my maidservant; perhaps I will be built through her” (Gen 16:2). Sarah treated Hagar as an object[[11]](#footnote-11) that she gave to Abraham (Ibid. 16:3). Sarah describes Hagar as her maidservant, without mentioning her name, reflecting how Hagar was objectified by her; Hagar serves as a sort of surrogate mother for Sarah.

It appears that Sarah’s plan is successful; Abraham accepts her advice and Hagar conceives immediately. However, difficulties ensue when the pregnant Hagar is disrespectful toward her barren mistress: “her mistress was diminished in her eyes” (Gen 16:4). We are not told what she said or did that caused Sarah’s harsh response, in which she expresses her anger to Abraham (Gen. 16:5). In response to Sarah’s harsh words (“the wrong to me is on you”) Abraham says: “Behold your maidservant is in your hand, do with her as is good in your eyes” (ibid.). After Abraham has condoned her actions in advance, we read: “Sarai treated her harshly” (ibid.). As a result, the pregnant Hagar flees to the desert. An angel reveals himself to her at a spring and asks her where she is from and where she is going. Hagar answers: “I flee from my mistress Sarai” (Gen. 16:9). The angel instructs her to return to her mistress and “suffer under her hands” (ibid.)[[12]](#footnote-12) and promises that she will have many descendants. The angel addresses her a third time and refers specifically to the name that she will give her son, Ishmael (Gen. 16:11). She then acknowledges God’s revelation to her through the angel (Gen. 16:13).

The second Hagar narrative takes place approximately thirteen years later when Sarah becomes pregnant, and Isaac is born. After Abraham and Sarah celebrate Isaac’s weaning, the conflict between Sarah and Hagar is renewed, this time between the two mothers; Sarah sees Ishmael ‘laughing’ (Gen 21:9) and asks Abraham to banish “this maidservant and her son” from their home. Although Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s proposal, he accedes to it when God supports Sarah’s desire to banish Hagar and Ishmael (verses 12-13).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Once again Hagar wanders in the desert; this time until her water supply is exhausted. The difference between the two narratives lies in the fact that now the focus is on her son Ishmael whose life is threatened. In despair, Hagar casts him under a bush so as not to witness his death. She sits at a distance and raises her voice and cries. An angel of God once again appears to her and asks her: “What troubles you Hagar” (21:17)? The angel then reassures her: “fear not, for God has heard the lad’s voice where he is.” Her eyes are opened, and she sees a well and can give her son to drink. Hagar’s story concludes with her taking an Egyptian wife for her son (21:21).

**Literary Works as Modern Midrash**

The word ‘midrash’ is derived from the root verb *darash* (דָּרַשׁ‎), which means “seek, enquire, require.” ‘Midrash’ is used by scholars of Jewish studies to refer to a wide range of early rabbinical exegesis.[[14]](#footnote-14) In a more specific and limited sense, this term refers to a corpus of rabbinic works containing halakhic, exegetical, and aggadic material, usually based on an interpretation of the verses of the Hebrew Bible.

The midrashic imagination has undergone a revival and shown itself capable of exercising a powerful influence on a new type of contemporary Jewish writing.[[15]](#footnote-15) [Wilda Gafney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilda_Gafney) writes that midrashic readings “discern value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces…They reimagine dominant narratival readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Over the past few decades, conceiving of poetic and literary works that rework or reimagine episodes from the Bible as a form of modern midrash has become common.[[17]](#footnote-17) This conception of modern works as midrash has shed new light on how and for what purposes biblical stories were used in shaping modern Hebrew literature. In our generation, we have witnessed the creation of a new literary genre in the form of feminist biblical midrashim, written by contemporary feminist thinkers and researchers. They have created their own *midrashim* – retellings of biblical stories – in order to incorporate women’s viewpoints into the traditional texts.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Biblical narrative is characterized by brevity; its style is laconic, and much is left unsaid.[[19]](#footnote-19) Modern poetry that deals with biblical characters, like midrash, often fills the gaps in the biblical narratives, using them to give expression to the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the authors and retelling biblical plots to illustrate dilemmas of contemporary life.[[20]](#footnote-20) This characterization is an apt one also with regard to the poems about Hagar that this essay will discuss. Moreover, since, in these poems, women are the central characters and their voice is heard, some of them can be regarded as a kind of a feminist midrash.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Hagar and Ishmael represent the Arab nation in many poems and in this way, modern poetry can be said to follow in the footsteps of early midrash, medieval biblical commentary, as well as medieval and early Jewish liturgical poetry (*piyyut*). In some of these, Ishmael is conceived of as a symbol of the enemy and of Hagar, in turn, as the mother of the enemy.[[22]](#footnote-22) In several poems, this takes on political significance and the treatment of Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, the forefather of the Arabs, is part of the expression of a political viewpoint about the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The approaches of the female poets to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and between their descendants over the generations stand in notable contrast to the mainstream midrashic tradition of justifying Abraham and Sarah and criticizing Hagar. For example, in order to justify the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the midrashic authors offer a variety of interpretations of Ishmael “laughing.” According to Rabbi Akiva, “Laughing is nothing but licentiousness…teaching that Sarah saw Ishmael… stalk married women and abuse them” (Genesis Rabba 53:11). In modern parlance, Ishmael engaged in sexual harassment and abuse of women and Sarah was concerned that Isaac would be influenced by him. There are other interpretations: that Ishmael was engaged in idol worship, or bloodshed, and there are those who suggest that Ishmael sought to murder Isaac in order to inherit Abraham (Genesis Rabba 53:11). All these interpretations situate Ishmael’s behavior in the realm of those transgressions for which, according to Jewish tradition, one must accept martyrdom rather than transgress and, in this way, all these interpretations implicitly support Sarah’s action.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Some *midrashim* note Hagar’s foreign origins and interpret it negatively. For example, They interpret the verse “fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is” as revealing negative aspects of Hagar, understanding that Hagar prayed to her father’s pagan gods (*Pirqei de-Rabbi ‘Eli’ezer* 30). Other midrashic authors suggest that even after the miracle in which the well was revealed to her, Hagar continued to doubt God’s power and concern, as she was of weak faith (Genesis Rabba 53:14).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Contrary to these ancient midrashim, most of the modern poets criticize Sarah and support Hagar, who represents to them the weak, oppressed woman. They make use of the biblical narrative to express a political stance. The female poets’ treatment of the conflict between the two biblical women, Sarah and Hagar reflects a perspective on the conflict between Arabs and Jews that seeks to understand and even empathize with the Arab Other.

Some of these poems not only draw on biblical sources but also make use of midrashic literature, through allusion or by incorporating midrashic content into the poetic plots. In doing so, they usually seek to subvert or dispute the midrashic tradition. For example, in Lynn Gottlieb’s poem, Sarah admits her blindness and recognizes that it was Hagar and not she who could see angels. This stands in contrast to the midrashic tradition that devalues the angelic revelations experienced by Hagar and claims that Hagar merited this revelation only thanks to Sarah (Genesis Rabba 45:10).[[25]](#footnote-25)

The modern poems do not offer an explicit articulation of an ideological position. The poetic medium is condensed and abbreviated, allowing for only allusions to a worldview.

In a few of these poems, there is something like an attempt to create a new, more optimistic ending to the story, e.g., Sarah and Hagar’s reconciliation. The freedom to create a rectified narrative allows them to redefine both the past and the future.

# Eternal Warfare

Dahlia Ravikovitch[[26]](#footnote-26) (1936-2005) was one of the greatest modern Hebrew poets. Her poem “Jealous Woman,”[[27]](#footnote-27) describes old Sarah’s jealousy of the young Hagar.

**אישה מקנאת / דליה רביקוביץ**

1 חֲרִיצִים נִצְנְצוּ בְּחֶלְקַת צַוָּארָהּ

מִקִּנְאָה וַחֲרוֹן שִׂמְחָתָהּ נִבְלְלָה

כָּל גִּבְעֹל בַּגִּנָּה כְּצִמְחִי קִיקָיוֹן

כָּל שִׁיר בְּאָזְנֶיהָ כְּרַחַשׁ קְלָלָה.

שְׁנָתָהּ נָדְדָה וְלִבָּהּ נֶאֱטַם

עֵינֶיהָ דְּלוּחוֹת מֵחֲשָׁד וְשִׂנְאָה.

לְפֶתַע אָמְרָה לוֹ שָׂרָה: אַבְרָהָם

גָּרֵשׁ מִבֵּיתִי אֶת הָגָר וְאֶת בְּנָהּ.

לֹא יִירַשׁ עִם בְּנִי יַחַד

10 גַּם בֶּן הָאָמָה

שַׁלַּח מִלְּפָנַי לַמִּדְבָּר אֶת הַשְּׁנַיִם

וּמִי שֶׁהֻכָּה בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם תַּדְהֵמָה

הַאִם יַאֲשִׁים אֶת שָׂרָה כִּי מָרָה הִיא?

וּבַבֹּקֶר הַהוּא עִם הָנֵץ הַחַמָּה

גֹּרְשׁוּ אֵם וּבְנָהּ וְצַפַּחַת הַמַּיִם

וּמֵאָז לֹא חָדְלוּ מִלְחָמוֹת עַל הָעִיר

צָעִיר מַכֶּה בְּכוֹר וְהַבְּכוֹר יַךְ צָעִיר.

