Political Readings of the Hagar Narratives in Poems by Jewish Women

# 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, Else Lasker-Schüler, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen and Rivka Miriam.

# Introduction

The poems that this essay will discuss can be regarded as a modern type of midrash.[[1]](#footnote-1) Biblical narrative is characterized by brevity; its style is laconic and much is left unsaid.[[2]](#footnote-2) The feminist reader who pays close attention to what elements of a narrative are addressed cannot help but see that the female characters in the Hebrew Bible tend to remain obscure.[[3]](#footnote-3) Midrash and other literary works have filled the gaps in the biblical narrative, using biblical characters to give expression to the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of their authors and retelling biblical plots to illustrate dilemmas of contemporary life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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)

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 essay, I will discuss poems about Hagar that address the nationalist theme either directly or indirectly. This theme is often expressed alongside or integrated with feminist concerns. I will not discuss poems that are concerned exclusively with feminist issues,[[6]](#footnote-6) i.e., poems where Hagar’s story serves as a psychological model of femininity without that being related to the tensions between the peoples.

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 modern 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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. These 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.

The female perspective is conspicuous in these poems. This paper is about women writing about a woman[[8]](#footnote-8) – female poets writing about Hagar expressing Hagar’s silenced voice[[9]](#footnote-9) as well as her own, as disclosed by her 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.

# The Biblical Narrative

The story of Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant, arises as a response to the barrenness of her mistress,[[10]](#footnote-10) 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).[[11]](#footnote-11) 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[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It appears that Sarah’s plan is successful; Abraham accepts her advice and Hagar becomes pregnant 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.)[[14]](#footnote-14) and promises that she will have many descendants. The angel addresses her a third time and refers specifically to her son to the name Ishmael that she will give him (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,[[15]](#footnote-15) he accedes to it when God supports Sarah’s desire to banish Hagar and Ishmael (verses 12-13).[[16]](#footnote-16)

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.”[[17]](#footnote-17) 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).

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,[[18]](#footnote-18) 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,[[19]](#footnote-19) as revealed in her flight into the desert.[[20]](#footnote-20) The figure of Hagar shifts form constantly within the variegated weave of poems in different styles.

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. 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[[21]](#footnote-21) and criticizing Hagar.[[22]](#footnote-22) Most of these 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.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This article will discuss poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zerubavela Sasonkin, Nava Semel, Bracha Serri, Else Lasker-Schüler, Shirley Kaufman, Lynn Gottlieb, Lally Alexander, Hava Pinhas-Cohen and Rivka Miriam.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The poems we will deal with were written by Jewish women. Most of them are native Israeli poets who wrote in Hebrew; some immigrated to the land of Israel or lived there for a portion of their lives who wrote in a variety of languages: Shirley Kaufman and Lynn Gottlieb wrote in English and Else Lasker-Schüler wrote in German. 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 of language, Hebrew, English, German, or Arabic or a mixture of some of these, has poetic, thematic and political significance.

It must be noted that that the poems discussed in this article relate to nationalist/political issues to different degrees. Some refer to these issues nearly explicitly while in others the nationalist/political themes are at most implicit and indirect.

I will divide the poems to be discussed into three groups: in the first group, “Eternal Warfare” (the poems by Ravikovitch, Sasonkin, Semel and Serri), the poets express their frustration and pain over the struggle that began as a personal conflict between two women and became a historical/national struggle – and eternal war – between two nations. The second group of poems, “Overcoming the Political” (the poems by Lasker-Schüler, Kaufman, Gottlieb and Alexander), express empathy and understanding for Hagar. While acknowledging Hagar and Ishmael’s role as national/political symbols, these poems emphasize the humanity of Hagar (and Ishmael). In the third group, ‘Violence and Eroticism’ (the poems by Hava Pinhas Cohen and Rivka Miriam), the poets use the Hagar story to depict the complex, two-sided relations between the two peoples, who live together and are connected and yet continue to fight one another.

We will begin with the first group of poems. In these poems, the political is expressed through the prism of motherhood and femininity.

# Eternal Warfare

Dahlia Ravikovitch[[25]](#footnote-25) (1936-2005) was one of the greatest modern Hebrew poets. Her poem “Jealous Woman,”[[26]](#footnote-26) describes old Sarah's jealousy of the young Hagar. The poem begins with the description of the wrinkles on the aging Sarah’s neck and the jealousy that destroyed her joy in life:

חריצים נצנצו בחלקת צוארה

מקנאה וחרון שמחתה נבללה

Cracks sprouted on her smooth neck

Jealousy and rage confounded her joy

Sarah's bitter jealousy led to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael:

שְׁנָתָהּ נָדְדָה וְלִבָּהּ נֶאֱטַם

עֵינֶיהָ דְּלוּחוֹת מֵחֲשָׁד וְשִׂנְאָה.

לְפֶתַע אָמְרָה לוֹ שָׂרָה: אַבְרָהָם

גָּרֵשׁ מִבֵּיתִי אֶת הָגָר וְאֶת בְּנָהּ

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.

Ravikovich offers a psychological justification for Sarah's harsh behavior toward Hagar and Ishmael.[[27]](#footnote-27) Ravikovich 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 which are to be paid by Sarah and Hagar’s descendants who will fight one another throughout history:

וּבַבֹּקֶר הַהוּא עִם הָנֵץ הַחַמָּה

גֹּרְשׁוּ אֵם וּבְנָהּ וְצַפַּחַת הַמַּיִם

וּמֵאָז לֹא חָדְלוּ מִלְחָמוֹת עַל הָעִיר

צָעִיר מַכֶּה בְּכוֹר וְהַבְּכוֹר יַךְ צָעִיר

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)

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 (האם יאשים את שרה כי מרה היא/ Will he blame Sarah for she is bitter?) since she is concerned by the threat posed by Ishmael, who is called “a wild man, of mighty arm” (פרא אדם אדיר קבורת). Sarah asks: “Who will defend my son Isaac, my very small child?” (מי יגונן על בני יצחק, על בני הקטן מאד?).

Ravikovitch presents Hagar as a woman in the bloom of youth (“blooming like fruit in an orchard”), who, together with her son, has enraptured Abraham, while Sarah is a sad, aging woman.

יָדָהּ לַבָּצֵק הִיא שָׁלְחָה כְּתָמִיד

וּלְפֶתַע שְׁטָפוּהָ דִּמְעוֹת עֵינַיִם.

תִּשְׁעִים שְׁנוֹת חַיֶּיהָ נָתְנוּ בָּה סִימָן.

הִלְבִּין **הַשֵּׁעָר** וְחָלְשׁוּ הַיָּדַיִם.

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.

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:

מִי יְגוֹנֵן עַל בְּנָהּ הַקָּטָן

כְּשֶׁיַּגִּיעַ יוֹמָהּ לְבֵית עוֹלָמִים

וּמַה יִּהְיֶה עַל יִצְחָק הַיָּתוֹם...

Who will protect her little boy

When the day comes for her final rest?

What will happen to orphaned Isaac…

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.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Like Ravikovitch’s poem, the poem “Hagar’s Oath in the Wilderness,”[[30]](#footnote-30) by Zerubavela Sasonkin[[31]](#footnote-31) (1929-2004) refers to the political through the prism of motherhood and femininity. However, 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 from him and Sarah for banishing her and her son:

אֲנִי אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ

בַּעֲלוֹת הַסַּהַר

בְּקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה

וְאֶל שָׂרַי / בִּילֵל-תַּנִּים

בַּחֲשֵׁכָה.

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.

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.

אני אבוא מן המדבר

לטול את נדריך

ומשרי

את חלומה.

I will come from the wilderness

To take that which you vowed

And from Sarai

Her dream.

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:

אֲנִי אֶרְאֶה אֶת בְּנִי

גָּדֵל בֵּין הַחוֹלוֹת

כְּדֶקֶל

וְאֶת בִּנְךָ מוּבָל

לַעֲקֵדָה.

I will see my son

Grow up in the sand

Like a date palm

And your son led

to sacrifice.