חֶרֶשׁ שׂוֹרֶרֶת אִמֵּנוּ שָׂרָה.

בַּקַּיִץ הַהוּא בַּבֹּקֶר הַצׇּח,

20 הָלַךְ יִשְׁמָעֵאל אַדְמוֹנִי וּמְפֹרָח

פֶּרֶא אָדָם אַדִּיר קִבֹּרֶת

אַךְ מִי יְגוֹנֵן עַל בְּנִי יִצְחָק

עַל בְּנִי הַקָּטָן מְאֹד?

יָדָהּ לַבָּצֵק הִיא שָׁלְחָה כְּתָמִיד

וּלְפֶתַע שְׁטָפוּהָ דִּמְעוֹת עֵינַיִם.

תִּשְׁעִים שְׁנוֹת חַיֶּיהָ נָתְנוּ בָּה סִימָן.

הִלְבִּין **הַשֵּׂעָר** וְחָלְשׁוּ הַיָּדַיִם.

מִי יְגוֹנֵן עַל בְּנָהּ הַקָּטָן

כְּשֶׁיַּגִּיעַ יוֹמָהּ לְבֵית עוֹלָמִים

30 וּמַה יִּהְיֶה עַל יִצְחָק הַיָּתוֹם

בֵּין הָגָר הַפּוֹרַחַת

כִּפְרִי בַּבֻּסְתָּן

וְעִמָּהּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל

אֲהוּבֵי אַבְרָהָם.

**Jealous Woman by Dahlia Ravikovitch**

1 Cracks sprouted on her smooth neck

Jealousy and rage confounded her joy

Every plant in the garden like Jonah’s withered gourd

Every song in her ears like a whispered curse.

Her sleep disturbed and her heart closed

Her eyes stream with suspicion and hatred.

Suddenly, Sarah said to him: Abraham

Banish Hagar and her son from my home.

My son will not inherit together

10 With merely the son of a maidservant

Send the two of them away from me to the desert

And whoever was shocked that very day

Can he blame Sarah for being bitter?

And on that morning, with the rising sun

Mother and son and water flask, banished

Ever since, the wars have not ceased

Younger striking elder and elder striking younger.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Our mother Sarah stews silently

That summer, that clear morning

20 Ruddy, volatile Ishmael went

A wild man, of might arm

But who will protect my boy Isaac

My so very small son?

As always, her hands were covered with dough

And suddenly, her eyes were awash with tears.

Ninety years of life had left their mark.

Hair had whitened and arms become weak.

Who will protect her little boy

When the day comes for her final rest?

What will happen to orphaned Isaac

Between Hagar, blooming

Like a fruit orchard

And with her, Ishmael,

The beloveds of Abraham.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru).

The poem begins with the description of the wrinkles on the aging Sarah’s neck and the jealousy that destroyed her joy in life. Sarah’s bitter jealousy led to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.

Ravikovitch offers a psychological justification for Sarah’s harsh behavior toward Hagar and Ishmael.[[29]](#footnote-29) Ravikovitch shows empathy and even grants forgiveness to the suffering Sarah, who is worried about Isaac. Sarah fears that no one would protect her son after her death.

The struggle between Sarah and Hagar turned into the war between their descendants. Ravikovitch points out the heavy cost of Sarah’s banishing Hagar that are to be paid by Sarah and Hagar’s descendants who will fight one another throughout history. While she is critical of Sarah for her banishment of Hagar and what she considers its tragic historical consequences, Ravikovitch finds it difficult to blame Sarah since she is concerned by the threat posed by Ishmael, who is called “a wild man, of mighty arm.” Ravikovitch presents Hagar as a woman in the bloom of youth, who, together with her son, has enraptured Abraham, while Sarah is a sad, aging woman. The reader is inclined to identify with Sarah, overcome with tears, dealing with age and frailty, and anxious about the fate of her son when she is gone. It is interesting to note Malka Shaked’s claim that Ravikovitch did not include this poem in her volume of collected poems, published in 1995, because she was uncomfortable with its contents or concerned about its political implications.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Like Ravikovitch’s poem, the poem“Hagar’s Oath in the Wilderness,”[[31]](#footnote-31) by Zerubavela Sasonkin[[32]](#footnote-32) (1929-2004) refers to the political through the prism of motherhood and femininity.

שבועת הגר במדבר / זרובבלה ששונקין

1 אֲנִי אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ

בַּעֲלוֹת הַסַּהַר

בְּקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה

וְאֶל שָׂרַי

בִּילֵל-תַּנִּים

בַּחֲשֵׁכָה.

אֲנִי אָבוֹא מִן הַמִּדְבָּר

לִטֹּל אֶת נְדָרֶיךָ

וּמִשָּׂרַי

10 אֶת חֲלוֹמָהּ

אֲנִי אֶרְאֶה אֶת בְּנִי

גָּדֵל בֵּין הַחוֹלוֹת

כְּדֶקֶל

וְאֶת בִּנְךָ מוּבָל

לַעֲקֵדָה.

אֲנִי אַשְׁקֶה שֶׁלִּי

דְּמָעוֹת מִתּוֹךְ הַחֵמֶת

בְּעוֹד יָדְךָ מוּנֶפֶת

עַל שֶׁלְּךָ

20 וּגְרוֹן שָׂרַי נִחָר

בִּיגוֹנָהּ.

אֲנִי לִבְנִי אֶתְפֹּר

כְּתֹנֶת חוֹל וָשֶׁמֶשׁ

וּבְלֵילוֹת קָרָה אוֹרִיד

שְׂמִיכַת הַכּוֹכָבִים

וְלֹא יִכְלוּ לָעַד

הַמַּיִם מִן הַחֵמֶת

כָּל עוֹד אוֹגְרוֹת

שְׁתֵּי בֶּאֱרוֹת עֵינַי

30 כּוֹחוֹת חַיִּים

עֵין הַמִּדְבָּר דְּרוּכָה

וְעַל גּוּפִי מַשְׁחֶזֶת

גִּצֵּי קָדִים צוֹרְבִים

וְסַכִּינֵי קָרָה

אֶת שְׁתֵּי כְּתֵפִי הַנִּשְׂרָפוֹת

לוֹפְתוֹת יְדֵי הַיֶּלֶד

שָׁמוּט רֹאשׁוֹ בַּהֲזָיוֹת

עַל אֶבֶן צַוָּארִי

עִם כָּל פְּסִיעָה שֶׁלִּי

40 אֵימַת מִדְבָּר נִכְנַעַת,

חָיֹה יִחְיֶה יַלְדִּי

יִרְבּוּ כַּחוֹל בָּנָיו –

אֶת זֹאת הַיּוֹם אֲנִי

הָגָר, לְךָ נִשְׁבַּעַת,

עֵדִים לִי הַמִּדְבָּר

הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בִּמְרוֹמָיו.

אֲנִי אָשׁוּב צְמוּאָה

בְּתוֹךְ סוּפַת מִדְבָּר

חוֹרֶכֶת עֲקֵבֶיךָ

50 אֲנִי אֵשֵׁב מוּלְךָ

בְּאָהֳלֵי קֵדָר,

אֲנִי אַבִּיט בְּךָ

כָּל עוֹד חַמָּה מוֹלֶכֶת

כָּל עוֹד יַדְלִיק רָקִיעַ

כּוֹכָבָיו.

**Hagar’s Oath in the Wilderness by Zerubavela Sasonkin**

1 I will return to you

With the rising of the crescent

In a still small voice

And to Sarai

With the howling of jackals

At nightfall.

I will come from the wilderness

To take that which you vowed

And from Sarai

10 Her dream

I will see my son

Grow up in the sand

Like a date palm

And your son led

To the binding.

I will give mine to drink

Tears from the waterskin

While your hand is raised

Against yours

20 And Sarai’s throat is hoarse

With her grief.

I will sew for my son

A tunic of sand and sun

And on nights of frost, I will bring down

A blanket of stars

And never will be spent

The water from the skin

So long as is stored

In the cisterns of my two eyes

30 The power of life

The desert’s eye is vigilant

And on my body are sharpened

Burning east-wind sparks

And blades of frost

My two burnt arms

Grasp the hands of the boy

His head bent in hallucinations

On the stone of my neck

With every step of mine

40 The desert’s terror yields,

My son will live

His sons will multiply like the sand –

By this, today I

Hagar, swear to you

My witnesses – the desert

The sun in the sky.

I will return, parched

In the midst of desert storm

Scorching you heels

50 I will sit opposite you

In shepherd’s tents

I will look at you

As long as the sun traverses

As long as the sun traverses

As long the firmament ignites its stars.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru).

In Sasonkin’s poem, both the political and the feminist perspectives are more emphatic and fundamental. “Hagar’s Oath in the Wilderness” has a belligerent and unforgiving tone. Hagar, the narrator, promises Abraham to return to take vengeance on him and Sarah for banishing her and her son.

Already in the second line, Sasonkin alludes to contemporary reality. Hagar, mother of Ishmael, will return with the rising of the crescent, the symbol of Islam. Her return is politically meaningful; it is an act of vengeance against those who sent her and her son into the wilderness that poses a threat to Abraham and Sarah.