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 the sand of the desert):

אני לבני אתפור

כתונת חול ושמש

ובלילות קרה אוריד

שמיכת הכוכבים.

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.

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 shoulders/ grasp the hands of the boy / his head bent in hallucinations” (את שתי כתפי הנשרפות / לופתות ידי הילד / שמוט ראשו בהזיות). Hagar swears that she will survive and the natural powers that she mentions serve as witnesses to her mythic oath:

חיה יחיה ילדי

ירבו כחול בניו –

את זאת היום אני

הגר, לך נשבעת,

עדים לי המדבר

השמש במרומיו.

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.

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).[[32]](#footnote-32) This poem is in intertextual dialogue with both the biblical narrative and her father’s poem from 1947, “Hagar,”[[33]](#footnote-33) which relates to the laying of a water pipe for the communities of the Negev desert. Penn takes 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.[[34]](#footnote-34)

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 the water will never again be spent from the waterskin.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The poet Nava Semel,[[36]](#footnote-36)(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 we will discuss below is an example of this.

In the poem “Sarah, Sarah”[[37]](#footnote-37) the author creates a new narrative that seeks to rectify the biblical story. 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.[[38]](#footnote-38) 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:

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.

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.

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: לְהִכָּנֵס [to enter] – נֵס [miracle], שׁוּרָה [line] – שָׂרָה [Sarah], הָגָר [Hagar] – מדְבָּר [wilderness]. The urgency is further emphasized by the rhyme of the closing words of the two verses, צָרוֹת [suffering] – דוֹרוֹת [time, lit. generations] that bring out the poet’s feeling that an opportunity has been missed and the tragic past cannot be changed.

The narrator turns to Sarah and pleads with her:

שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה,

תְּנִי לְיִצְחָק, תְּנִי לְיִשְׁמָעֵאל

לִהְיוֹת אִַחִים מְאֻשָּׁרִים

שֶׁיְּשַׂחֲקוּ, שֶׁיִּגְדְּלו יַחַד

שֶׁיִהְיוּ חֲבֵרִים

מִכָּאן וְעַד סוֹף הַדּוֹרוֹת.

Sarah, Sarah/ Allow Isaac, allow Ishmael

To be brothers happily

Let them play, let them grow up together

Let them be friends

From now until the end of time.

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. Her writing focused on Judaism, Mizrahi[[39]](#footnote-39) identity, feminism, and left-wing politics.[[40]](#footnote-40) Her poems are interlaced with biblical texts and political themes and present the worldview of a Jewish Mizrahi woman who is provocatively and remonstratively reexamining 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. Utilizing the character of Hagar, the banished Egyptian maidservant, Serri expresses her socially conscious feminist protest using political imagery. Like the poems discussed above, the poem “Aliza Says" protests Hagar’s banishment:[[42]](#footnote-42)

שכולם הלכו לתפילה

במערת המכפלה.

שכולם בוכים

על שרה

שלא נשארה עקרה.

שכולם ברחם הגדולה

הכפולה

במלחמת התאומים

על הירושה ועל הנחלה.

That everyone went to pray

At the Cave of Machpela.

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.

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.” The poet identifies with Hagar, the exiled outsider of inferior social status:

ונשארתי במדבר

עם הגר

ועם ילדה ישמעאל... ונשארתי שפחה...

נמלטת

מהגרת

מפגרת

פילגש

קפואת רגש

מעונה

בלי טינה

בלי שנאה

נרדפת

בורחת

פליטה

זרה

יהודייה

בלי מהות

בלי זהות

קפואה

עקרה.

And I remained in the desert

With Hagar

And with her child Ishmael…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.

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 two-syllable rhyme (between the word נמלטת [escaping] and the chain of adjectives מהגרת [immigrant], מפגרת [retarded], פלגש [concubine], נרדפת [persecuted] all generate a musical intensity that accentuates the poet’s despair.

Serri was the author of many anti-war poems[[43]](#footnote-43) and identified herself religiously and nationally as a stranger and refugee. In the poem, she identifies with Isaac who is bound on the altar:

אבל אני נשארתי ילדה

עם יצחק

בעקדה

ובשבילי הוא מעולם

לא קם

משם.

But I remained a girl

With Isaac

At the binding

And for me, he

Never rose

From there.

The last three lines of the poem rhyme, with a diminishing number of words in each line – the first line containing three words, the second two, and the third just one (ובשבילי הוא מעולם/ לא קם / משם). This device emphasizes Serri’s idea that 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. Her 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)

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**

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 Else Lasker-Schüler[[47]](#footnote-47) (1869-1945), a German-Jewish poet and playwright famous for her bohemian lifestyle in Berlin as well as her poetry. She was one of the few women affiliated with the Expressionist movement. Lasker-Schüler fled Nazi Germany and lived out the rest of her life in Jerusalem. In her lyric poems, she emphasized her belonging to the Jewish people and the Jewish homeland although in practice she never acclimated to the culture of her new home and lived a lonely life there.[[48]](#footnote-48) Even after immigrating to the land of Israel, she continued to write in German rather than Hebrew, and her poems reveal her affiliation with German rather than Israeli culture.

Lasker-Schüler’s poem contains biblical topics and motifs and it is no surprise that the German-Jewish refugee was interested in the story of Hagar, the foreign (as is alluded to by her name Hagar, read as *hager*, the stranger) maidservant who was banished to the wilderness.[[49]](#footnote-49) The experience of persecution as a woman who is an Other generated in Lasker-Schüler a deep sense of identification with Hagar. Moreover, it appears that the characters of Hagar and Ishmael, which are connected to the wilderness, the opposite of civilization, symbolized for Lasker-Schüler the “noble savage,” an image that was important for the Primitivist movement in which Lasker-Schüler was interested.[[50]](#footnote-50) The noble savage (the word “Negro” referring to Ishmael in the poem alludes to this figure) symbolizes the authentic man who has not been corrupted by Western civilization; he is considered to be superior to the products of culture.

The tone of Lasker-Schüler’s poem “Hagar and Ishmael”[[51]](#footnote-51) is lyrical and personal, and it lacks the belligerent tone of Semel’s and Serri’s poems, not to mention Sasonkin’s. This tone could perhaps change our perspective about the modern conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael and allow for a more optimistic attitude.

Lasker-Schüler imagines the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael growing up together in Abraham’s house. From the perspective of the children, the conflict exists only in the background. In contrast to the midrashic authors’ interpretation of Ishmael “laughing”[[52]](#footnote-52) as the expression of his reprehensible behavior toward Isaac, this poem raises the possibility that the half-brothers played together innocently:

Abraham's little sons played with shells

And floated mother-of-pearl boats;

Then Isaac leaned anxiously on Ishmael

And the two black swans sang sadly

For their colorful world, very dark tones,

And the rejected Hagar quickly stole her son.

She shed her big tear into his little one…

While the children engage in innocent play, black swans sing a sad song, which is heard against the backdrop of the children’s colorful world and alludes to the tragic future. The poet imagines that the brothers loved one another,[[53]](#footnote-53) and it was their mothers’ conflict that separated them. The poem concludes with wordplay about colors that emphasizes Hagar and Ishmael’s black skin and white teeth (which in turn allude to the black swans mentioned above) in contrast to the yellow sand of the desert:

But the sun burned brightly on the desert

And Hagar and her son sank onto the yellow fur

And bit the white Negro teeth into the hot sand.

It appears that Else Lasker-Schüler, the German-Jewish refugee who settled in Jerusalem, identified with Hagar, the dark-skinned Egyptian Other, whom she imaginatively saw collapsing, together with her son, on the burning yellow fur of the sandy desert.

Else Lasker-Schüler, the German Expressionist, makes use in this poem of contrasting colors as a means of strongly expressing emotions (the blackness of the swans and Hagar and Ishmael’s skin is described in contrast to the whiteness of their teeth and the yellow sand of the desert).