Like Ravikovitch’s poem, this poem also emphasizes the maternal perspective. The central conflict in the poem is expressed in the contrast of the two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. According to Sasonkin, Hagar is the paragon of motherhood who knows how to protect her son (who grows like a palm tree) while Sarah does not have the strength to protect her son, and he is bound upon the altar. Hagar is an active agent who enlists the entire cosmos in her project (the sun, the stars and the sand of the desert). Sasonkin’s use of the images that invoke the sun and the stars with regard to Hagar’s protection of her son Ishmael echoes God’s promise of descendants to Abraham: “…I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore…” (Genesis 22:17), intimating that it is Ishmael, rather than Isaac who will inherit Abraham. Despite the terrible dangers she and her son encountered in the desert – “My two burnt arms/ grasp the hands of the boy / his head bent in hallucinations”). Hagar swears that she will survive and the natural powers that she mentions serve as witnesses to her mythic oath:

The phrase “his sons will multiply like the sand,” alluding to the verse mentioned above that expresses the promise to Abraham that he will have descendants, strengthens the suggestion that it is Ishmael who is Abraham’s heir.

Chaya Shacham has argued that the full meaning of this poem is only revealed when it is read with the unique context of its writing in mind. Zerubavela Sasonkin was the daughter of the poet Alexander Penn (1906-1972).[[33]](#footnote-33) This poem is in intertextual dialogue with both the biblical narrative and her father’s poem from 1947, “Hagar,”[[34]](#footnote-34) which relates to the laying of a water pipe for the communities of the Negev desert. Penn took this event to be an opportunity for reconciliation between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael. Sasonkin’s poem was composed in 1969, during the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt, and suggests that the hope for peace and reconciliation that Penn expressed in his poetry has dissipated entirely.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Sasonkin’s poem, alongside its contemporary political theme, exhibits a notably feminist perspective. Hagar, who is silenced in the biblical narrative, has an assertive, powerful voice in the poem. Moreover, in contrast to the portrayal of Hagar in her father’s poem, Sasonkin depicts her as a forceful active character. Penn’s Hagar is one “whose eyes stream into the waterskin,” while Sasonkin’s confident Hagar says: “And never will be spent/ The water from the skin.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The poet Nava Semel,[[37]](#footnote-37)(1954-2017) was a member of the second generation of Holocaust survivors. Her work often addressed the conflicts between Jews and non-Jews, especially but not exclusively in the context of the Holocaust of European Jewry. Her poetry collection *Mizmor laTanakh* [A Hymn to the Bible] expresses her deep connection to the Bible and rabbinic midrashim and she utilizes different biblical stories to express her yearning for peace between non-Jews and Jews in general and particularly between Arabs and Jews. The poems in *Mizmor laTanakh* can be said to be modern interpretations of the deeds of biblical characters through which Semel articulates her political and social beliefs. The poem “Sarah, Sarah”[[38]](#footnote-38) that we will discuss below is an example of this.

**שרה / נאוה סמל**

וַתֵּרֶא שָׂרָה אֶת-בֶּן-הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית, אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם, מְצַחֵק

וַתֹּאמֶר, לְאַבְרָהָם, גָּרֵשׁ הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת, וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ,

כִּי לֹא יִירַשׁ בֶּן-הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת, עִם-בְּנִי עִם-יִצְחָק.

(בראשית כא, 10-9)

לְסֵפֶר בְּרֵאשִׁית אֲנִי רוֹצָה לְהִכָּנֵס

בְּפֶרֶק כ”ף-אל”ף לְחוֹלֵל אֵיזֶה נֵס

לְהוֹסִיף עוֹד שׁוּרָה

וְלוֹמַר כָּךְ לְשָׂרָה:

אַל תְּגָרְשִׁי אֶת שִׁפְחָתֵךְ הָגָר

אַל תְּגָרְשִׁי אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר.

אַתְּ תַּחְסְכִי מֵאִתָּנוּ הֲמוֹן צָרוֹת.

שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה,

תְּנִי לְיִצְחָק, תְּנִי לְיִשְׁמָעֵאל

10 לִהְיוֹת אִַחִים מְאֻשָּׁרִים

שֶׁיְּשַׂחֲקוּ, שֶׁיִּגְדְּלו יַחַד

שֶׁיִהְיוּ חֲבֵרִים

מִכָּאן וְעַד סוֹף הַדּוֹרוֹת.

**Sarah, Sarah by Nava Semel**

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” (Genesis 21:9-10)

I want to enter into the book of Genesis

To work a miracle in chapter 21

To add another line

And to say this to Sarah:

Do not banish your maidservant Hagar

Do not banish to the wilderness.

You can save us a lot of suffering.

Sarah, Sarah

Allow Isaac, allow Ishmael

10 To be brothers happily

Let them play, let them grow up together

Let them be friends

From now until the end of time.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru).

In rewriting the story, the poet seeks, as it were, to avoid the conflict between the two nations. Like Ravikovitch and Sasonkin, Semel holds Sarah accountable for Hagar’s banishment.[[39]](#footnote-39) The poem opens with the poet expressing her desire to enter into the biblical story and rectify it. If only she could change the biblical past, she could change historical events that arose from it.

She suggests that if Sarah had refrained from banishing Hagar, the Israeli-Arab conflict could have been avoided. The poet’s sense of urgency, her need to act and to change fate, is brought out in the poem through the intense rhyme in the first verse: *le-hikanes* [to enter] – *nes* [miracle], *shura* [line] –*Sara* [Sarah], *Hagar* [Hagar] – *midbar* [wilderness]. The urgency is further emphasized by the rhyme of the closing words of the two verses, *tsarot* [suffering] – *dorot* [time, lit. generations] that bring out the poet’s feeling that an opportunity has been missed and the tragic past cannot be changed.

In her depiction of the two half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael playing and growing up together happily, the poet uses the future tense, emphasizing the gap between the difficult reality and what could have been.

Bracha Serri (1940-2013) was born in Sana’a in Yemen and immigrated to Israel with her religious family when she was ten. She wrote in Hebrew although it was not her first language. Her writing focused on Judaism, Mizrahi[[40]](#footnote-40) identity, feminism, and left-wing politics. Her poems are interlaced with biblical texts and political themes and present the worldview of a Jewish Mizrahi woman who is provocatively and remonstratively re-examining traditional texts; her struggles to define herself are evident. Her poem, “Aliza Says,”[[41]](#footnote-41) which we will discuss below, relates to exclusion, alienation and being a refugee, like many of Serri’s poems.

**עליזה אומרת / ברכה סרי**

1 עליזה אומרת

שכולם הלכו לתפילה

במערת המכפלה.

שכולם בוכים

על שרה

שלא נשארה עקרה.

שכולם ברחם הגדולה

הכפולה

במלחמת התאומים

10 על הירושה ועל הנחלה

אבל אני נשארתי ילדה

עם יצחק

בעקדה

ובשבילי הוא מעולם

לא קם

משם.

ונשארתי במדבר

עם הגר

ועם ילדה ישמעאל

20 צמאה יבשה

מחפשת באר לחי

רואי, לרוויה

להשקות את הנער.

ונשארתי שפחה

נמלטת

מהגרת

מפגרת

פילגש

קפואת רגש

30 מעונה

בלי טינה

בלי שנאה

נרדפת

בורחת

פליטה

זרה

יהודייה

בלי מהות

בלי זהות

40 קפואה

עקרה.

Aliza says

That everyone went to pray

At the Cave of Mahpela.

That everyone cries

For Sarah

Who did not remain barren.

That everyone is in the great womb

The doubled

In the war of the twins

Over possession and inheritance.

But I remained a girl

With Isaac

At the binding

And for me, he

Never rose

From there.

And I remained in the desert

With Hagar

And with her child Ishmael

Thirsty, dry

Seeking the well of the Living One

Who sees me, to slake

To give the boy to drink

And I remained a maidservant

Escaping

Immigrant

Retarded

Concubine

Apathetic

Tortured

Without bitterness

Without hatred

Persecuted

Fleeing

Refugee

Stranger

Jew

Without essence

Without identity

Frozen

Barren.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru).

Utilizing the character of Hagar, the banished Egyptian maidservant, Serri expresses her socially conscious feminist protest using political imagery. Like the poems discussed above, this poem protests Hagar’s banishment.[[42]](#footnote-42) Sarah, who is buried in the Cave of Machpela (which means ‘cave of pairs’ or ‘doubled cave’) is viewed by the poet as the guilty party in the conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael “over possession and inheritance.”

Serri was the author of many anti-war poems[[43]](#footnote-43) and identified herself religiously and nationally as a stranger and refugee. In this poem, she identifies with Isaac who is bound on the altar. Even though Isaac was saved from slaughter, he never recovered from his fate as a sacrifice. Serri also identifies with Ishmael and his mother, with whom she “remained in the desert.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Each one of these characters is a victim, whose suffering inspires her empathy. Serri feels an affinity for Hagar, who symbolizes the exiled outsider of inferior social status.

Serri’s national identity, which would separate her, a “Jew,” from Hagar the Egyptian (“and I remained a maidservant /…Jew”) is negated in this poem, in a manner similar to other poems of hers where the contrast between national identities is inverted.[[45]](#footnote-45) Serri raises here the question of the Judeo-Arab identity, the deep cultural connections between Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians that is present in the writings of several Mizrahi Jewish writers.[[46]](#footnote-46)

As mentioned above, Serri immigrated to Israel from Yemen as a child. She feels as if she “has remained in the desert;” she, as it were, never entered the promised land. The use of the vulgar word “retarded” [*mefageret*] reflects the inferiority felt by a girl of Yemenite extraction facing the patronizing Israeli-Ashkenazi elite. The experience of being an immigrant implanted in her a sense of class inferiority (“maidservant,” “concubine”), and the emotional damage of the experience (“persecuted”) became trauma (“frozen,” “apathetic”) that gave rise to the dullness (“without bitterness, without hatred”) characteristic of depression and loss of identity and meaningfulness (“without essence”). The structure of the poem, in which every word is set on its own line, emphasizes the poet’s desperate state. The repetition of the word “without” [*beli*] at the beginning of four lines (“without bitterness,” “without hatred,” “without essence,” “without identity”) and the other repetitions (e.g., “I remained in the desert,” “I remained a maidservant”) along with the penultimate stress rhyme (between the word *nimleṭet* [escaping] and the chain of adjectives *mehageret* [immigrant], *mefageret* [retarded], *pilegesh* [concubine], *nirdefet* [persecuted] all generate a musical intensity that accentuates the poet’s despair.

In contrast to the poems in this first group, which highlight the conflict and violence between the descendants of Sarah and Hagar, the poems in the next group exhibit a more optimistic tone, all expressing, in one way or another, the poets’ empathy for Hagar.

# Overcoming the Political

Overcoming the political and nationalist conflict through empathy is a theme in the poems by Kaufman, Gottlieb and Alexander that we will discuss below. These poems all treat Hagar or Ishmael as individuals, deserving of empathy. They creatively reinterpret the biblical narrative in an attempt to repair the relationship between its female protagonists or their present-day descendants. In one poem, the biblical story is projected into the future and given a new conclusion in which Hagar is not merely a victim but an empowered individual. In another, the poet has Sarah express her contrition, turning to Hagar and addressing her as her sister.

In these poems, the treatment of Hagar and her descendants is founded on the solidarity of Sarah and Hagar as women and mothers. We will begin our discussion with a poem by Shirley Kaufman[[47]](#footnote-47) (1923-2016), an Israeli-American poet who was born and raised in the United States and immigrated to Israel in 1973. Her poetry expresses her self-consciousness as a woman and her strong connection to her family and her Jewish identity. Kaufman wrote a series of poems about biblical women (besides the poem about Sarah and Hagar discussed below, she wrote about Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Michal, Abishag, Yael, Moses’s wife and Joab’s wife), describing their inner lives and trials. She often set these characters in a modern Israeli setting. Her immigration from the United States is evident in her poems, which were written in English and often expressed feelings of uprootedness and ambivalence about place, culture language and identity.[[48]](#footnote-48) She was troubled by the political and security situation in Israel and that is also expressed in her poems, including the poem “Déjà Vu,”[[49]](#footnote-49) which we will discuss below.

**Déjà Vu by Shirley Kaufman**

1Whatever they wanted for their sons

will be wanted forever, success,

the right wife, they should be

good to their mothers.

One day they meet at the rock

where Isaac was cut free

at the last minute. Sara stands

with her shoes off under the dome

showing the tourists with their Minoltas

10 around their necks the place

where Mohammed flew up to heaven.

Hagar is on her knees

In the women’s section praying.

They bump into each other at the door,

the dark still heavy on their backs

like the future always coming after them.

Sara wants to find out what happened

to Ishmael but is afraid to ask.

Hagar’s lips a makes crooked seam

20 over her accusations.

They know that the world is flat,

and if they move to the edge

they’re sure to fall over. They know

they can only follow their own feet

the way they came.

Jet planes fly over their heads

as they walk out of each other’s lives

like the last time, silent, not mentioning

the angels of god and the bright

30 miracles of birth and water. Not telling

that the boys are gone.

The air ticks slowly. It’s August

and the heat is sick of itself

waiting all summer for rain.

Sarah is in her cool villa.

She keeps her eyes on the pot

so it won’t boil over.

She brings the food to the table

where he’s already seated

40 reading the afternoon paper

or listening to the news,

the common corruptions they don’t

even speak about now.

Guess who I met she says talking

across the desert.

Hagar shops in the market.

There’s a run on chickens, the grapes

are finished and the plumes are soft.

She fills her bag with warm bread

50 fresh from the oven thinking

there’s nothing to forgive,

I got what I wanted from the old man.

The flight in the wilderness

is a morning stroll.

She buys a kilo of ripe figs. She

climbs the dusty path home.

In this poem Sarah and Hagar’s motherly solidarity is presented by their common hopes for their sons. Kaufman transports both biblical women, Sarah and Hagar, into modern Israeli reality; Sarah (or Sara) is an Israeli tour guide and Hagar is an Arab woman praying in the Dome of the Rock. In a dramatic coincidence, their paths cross.

As the title of the poem indicates, this meeting generates a feeling of déjà vu for both women: Sarah, standing in the place where her son was bound and nearly slaughtered by Abraham, remembers the trauma she experienced due to that event. Hagar recalls the trauma of her banishment at the hands of Abraham and Sarah when her son nearly died in the desert. According to Jewish tradition, the Dome of the Rock sits over the site where the binding of Isaac took place. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad ascended to heaven from the same spot. It is a locus of political and religious tension between the Jews, descendants of Sarah, and the (mostly Muslim) Arabs, descendants of Hagar.

It appears that Sarah wants to approach Hagar and reconcile with her. She is curious to know what became of Ishmael but is afraid to ask Hagar, whose “lips make a crooked seam / over her accusations.” The reader’s expectation of a dramatic reconciliation is not realized, and Sarah and Hagar “walk out of each other’s lives.” Each of them returns to her comfortable daily routine; Sarah goes back to her “cool villa” to cook dinner for her husband and Hagar “shops in the market.” The poem concludes with Hagar’s surprising thought (“The flight in the wilderness / is a morning stroll”). This thought ironically relates to the conflict in the biblical past. Retrospectively, Hagar is not merely a victim and does not regard her banishment as having been so terrible; therefore, “there’s nothing to forgive.” These lines remind the reader how Sarah’s desire for reconciliation from her socially superior position can be read as patronizing. Hagar has her own narrative that is not dependent upon or even interested in Sarah’s perspective.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The next poem was also composed by a Jewish-American poet. Lynn Gottlieb[[51]](#footnote-51) (1949) is an American rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement. Her poems express her feminist worldview as well as her political views about the Israeli-Arab conflict.[[52]](#footnote-52) Gottlieb’s poem, “Achti,”[[53]](#footnote-53) discussed below, was written in English and includes an expression in Arabic; there is symbolic significance to the choice of language.

**Achti by Lynn Gottlieb**

1Achti,

I am pained I did not call you

By the name your mother gave you.

I cast you aside,

Cursed you with my barrenness and rage,

Called you “stranger”/ Ha-ger,

As if it were a sin to be from another place.

Achti

They used me to steal your womb,

10 Claim your child,

As if I owned your body and your labor.

I, whom they call “See Far Woman” / Sarah,

Could not witness my own blindness.

But you, my sister,

You beheld angels,

Made miracles in the desert,

Received divine blessings from a god,

Who stopped talking to me.

Only at the end,

20 When I witnessed my young son screaming under his father’s knife,

Only then

Did I realize our common suffering.

And I called out, “Avraham, Avraham, hold back your knife!”

My voice trumpeted into the silence

of my sin.

Forgive me, Achti

For the sin of neglect

For the sin of abuse

For the sin of arrogance

30 Forgive me, Achti,

For the sin of not knowing your name.

In this poem, Gottlieb describes Sarah and Hagar’s complex relationship using the biblical narrative to express her belief that our pain and suffering should inspire us to hear the other side’s suffering. According to Gottlieb, Sarah is also a victim of the patriarchal society that demanded that she “steal the womb” of her servant. She accuses that society of not valuing the life of a barren woman.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In this poem, the poet addresses Hagar in Arabic, ‘Achti,’ meaning ‘my sister.’[[55]](#footnote-55) This description of Hagar, which is also the title of the poem, is repeated frequently throughout the poem and becomes something of a mantra. The use of (what the poet imagines to be) Hagar’s language, Arabic, is a gesture to Hagar from Sarah, the poem’s narrator.

Gottlieb’s poem, “Achti,” proposes a new ending to the biblical story, an alternative narrative that serves to rectify the original. While the biblical account concludes with Hagar’s banishment, in the poem, Sarah, years later, feels that the time has come for reconciliation. She confesses to Hagar that she objectified her and made her into a surrogate mother.

The motif of names is central to the poem. Gottlieb understands the name ‘Hagar’ to mean ‘the stranger.’[[56]](#footnote-56) Sarah, who announces that her name means “See Far Woman” (derived from the root *shin-waw-resh*, meaning ‘see’), admits her blindness and recognizes that it was Hagar and not she who could see angels. This stands in contrast to the midrashic tradition that devalues the angelic revelations experienced by Hagar. [[57]](#footnote-57)

It is the binding of Isaac that makes it possible for Sara to recognize her unjust banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. For Gottlieb, it is Sarah, not the angel of the biblical narrative, who calls out and restrains Abraham at the last moment. Finally, Sarah apologizes to Hagar for calling her “the stranger” and afterward confesses to her “For the sin of not knowing your name.”