This poem calls to mind Nava Semel’s previously discussed poem (Lasker-Schüler’s poem was published long before Semel’s). In both poems the two [half-]brothers, Isaac and Ishmael play and grow up together happily. However, while Semel presents a pessimistic description of the reality of the two boys and the future, Lasker-Schüler’s interpretation of the biblical reality contains an optimistic strand, which inspires hope of reconciliation.

Overcoming the political and nationalist conflict through empathy is also a theme in the poems by Kaufman, Gottlieb and Alexander that we will discuss next. 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.

From a poet who was the product of German culture, we will move now to a product of American culture. Shirley Kaufman[[54]](#footnote-54) (1923-2016) was 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.[[55]](#footnote-55) She was troubled by the political and security situation in Israel and that is also expressed in her poems, including the one we will discuss below.

In the poem “Déjà Vu,”[[56]](#footnote-56) Shirley Kaufman transports both biblical women, Sarah and Hagar, into modern Israeli reality; Sarah (or Sara) is an Israeli tour guide and Hagar an Arab woman praying in the Dome of the Rock. In a dramatic coincidence, their paths cross:

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

around their necks the place

where Mohammed flew up to heaven.

Hagar is on her knees

in the women’s section, praying.

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.

Sarah and Hagar’s motherly solidarity is presented by their common hopes for their sons:

Whatever they wanted for their sons

Will be wanted forever, success,

the right wife, they should be

good to their mothers.

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:

there’s nothing to forgive,

I got what I wanted from the old man.

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.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The next poem was also composed by a Jewish-American poet. Lynn Gottlieb[[58]](#footnote-58) (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.[[59]](#footnote-59) In the poem discussed below, she describes Sarah and Hagar’s complex relationship uses the biblical narrative to express her belief that our pain and suffering should inspire us to hear the other side’s suffering. Like in the poems discussed previously, this poem, which was written in English and includes an expression in Arabic, there is symbolic significance to the choice of language. As we will see later, Gottlieb’s use of the word ‘Achti’ (meaning sister in Arabic), is part of her call in the poem for reconciliation.

Gottlieb’s poem, “Achti,”[[60]](#footnote-60) 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:

They used me to steal your womb,

Claim your child,

As if I owned your body and your labor.

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.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In this poem, the poet addresses Hagar in Arabic, ‘Achti,’ meaning ‘my sister.’[[62]](#footnote-62) 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:

Achti,

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 “the stranger”/*Ha-ger*,

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

The motif of names is central to the poem; Sarah apologizes to Hagar for calling her “the stranger”[[63]](#footnote-63) and afterward confesses to her:

Forgive me, Achti

For the sin of not knowing your name.

The poet understands the name ‘Hagar’ to mean ‘the stranger.’ 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.[[64]](#footnote-64)

In the poem, it is the binding of Isaac, Sarah’s son that makes it possible for her to recognize her unjust banishment of Hagar and Ishmael:[[65]](#footnote-65)

Only at the end,

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 in the silence

of my sin.

For Gottlieb, it is Sarah, not the angel of the biblical narrative, who calls out and restrains Abraham at the last moment.

Lally Alexander (1959 -)[[66]](#footnote-66) 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 reexamining women’s place in the world, particularly the Jewish world.

The poem “Maidservant”[[67]](#footnote-67) by Lally Alexander emphasizes the solidarity of women and mothers. Hagar is not mentioned by name but only by her description, “maidservant,” which emphasizes her inferior status. The poet/narrator remembers having seen Hagar in the desert:

בְּאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם, כָּךְ אֲנִי זוֹכֶרֶת,

הָיָה מִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע שָׁקֵט וּמְתַעְתֵּעַ.

On that day, so I remember,

The wilderness of Beersheba was quiet and deceptive.

She did not share Hagar’s difficult experience as a mother:

לֹא הִשְׁלַכְתִּי יֶלֶד תַּחַת שִׂיחַ,

לֹא אָמַרְתִּי אַל-אֶרְאֶה.

אַךְ עִקּוּל גַּבֵּךְ הַנִּשְׁבָּר

וְחֻמֵּךְ וְחֹם הַמִּדְבָּר

סַהַר עֲקֵבֵךְ, נִשְׁכַּח,

נוֹשֵׁק לַעֲקֵבִי.