Lally Alexander (1959)[[58]](#footnote-58) is an art therapist, a group dynamics facilitator, and a therapist for victims of sexual assault. One may presume that her professional background plays a role in her identification with Hagar. It appears that Hagar’s inferior status as a maidservant tasked with carrying a baby for her mistress, and then as a single mother banished to the desert with her son awakened the poet’s empathy as a therapist who treats victims of sexual abuse and the deals with the problems of disempowered women. Alexander’s poetry, which engages in complex dialogues with biblical (and Talmudic and midrashic) texts reveals her identity as a writer who is re-examining women’s place in the world, particularly the Jewish world.

Her poem “Maidservant”[[59]](#footnote-59) emphasizes the solidarity of women and mothers.

**אמה / ללי אלכסנדר** בְּאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם, כָּךְ אֲנִי זוֹכֶרֶת,

הָיָה מִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע שָׁקֵט וּמְתַעְתֵּעַ.

הַדְּבָרִים הָיוּ הוֹלְכִים וְכָלִים,

הַכֵּלִים הוֹלְכִים וְנִשְׁבָּרִים,

הַמִּישׁוֹרִים הַגְּדוֹלִים

הוֹלְכִים וְסוֹגְרִים,

עָלַיִךְ.

וַאֲנִי,

אֵינֶנִּי מְזַהָה אֶת הָעֲקֵבוֹת,

10 אֵינֶנִּי מַכִּירָה אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ,

לֹא הִשְׁלַכְתִּי יֶלֶד תַּחַת שִׂיחַ,

לֹא אָמַרְתִּי אַל-אֶרְאֶה.

אַךְ עִקּוּל גַּבֵּךְ הַנִּשְׁבָּר

וְחֻמֵּךְ וְחֹם הַמִּדְבָּר

סַהַר עֲקֵבֵךְ, נִשְׁכַּח,

נוֹשֵׁק לַעֲקֵבִי.

**Maidservant by Lally Alexander**

1 Through summer haze shimmered, Beersheba - an illusive desert memory,

Of the wordless wilderness, witness mute and deceptive,

Of things that deplete,

Bereft, incomplete,

The endless plains,

Now constrain,

You.

And I

Flail blindly in search of a trace,

10 Of a footstep outlined within mine which to place,

I did not forsake my child under a bush,

Nor say “On his death Lord, let me not look,”

But the curve of your breaking back,

The warmth of the desert into yours has grown,

The forgotten crescent of your heel,

Caresses my own.

(Translated into English by Jeremy Kuttner)

Hagar is not mentioned by name but only by her description, “maidservant,” which emphasizes her inferior status. The rhyme of the words *ha-nishbar* [breaking] and *ha-midbar*[desert] brings out the strong connection between Hagar’s aching body and the desert. The heat of the parched desert and the heat radiating from her body are one. The crescent, the symbol of Islam, is a metaphor for Hagar’s footprint and brings to our attention that the narrator follows in the footsteps of Muslim Hagar out of female solidarity that crosses religious and national borders.

The third group of poems we will discuss depicts the complex relationship between the two peoples who live together and are connected to one another while at the same time are engaged in conflict.

# Violence and Eroticism

The last two poems I will discuss address the relationship between the two national or ethnic groups, which is characterized by a combination of violence and eroticism. In both poems, the love/hate relationship between the groups is a result of the relationship between the characters in the biblical story.

Hava Pinhas-Cohen’s poetry is characterized by erotic imagery and the dialogue between the biblical characters in the poem we will discuss below contains strong erotic overtones that have repercussions for nationalist issues in the present. Like many of her poems, this poem addresses the Israeli-Arab conflict from the perspective of a woman and a mother. Hagar’s story is the means by which Pinhas-Cohen navigates the complexities of the relationships between Israelis and Arabs living side by side in the land of Israel. The poem stands out in the desire expressed in it for a messianic redemption of peace based upon the love that Jews and Arabs share for the land and its fruits. Like in some of the poems discussed previously, the choice of language in the poem is of political significance. In this case, Pinhas-Cohen uses a strategy not discussed until now – she combines different languages, mixing expressions in Arabic into the Hebrew of the poem. This linguistic mixing, which is particularly prominent in this poem, is means of expressing her call for reconciliation. Pinhas-Cohen’s poem “Menahem my Beloved”[[60]](#footnote-60) alludes to Sarah’s statement regarding Hagar, “perhaps I shall be built through her” (Gen 16:2).[[61]](#footnote-61) This poem employs three languages; Arabic and English words are integrated into the Hebrew text. This mixed usage reflects the standard mode of communication between Jews and Arabs who live side by side today in the land of Israel.

**מנחם, אהובי / חוה פנחס-כהן**

בְּסֻכַּת הַדְּרָכִים עַל כְּבִישׁ גּוֹלָנִי כַּרְמִיאֵל

טָפַח לַמֶּלוֹן שֶׁבִּקַּשְׁתִּי עַל פָּנָיו וְקָרָא לוֹ: בָּלָדִי

וְלַתְּאֵנִים שֶׁנֶּאֶסְפוּ אֶל הַסַּל: בָּלָדִי

וְשִׁכְנַע אוֹתִי בְּמֶתֶק שְׂפָתַיִם שֶׁזֶּה הַבָּלָדִי

וְאֵין בִּלְתּוֹ, קִנְאַת הָעוֹבְרִים עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ

לֹא עָמַדְתִּי בַּפִּתּוּי וְנָעַצְתִּי שִׁנַּיִם בִּסְגֹל בְּשָׂרָהּ

שֶׁל תְּאֵנָה וּבִלְשׁוֹנִי אָסַפְתִּי וְהִפְנַמְתִּי הָעֵדֶן הַמָּתוֹק

אָמַר לִי חִילוּ תְּאֵנֵי הַבָּלָדִי

וְקָרָאתִי אֵלָיו וְאֶל הַמְּכוֹנִיּוֹת עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ

10 bloody בָּלָדִי

bloody בָּלָדִי

יָא, אָחִי, יָחוּל אוֹתָנוּ הָאֱלֹהִים.

וְהוּא סִדֵּר אֶת הַמֶּלוֹן הַבָּלָדִי וְהַתְּאֵנִים הַבָּלָדִי

וְהָעֲנָבִים הַבָּלָדִי בְּקַרְטוֹן

וְשָׂם בַּמּוֹשָׁב הָאֲחוֹרִי שֶׁל הַמְּכוֹנִית

אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ שׁוּקְרַן אָמַר לִי תְפַאדַלִי

קִנַּחְתִּי אֶת פִּי וְעִגַּלְתִּי עִגּוּל עַל בִּטְנִי

וְאָמַרְתִּי לוֹ, אִינְשַׁאלְלָה

אוּלַי אִבָּנֶה מֵאֵלֶּה הַפֵּרוֹת. וְנָסַעְתִּי.

**Menahem my Beloved by Hava Pinhas-Cohen**

At the roadside stand on the Golani-Carmiel highway

He tapped on the melon I asked for and called it: *baladi*

And the figs that had been gathered in the basket: *baladi*

Sweetly convincing me that this is the *baladi*

And none other, the object of jealous desire for all passersby

I could not withstand the temptation and I sank my teeth into the purple flesh

Of a fig, and with my tongue gathered and imbibed the edenic sweetness

He told me “Be sweet, be sweet, my *baladi* fig.”

And I called out to him and to the cars on the way

10 bloody, *baladi*

bloody, *baladi*

Ho, my brother, may God sweeten us.

He placed the *baladi* melon and the *baladi* figs

And the *baladi* grapes in a carton

And put them in the back seat of the car

I said to him: *shuqran* [thank you] and he said to me: *tfadali* [you’re welcome]

I wiped my mouth and rubbed a circle on my belly

And I said to him: *Inshallah* [God willing]

Perhaps I will be built from this fruit. And I drove off.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru)

The poem describes a meeting in a commercial setting, with the poet describing how she occasionally buys fruit from a fruit stand belonging to an Arab.

The dialogue is laden with symbolism: the fruit seller taps on the side of a melon that she would like to buy and promotes his produce, describing it as “*baladi*,” meaning local, authentic; his fruit is “*baladi* and there is nothing like it.” With “sweetness of lips,” he presents his wares, tempting her to buy. She tastes the fruit, and her sensuous description has erotic associations (“I could not withstand the temptation and I sank my teeth in the purple flesh of a fig…”)

The fruit seller proclaims in Arabic: “Be sweet, be sweet, my *baladi* fig.”

The word bloody (in English in the original) calls to mind bloodshed. The wordplay between bloody (in English) and *baladi* (in Arabic) focuses our attention on the combination of sweetness and blood that characterizes contact between Jew and Arab, each representing enemy peoples. The bloodshed in the conflicts between the two peoples is combined with the purple blood that drips from the “flesh of a fig,” alluding to the sexual tension between the two of them. The poet calls the fruit seller “my brother” and blesses him: “Ho, my brother, may God sweeten us.”

The language of this prayer includes Arabic and Hebrew words, along with sound effects ‘אָחִי’ [*aḥi*, my brother] – ‘יָחוּל’ [*yaḥul*, sweeten] – ‘חִילוּ’ [*ḥilu*, be sweet], that appeared earlier. The alliteration calls to mind a different Hebrew word – *ḥil*, חִיל, meaning fear or trembling. The picture evoked includes brotherly solidarity on the one hand and fear and anxiety on the other.

As was pointed out above, the phrase “perhaps, I will be built” echoes Sarah’s statement: “Consort now with my maidservant, perhaps I will be built through her” (Gen 16:2). Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, is that maidservant; the Arab fruit seller is Ishmael’s descendant. The poet’s rubbing her belly alludes to her hoped-for pregnancy, while reminding us of the fruit seller’s tapping of the round melon at the beginning of the poem. After she ‘wipes’ her mouth from the sweetness of the juicy fruit from which she has just bitten, symbolizing the sexual act, she offers a prayer, “God willing” to be built from the fruit of the Arab fruit seller. This theme of the hoped-for pregnancy is brought out by the use of so many verbs in the first person (*‘amarti* [I said], *qinaḥti* [I wiped], *‘igalti* [rubbed a circle], *‘amarti* [I said], *nas’ati* [I drove off]) and the phonic effect of their rhyming.

This poem, “Menahem my Beloved,” was published in a collection called “Messiah” whose subtitle is “Poems Told to me by Menahem my Beloved.” ‘Menahem’ is one of the names of the messiah according to tradition.[[62]](#footnote-62) The poem’s title identifies the Arab fruit seller with the messiah, conjoining its erotic overtones with a transcendental theme. The Jewish poet’s hope - ‘to be built’ from the fruits of the Arab fruit seller - is a religious aspiration for rectification on the transcendental level, for redemption and hope for peace.

There is also feminist rectification in this poem; in the biblical story, Hagar the Egyptian maidservant is treated as an object; she is ‘taken’ by Abraham and serves as a surrogate mother for Sarah. In the poem, by contrast, Abraham is absent and the sexual encounter between Abraham and Hagar that was initiated by Sarah is between the poet, the descendant of Sarah, and the Arab fruit seller, the descendant of Hagar, through the sweet fruit that he offers her, הָעֵדֶן הַמָּתוֹק, the edenic sweetness, symbolizing the forbidden fruit of Eden.

Like Pinhas-Cohen, Rivka Miriam[[63]](#footnote-63) (1952) reveals both a strong connection to the Bible (and midrashic sources) and a daring eroticism in her poetry. Like in Pinhas-Cohen’s poem, contemporary events are interpreted employing the ancient biblical framework and erotic themes have national repercussions.

Miriam’s poem “Were Israel and Egypt”[[64]](#footnote-64) exhibits a mixture of violence and eroticism.

**הֶהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְרַיִם / רבקה מרים**

1 הֶהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְרַיִם לְפוּתוֹת זוֹ בַּזּוֹ כִּשְׁנֵי מִתְאַבְּקִים

אוֹ כְּאוֹהֲבִים שֶׁחוֹמְדִים זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְהֵם נְסוֹגִים

וּדְבֵקִים, נְסוֹגִים וּדְבֵקִים

כְּשֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵת לוֹחֶשֶׁת בִּסְעָרָה, ‘הָגָר, הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית’ –

כְּשֵׁם שֶׁלָּחַשׁ אַבְרָהָם אֵי־אָז, נֹכַח שִׁפְחָתוֹ הַצְּעִירָה

הֶהָרָה –

וּמִצְרַיִם בַּחֲשַׁאי מְשִׁיבָה לָהּ, דּוֹבֶרֶת עִבְרִית

גּוֹנַחַת ‘שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה’ –

כְּאֶנְקָתוֹ הַמְקֻטַּעַת שֶׁל פַּרְעֹה בְּיָמִים רְחוֹקִים

10 כְּשֶׁשּׁוֹקֵק הִבִּיט בָּהּ, אֶת קוֹלָהּ חוֹמֵד, אֶת לֹבֶן בְּשָׂרָהּ –

הוֹ, הַמִּנֶּגֶד שֶׁחָזַר וְנִשְׁנָה

כְּשֶׁהַשּׁוֹט רַק חוּט מְקַשֵּׁר, כְּשֶׁפִּיתֹם וְרַעַמְסֵס רַק אֶבֶן פִּנָּה

בַּגַּעְגּוּעַ שֶׁאֵינֶנּוּ פּוֹסֵק, בַּגַּעְגּוּעַ הַמִּטַּלְטֵל, הַיּוֹרֵד וְנוֹסֵק

שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ כְּסוּת וּשְׁאֵר וְעוֹנָה.

**Were Israel and Egypt by Rivka Miriam**

Were Israel and Egypt clinched one with the other like two wrestlers

Or like lovers who desire one another, and they retreat

And conjoin, retreat and conjoin.

While Israel constantly whispers in a frenzy ‘Hagar, Hagar the Egyptian’ –

Just as Abraham whispered way back when to his young maidservant

Who was pregnant –

And Egypt secretly responds to her, speaking Hebrew

moaning “Sarah, Sarah”–

Like Pharaoh’s broken cry in distant days

When he looked at her, desirous, and covets her voice, the whiteness of her flesh

Oh, “from afar,” that repeated over and over

When the whip is just a connecting strand, when Pitom and Raamses are just a cornerstone

With unending longing, disconcerting longing, that sinks and soars

That does not include garments, food or conjugal rights.

(Translated into English by Joshua Amaru).

The nations of Israel and Egypt are “clinched with one another” and the nature of their clinch is unclear, whether in love or hatred. The back-and-forth movement of conjoining and retreating generates a dual image of sexual desire and union on the one hand and violent physical struggle on the other. This relationship between Israel and Egypt is a consequence or a reflection of the relationship between their ancestors:

The connection between the story of the Egyptian Hagar story being taken into Abraham’s household (Gen 16) to the story of Sarah being taken by Pharaoh (Gen 12) appears in midrashic literature. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: “Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw the miracles performed for Sarah, he took his daughter and gave her to her. He said: Better that she be a maidservant in this household rather than a mistress in a different household.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

The contemporary dialogue between Israel and Egypt resonates with the dialogues that the poet imagines took place in the two biblical stories: between Abraham and Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant who became pregnant with his son, and between Pharaoh and Sarah, whom he “covets.” Abraham’s whispers are heard from Israel’s mouth, while Egypt, speaking Hebrew, sounds Pharaoh’s broken cry. These two morally complex stories become the paradigm for the ambivalent relationship between Israel and Egypt. The intense rhyming in the first verse (*mit’abqim* [wrestlers], ‘*ohavim* [lovers], *ḥomdim* [desire], *nesogim* [retreat], *dveqim* [conjoin], *nesogim* [retreat], *dveqim* [conjoin]) emphasizes the ambivalence of the lovers/enemies, while the rhyme in the second verse (*se*’*ara* [frenzy], *tse’ira* [young], *he-hara* [pregnant], *Sara* [Sarah], *besarah* [her flesh]) emphasizes their mutual erotic attraction.

The concluding lines of the poem express the difficulty that is characteristic of this relationship:

The “connecting strand” between Israel and Egypt is the whip, representing the Egyptian abuse of their Israelite slaves. Alongside the whip, however, there is attraction, “disconcerting longing that sinks and soars.” “Pitom and Raamses,” the cities that Israel built in Egypt (Ex 1:11) are “just a cornerstone,” the foundation of a building that is incomplete. The relationship between Israel and Egypt does not include “garments, food or conjugal rights,” the basic obligations of a husband to his wife. The relationship between the two nations is compared to that of two people who are unwilling to commit to one another and build a substantial connection. Instead, they fluctuate between sexual attraction and abuse.

# Conclusion

The poems about Hagar written by modern Jewish women discussed in this article can be regarded as a kind of modern, feminist midrash. The approaches of the female poets to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and between their descendants over the generations stand in notable contrast to the mainstream midrashic tradition of justifying Abraham and Sarah and criticizing Hagar. Most of the modern poets criticize Sarah and support Hagar, who represents to them the weak, oppressed woman. Support for Hagar, the Other, expresses the support of the poets for the Arabs, the descendants of Hagar, who are portrayed as Others.

The poems discussed in this article touch in different ways on the Arab-Israeli conflict. They relate to the war that has extended for generations between the two ethnic groups, or to how empathy for Hagar could change the modern political dynamic, or to the complex relationship (the erotic-violent dynamic) that has arisen between the descendants of the two women.

Some of the poems seek to rectify the biblical narrative and create a new narrative in their poems. Some describe Sarah and Hagar, or their descendants, reconciling, writing a “happy ending” to the biblical story from the past to bring about a happy ending in the present. In some of the poems that emphasize the desire to reconcile, the reconciliation involves transforming Hagar from a foreign woman into a figure whose language and culture are made accessible to the reader. Some of the poems, in a sort of gesture to Hagar or her descendants, include words in Arabic. Hagar is called “Achti,” my sister (in Gottlieb’s poem) and Hava Pinhas-Cohen’s poem includes the Arabic words *shukran* [thank you]*, tfadali* [you’re welcome]*, inshallah* [God willing]*,* and *baladi* [local], and Miriam’s poem has Egypt speaking Hebrew. That is, the choice to insert into a poem written in one language phrases from other languages has a political significance. In other poems, symbols or places associated with Islam are mentioned, like the crescent (in the poems by Sasonkin and Alexander) or the Dome of the Rock (in Kaufman’s poem). And of course, the use of these symbols also has political significance.