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.

The rhyme of the words הַנִּשְׁבָּר [breaking] and הַמִּדְבָּר [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.

Hava Pinhas-Cohen’s poem “Menachem my Beloved”[[68]](#footnote-68) alludes to Sarah’s statement regarding Hagar, “perhaps I shall be built through her” (Gen 16:2).[[69]](#footnote-69) 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.

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:

בְּסֻכַּת הַדְּרָכִים עַל כְּבִישׁ גּוֹלָנִי כַּרְמִיאֵל

At the roadside stand on the Golani-Carmiel highway.

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:

לֹא עָמַדְתִּי בַּפִּתּוּי וְנָעַצְתִּי שִׁנַּיִם בִּסְגֹל בְּשָׂרָהּ

שֶׁל תְּאֵנָה וּבִלְשׁוֹנִי אָסַפְתִּי וְהִפְנַמְתִּי הָעֵדֶן הַמָּתוֹק

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

of a fig, and with my tongue gathered and imbibed the Edenic sweetness.

The fruit seller proclaims in Arabic:

חִילוּ חִילוּ תְּאֵנֵי הַבָּלָדִי

Be sweet, be sweet, my *baladi* fig.

The poet then calls out to him and to all those driving by:

וְקָרָאתִי אֵלָיו וְאֶל הַמְּכוֹנִיּוֹת עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ

bloody בָּלָדִי

bloody בָּלָדִי

 יָא, אָחִי, יָחוּל אוֹתָנוּ הָאֱלֹהִים.

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

bloody, *baladi*/ bloody, *baladi*

Ho, my brother, may God sweeten us.

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 blood shed 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. The poet and fruit seller part:

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

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.

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 (אָמַרְתִּי [I said], קִנַּחְתִּי [I wiped], עִגַּלְתִּי [rubbed a circle], אָמַרְתִּי [I said], נָסַעְתִּי [I drove off]) and the phonic effect of their rhyming.

This poem, “Menachem my Beloved,” was published in a collection called “Messiah” whose subtitle is “Poems Told to me by Menachem my Beloved.” ‘Menachem’ is one of the names of the messiah according to tradition.[[70]](#footnote-70) 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[[71]](#footnote-71) (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”[[72]](#footnote-72) exhibits a mixture of violence and eroticism. The nations of Israel and Egypt are “clinched with one another” and the nature of their clinch is unclear, whether in love or hatred:

הֶהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְרַיִם לְפוּתוֹת זוֹ בַּזּוֹ כִּשְׁנֵי מִתְאַבְּקִים

אוֹ כְּאוֹהֲבִים שֶׁחוֹמְדִים זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְהֵם נְסוֹגִים

וּדְבֵקִים, נְסוֹגִים וּדְבֵקִים.

Were Israel and Egypt clinched one the other like two wrestlers

Or like lovers who desire one another? And they retreat

And conjoin, retreat and conjoin.

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:

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

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

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 –

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.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

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,[[74]](#footnote-74) sounds Pharaoh’s moaning. These two morally complex stories become the paradigm for the ambivalent relationship between Israel and Egypt. The intense rhyming in the first verse (מִתְאַבְּקִים [wrestlers], אוֹהֲבִים [lovers], חוֹמְדִים [desire], נְסוֹגִים [retreat], דְבֵקִים [conjoin], נְסוֹגִים [retreat], דְבֵקִים [conjoin]) emphasizes the ambivalence of the lovers/enemies, while the rhyme in the second verse (סְעָרָה [frenzy], צְּעִירָה [young],הֶהָרָה [pregnant], שָׂרָה [Sarah],בְּשָׂרָהּ [her flesh].

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

כְּשֶׁהַשּׁוֹט רַק חוּט מְקַשֵּׁר, כְּשֶׁפִּיתֹם וְרַעַמְסֵס רַק אֶבֶן פִּנָּה

בַּגַּעְגּוּעַ שֶׁאֵינֶנּוּ פּוֹסֵק, בַּגַּעְגּוּעַ הַמִּטַּלְטֵל, הַיּוֹרֵד וְנוֹסֵק

שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ כְּסוּת וּשְׁאֵר וְעוֹנָה.