In the collection of poems by women about Hagar discussed here, two themes stand out and both already appear in the biblical story: the conflict between the two women, Sarah and Hagar, and motherhood which is at the heart of it.[[66]](#footnote-66) The poets especially make use of the motherhood motif as a means of discussing the roots of the conflict: In Ravikovitch’s poem, Sarah banishes Hagar and Ishmael because she is anxious about her son’s fate after her death; in Sasonkin’s poem, she expresses empathy for Hagar as the ultimate mother figure who successfully protected her son in the wilderness; in Gottlieb’s poem, Sarah apologetically admits that it was only the experience of her son’s near-sacrifice that led her to realize the injustice she had done to Hagar and Ishmael. This realization gives rise to a call for reconciliation.

Finally, the poems about Hagar discussed in this article present the Israeli-Arab conflict from the female perspective. The concern about the tension between the two peoples, expressed through new female interpretations of the biblical texts, gave birth to these poems. Perhaps these literary works, which express the female perspective, will change reality for the better and promote peace between the two peoples. Let me conclude with the words of the heroine of Pinhas-Cohen’s poem, who represents the hope for peace between the groups and rubs her belly, suggesting her desire to become pregnant: “*Inshallah* [God willing] / Perhaps I will be built…”

1. \* I thank Herzog College for their generous support which enabled the writing of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Modern male poets have also written about Hagar (for example, Aharon Amir, Aharon K. Bartini, Israel Eliraz, see: Malka Shaked, *Lanetzaḥ ’anagnekh: hamiqra bashira ha‘ivrit haḥadasha – ’antologia* [I’ll Play You Forever: The Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry – An Anthology] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot and Sifrei Hemed, 2005, p. 404-407). In this article, I have limited myself to examining the writing of women poets about Hagar. Aliza Shenhar discusses the characteristics of the male voice in the poems about Hagar in Aliza Shenhar, “Do to Her as You Like – the Exiled Maidservant,” *Ahuvot u-snuot* (Love and Hate: Biblical Wives, Lovers, and Mistresses) (Haifa: Pardes, 2011), 17-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Alicia S. Ostriker, *Stealing the language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (Boston, 1986), 211-213; E. Showalter, ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,’ in: E. Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York, 1985), 243-266; Tova Cohen, “Within the Culture and Without: on the Adoption of the ‘Father's Language’ as a Means of Intellectually Shaping the Female Ego,” in: Ziva Shamir (ed.), *Sadan* *II: Selected Chapters on the Female Hebrew Poetry* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997; Heb.), 69-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The poems that are mostly concerned with feminist issues deserve their own treatment. On this topic, see Chaya Shacham, “The Desert as a Metaphor – Aspects of Female Apprenticeship in Women's Poems on the Figure of Hagar,” *Nashim u-masekhot* [Women and Masks] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2001; Heb.), 104-128. See also, Wendy Zierler, “Suppressed Voices: Hagar as Poetic Foremother,” in *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women’s Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 112-119. Bakinaz Khalifa Abdalla addresses the ethnic perspective. See Bakinaz Khalifa Abdalla, “Womanhood Supersedes Racism: Hagar, the Egyptian Surrogate Mother,” [*Reconstructing the Jewish Woman*](https://www.academia.edu/30776697/RECONSTRUCTING_THE_JEWISH_WOMAN_IMAGE_REVERSAL_OF_FEMALE_BIBLICAL_CHARACTERS_IN_MODERN_HEBREW_WOMENS_POETRY)*: Image Reversal of Female Biblical Characters in Modern Hebrew Women's Poetry* (M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, 2010), 100-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Phyllis Trible reads Sarah as a cruel mistress who takes the active role in Hagar’s oppression. See: Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM, 1984): 16.

   [Savina J. Teubal](https://www.ohioswallow.com/author/Savina+J+Teubal) In her book *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah.* Athens (Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1997) argues that the biblical story of Hagar and Sarah, conceals an entirely different story about the women’s relationship and their social status. The allegedly jealous competitiveness described in Genesis covers up a much more complex institution of childless priest[esse]s and their social and economic rights and duties. See: Esther Fuchs' Book Reviewin *Women In Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 2:2 (Spring 2001). <http://sites.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/journal/vol2n2/documents/teubal.pdf>. According to Renita J. Weems, an African American feminist Bible critic, Hagar’s story expresses the need for women who are “abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished” for “a sister who will respond with mercy.” See: Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, California: LuraMedia, 1988). Anna Fisk claims: “Hagar—slave, surrogate and survivor—has been a paradigmatic figure in African American womanist theology. Sarah’s treatment of her has also been read as representative of privileged white women’s oppression of women of colour.” See: Anna Fisk, “Sisterhood in the Wilderness: Biblical Paradigms and Feminist Identity Politics in Readings of Hagar and Sarah,” in A. K. M. Adam and Samuel Tongue (eds.), *Looking through a Glass Bible: Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), 113-137, esp. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jonathan Grossman has argued that both Hagar narratives express ambivalence about her character. In the first story, when she flees from her mistress, the sympathy for her plight is stronger than the implied criticism of her actions, while in the story of her banishment there are strong allusions of disapproval of her behavior. See Jonathan Grossman, “Hagar's characterization in Genesis and the explanation of Ishmael's blessing” (Heb.), *Beit Mikra* 63 (2018), 249-286, es 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yael Shemesh discusses ways that the Hagar is empowered in the biblical narrative and draws attention to her courage and to the admiration the biblical narrator has for her (303). See Yael Shemesh, “Stories about Abraham Sarah and Hagar (Genesis chapters 16 and 21) from a Gender Perspective” (Heb.), *Beit Mikra* 63 (2018), 287-319. Shemesh examines the two biblical stories that relate to the triangle Abraham, Sarah and Hagar from a gender perspective and questions the claim made in Athaliah Brenner’s feminist interpretation of the stories that they express a masculine voice. According to Shemesh, despite the tension and hostility between Sarah and Hagar, both stories contain elements that empower Sarah and especially Hagar. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hagar’s courage and independence appear in a number of poems and are particularly notable in Sasonkin’s poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Esther Fuchs argues that Genesis stories of rivalry between wives form part of a “literary strategy serving patriarchal ideology” especially in that the preferred wife is infertile, whereas the unfavored wife is able to bear children. See: Esther Fuchs, “The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader,* ed. Alice Bach (London: Routledge,1999), 160. See also Yairah Amit, “And Why Were the Mothers Barren?” *Qor’ot mibereshit: Israeli Women Writing on the Women of* Genesis, ed. Ruth Ravitzky (Tel Aviv, 1999; Heb.), 127-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all look to the figure of Abraham as “the founding father of an extended family of believers.” See: Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, “Unto the Thousandth Generation,” in their (eds.) *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The midrash subversively interprets the verb ‘took’ from the verse “Sarai, Abram’s wife took Hagar…and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife” (Gen. 16:2) as referring to her convincing Hagar to marry Abraham: “‘Sarai, Abram’s wife took Hagar…’ – took her with words. She said to her, ‘happy are you that you are attached to a sacred body’ (Genesis Rabba, *Lekh Lekha*, 45:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Hagar story is challenging to what Delores Williams terms “the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation,” because God does not, in this case, help the African slave to escape; rather, she is told to return and submit to oppression. See: Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*

    (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Susan Niditch makes the insightful point that the narrator of Genesis “works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah.” See Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Jacob Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2014: xi). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See: David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: a Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See: Wendy Zierler, “On Account of the Cushite Woman that Moses Took: Race and Gender in Modern Hebrew Poems About Numbers 12,” *Nashim* 19 (2010): 34-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, *Dirshuni: Israeli Women Writing Midrash*, edited by Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala, Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2009 (in Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See: Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 10-11; James Adam Redfield, *Behind Auerbach's “Background”: Five Ways to Read What Biblical Narratives Don't Say,*[AJS Review](https://www-proquest-com.mgs.herzog.ac.il/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/Association+for+Jewish+Studies.+AJS+Review/$N/43751/DocView/1680119434/fulltext/54C4CB38501D427DPQ/1?accountid=41239)[39, 1](https://www-proquest-com.mgs.herzog.ac.il/indexingvolumeissuelinkhandler/43751/Association+for+Jewish+Studies.+AJS+Review/02015Y04Y01$23Apr+2015$3b++Vol.+39+$281$29/39/1?accountid=41239) (Apr 2015): 121-150; James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1, 3 (1981): 219; Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King through Ironic Eyes – Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Poetics Today* 7.2 (1986): 275-322. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. D. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 6; D. Curzon, “Introduction” in D. Curzon (ed.), *Modern Poems on the Bible – An Anthology* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 3-27; Malka Shaked, “The Figure of Moses in Modern Hebrew Poetry,” *AJS Review* 28 (2004): 157-172, esp. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The feminist reader who pays close attention to what elements in a narrative are addressed cannot help but see that the female characters in the Hebrew Bible tend to remain obscure, See: Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, “Introduction,” *Nashim* 24: Feminist Receptions of Biblical Women (Spring 2013): 5-10; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For example, see Rashi on Gen. 21:17. For further examples see Yehuda Halevi’s (1075-1141) *seliḥa* piyyut “*Yerushalayim lemogayikh”*: “He would cry – and the son of the maidservant / the Egyptian opposite him is laughing.” In Hayyim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1950, Heb.) vol. 1, part II, 420. See also Rabbi Yisr’ael Najara’s (1555-1628) piyyut “*Yeruḥam Yatom – ’aviv ḥai*”: See also, “The mistress’s son sits below / and the maidservant’s son rules over him.” <https://benyehuda.org/read/15074>. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The interpretations of the medieval Jewish biblical exegetes Nachmanides and of Rabbi David Qimḥi are noteworthy in that they both criticize Sarah’s behavior (See their commentaries to Gen. 21:10), contra the main midrashic tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, throughout the generations, has generally taken a negative attitude to Hagar. For example, on the verse “she went and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba” (Gen. 21:14), Rashi comments: “she went back to the idolatry of her father.” There are even commentators who question Hagar’s motherly devotion and attribute its lack to her origins. S.R. Hirsch criticizes Hagar’s distancing herself from her dying son: “All of Hagar’s behavior is entirely characteristic of a child of Ham who had not undergone a process of refinement. An Israelite mother would not abandon her child” (from Hirsch’s commentary to the words “she cast the child” - Gen. 21:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This midrash praises Sarah for hiding her face out of modesty, resulting in her not seeing the angel while it criticizes Hagar who not only immodestly looked upon the face of the angel but afterwards bragged about it. For another example, according to Genesis Rabba 45:7, angels were regular visitors in the Abraham’s household and its members, among them Hagar, developed the capacity to perceive them. By attributing Hagar’s ability to her residing in Abraham’s household, this midrash bolsters Abraham’s status at the expense of that of Hagar. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See; Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen, “Dahlia Ravikovitch,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. <[https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ravikovitch-Dahlia](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ravikovitch-dalia)>. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Dahlia Ravikovitch, “Jealous Woman,” *Iton 77 Literary Magazine* (July 1977, Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The description of constant warfare between the brothers recalls Nachmanides’s interpretation that Sarah’s banishment of Hagar was a sin and that Ishmael’s descendants’ actions are a punishment visited upon her descendants (Nachmanides, Commentary on Gen. 21:10). However, in contrast to Nachmanides’s focus on Ishmael’s violence against Sarah’s descendants, Ravikovitch describes a state of mutual violence between the two sides. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Malka Shaked, *Lanetzaḥ ’anagnekh*, 515). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Malka Shaked, *Lanetzaḥ ’anagnekh* (above, n. 31), 515, note 16. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Ravikovitch expressed her identification with the suffering of the Palestinian people in many of her poems. For example, see Dahlia Ravikovitch, *Complete Poems Until Now* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMe’uchad, 1995, Heb.) 249-252. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Zerubavela Sasonkin, *Shkifuyot* [Reflections] (Tel-Aviv, 1992, Heb.), 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Zerubavela Sasonkin was an Israeli poet, songwriter and actress who was the poet Alexander Penn’s first child. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Alexander Penn was a member of the Israeli Communist Party and the editor of the literary supplement of its newspaper *Qol ha-‘Am*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Alexander Penn, “Hagar,” *Roofless Nights* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985; Heb.), 139-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Shacham, *Nashim u-masekhot* (above, n. 3), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Shacham, *Nashim u-masekhot* (above, n. 3), 122-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See “Nava Semel,” *The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature*. access date: February 11, 2021 <<https://www.ithl.org.il/page_13244> > [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Nava Semel, “Sarah, Sarah,” *Mizmor laTanakh* (Ra'anana: Even Hoshen, 2015; Heb.), 34. “Blood Brothers” (p. 17) which describes Cain’s murder of Abel, is another example of a poem about a biblical narrative where Semel expresses her frustration at the absence of peace in the world. Nava Semel’s poem calls to mind the poem “Hagar and Ishmael” by Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945), a German-Jewish poet. (See: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/801202/summary>). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hagar is mentioned in another of Nava Semel’s poems, “*Gera*” (‘Stranger,’ *Mizmor laTanakh*, 88), whose main focus is Ruth the Moabite while relating to contemporary Israeli issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Mizrahi Jews are those derived from the Jewish communities of the Middle East. They have historically been marginalized in Israeli politics and culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bracha Serri, *Sacred Cow* (Tel Aviv: Breirot, 1990; Heb.), 102. The poems are not punctuated in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Sarah and Hagar appear in a different poem by Bracha Serri. See, Bracha Serri, *Bat Yayin* [Wine's Daughter] (Jerusalem: Ha'Or Haganuz, 2007 (Heb.), 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Yael Hazan, “The Reality Is Greater than the Poems: War and Protest in the Poems of Bracha Serri,” in: H. D. Kaleb (ed.), *In blessing secret: the poetry of Bracha Serri* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2013; Heb.), 230-262. According to Hazan (232), Serri’s poems are protest poems against the values of the patriarchy and capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hazan (above, n. 46), 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. In a number of Serri’s poems the Jewish/gentile contrast is inverted. Most of the Jews are gentiles because they are oppressors, and the Arabs are ‘Jews’ because they are downtrodden. Serri treats Jewishness not as a religious or ethnic category but rather as means of identifying, in humanist terms, the power differences between groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Yoḥai Openheimer, “*’Ani Palit ‘Aravi’: Shira Politit Mizraḥit*” [‘I am an Arab Refugee: Mizrahi Political Poetry] in Assaf Meydani and Nadir Tsur (eds.), *A Voice Calls with Vigor: Politics and Poetry in Israel* (Herzliya: Israel Political Science Association, 2012, Heb.), 85-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. LoisMillerBar-Yaacov*.*[“Shirley Kaufman.”](http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kaufman-shirley)*Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 30 June 2009. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kaufman-shirley> [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Lois Miller Bar-Yaacov, [“Shirley Kaufman.”](http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kaufman-shirley)  [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Shirley Kaufman, “Déjà Vu,” in: Miriyam Glazer, *Dreaming the Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women Writers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 365-366. The poem was first published in Shirley Kaufman, *Claims* (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Anat Koplowitz-Breier understand this sentence differently. She reads Hagar’s relating to her flight into the wilderness as a morning stroll as the expression of how, from her perspective, the present is much worse than the past. See Anat Koplowitz-Breier, “[Déjà Vu: Shirley Kaufman's Poetry on Biblical Women](https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/9/493),” *Religions* 2019, 10(9), 493, 10. <<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090493>> [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See “Lynn Gottlieb,” *Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of Aice*. < <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lynn-gottlieb>> [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Gottlieb supports the [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycott,_Divestment_and_Sanctions)(BDS) campaign.[See “Is BDS the Way to End the Occupation?”](https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/is-bds-the-way-to-end-the-occupation) [*Tikkun Magazine*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikkun_Magazine), July/August, 2010. Accessed October 7 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: Feminist Vision of a Renewed* Judaism (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Amit, “And why were the Mothers Barren?,” (above, n.8), 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Another poet who presented Hagar as a sister was Zelda (Mishkovsky), in her poem “An Uncombed Head” (*Zelda's Poems* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985; Heb.), 191), where she refers to Hagar as “little sister.” See Rachel Ofer, “[Between Subversion and Tradition:](https://www.academia.edu/43122740/Between_Subversion_and_Tradition_Recasting_Biblical_Characters_in_Zeldas_Poetry) Recasting Biblical Characters in Zelda's Poetry,” *Women in Judaism: Multidisciplinary Journal*, 16:1 (2019), 4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See Genesis Rabba 53:14. See also Rabbi Ḥayyim David Azulay’s commentary *Penei David* on Genesis 16:2. For more on the meaning of the name Hagar, see Hana Safrai, “The Figure of Hagar in Classic Rabbinic Literature” in *Qor’ot mibereshit* (above, n. 9), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See: above, n. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Lally Alexander is a member of Kibbutz Ein Tzurim where she has a private clinic as an art therapist. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See: Lally Alexander, *Stones* (Haifa: Pardes, 2018; Heb.), 33. My thanks to Jeremy Kuttner for his translation of the poem into English. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See: [Hava Pinhas-Cohen](https://sites.google.com/site/havapinhascohenenglish/), *Mashiah* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003; Heb.), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Hava Pinhas-Cohen also refers to Hagar in her poem “Signs”; “*simanim*,” *Mostly Color* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990; Heb.), 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. “Some say, Menahem son of Hezekiah is his name, as it is said: For Menahem, restorer of my soul, is far from me (Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 98b). ‘Menahem’ (meaning consoler) is the messiah’s name because he will console Israel, and in doing so bring an end the Exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See “[Rivka Miriam](https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/25000/Rivka-Miriam/en/tile),” *Poetry International Archives*. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See Rivka Miriam*, Moshe: Poems* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2011), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See Genesis Rabba 45:1; *Pirqei de-Rabbi ’Eli‘ezer* 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. It is interesting to note that in poetry about Hagar that focuses on explicitly feminist issues (as opposed to the national/ethnic issue), these two topics – motherhood and the Sarah-Hagar conflict, are notably absent. Chaya Shacham points out that female poets who find in the story of Hagar “processes of feminine initiation” tend to try distance themselves from the stereotypical image of woman as mother. The minimal treatment of the conflict with Sarah stems from the fact that the struggle between two women over a man bolsters his privileged status (Shacham, *Nashim u-masekhot* (above, n. 3), 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)