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.

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.[[75]](#footnote-75)

# Conclusion

The poems about Hagar written by female poets discussed here all touch in some way 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.

Some of the poems have an anti-war element (the poems of Semel and Serri) and others are more personal and lyrical (Lasker-Schüler’s poem). Some emphasize the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar and others the desire to reconcile. In a number of the poems, 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. 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).

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.[[76]](#footnote-76) The poets especially make use of the motherhood motif[[77]](#footnote-77) 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. 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. David Stern claims that the midrashic imagination has undergone a revival in the larger Jewish community and shown itself capable of exercising a powerful influence on a new type of contemporary Jewish writing. See: David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998). Jody Myers writes about midrashim written by women. According to her, all the perspectives of all the authors she discusses draw from their experiences as women. They all use midrash to raise the self-esteem of contemporary Jewish women. See: Jody Myers, “The Midrashic Enterprise of Contemporary Jewish Women,” *Jews and Gender*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119–141, esp. 119–120. Wendy Zierler argues that over the past few decades, it has become a commonplace to look at midrash as a form of imaginative literature or poetry and, at the same time, to read Hebrew poetry that reworks or re-imagine episodes from the Bible as a form of modern midrash. 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-1)
2. See: Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 10-11. James Adam Redfield tries to answer the question: Is it possible to give a coherent account of what the Bible does not say? See: 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. On this topic see also: James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1, 3 (1981): 219. Sternberg and Perry maintain that the biblical text guides the reader to the possible “closings” of the gaps. See: 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-2)
3. See: Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, “Introduction,” *Nashim* 24: Feminist Receptions of Biblical Women (Spring 2013): 5-10. Ilana Pardes explores the tense dialogue between dominant patriarchal discourses of the Bible and the female counter-voices. See:  Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 4, 7, distinguishes between poems that interpret the Bible and those that make a figurative use of the Bible. See also: 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), 21-22. Malka Shaked also describes the unbreakable bond between the author and his interpretation of the biblical text. See: Malka Shaked, “The Figure of Moses in Modern Hebrew Poetry,” AJS Review 28 (2004): 157-172, esp. 158. [↑](#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, conceal 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. Many poems that address modern feminist concerns make use of the figure of Hagar: Hagar is the maidservant who is treated as an object; Hagar is the surrogate mother, who gives birth for her mistress; Hagar is the concubine who is the object of the jealousy of the legal wife, or the fertile woman who inspires the envy of the barren woman; Hagar has been presented as a homeless single mother, whose life and whose son’s life depend on the kindness of others. The poems that are mostly concerned with such feminist issues deserve their own treatment. In these poems, Hagar’s story is not presented as a historical event with political and national implications. Here is a short list of feminist poems about Hagar that I will not discuss: The poem “The Love of Theresa di Moun”by Leah Goldberg, which uses the story of Abraham’s banishment of his maidservant Hagar in order to relate to unrequited love that is founded on differences in social status (Leah Goldberg, *Poems* vol. II (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poʻalim, 1986, Heb.), 158); the poem “Fresh Belly”by Avigail Antman which expresses the jealousy and frustration of woman feels when confronting the pregnancy of a younger woman (Avigail Antman, *In My future Life: Poems* (Ra’anana: Even Hoshen, 2014; Heb.), 59); the long poem “Hagar” by Anda Pinkerfeld Amir that focuses on Abraham and Hagar’s relationship and through it presents the story of all women who have experienced separation, banishment and humiliation from the man they loved (Anda Pinkerfeld Amir, *Gadish: Poems* ( Tel Aviv: Devir, 1952; Heb.), 20-35); the poem ‘Hagar’ by Shin Shifra where Hagar symbolizes the fate of women in general, without reference to their personal status (Shin Shifra, *Desert Songs* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1972; Heb.), 7). Chaya Shacham relates to the poems of Amir-Pinkerfeld and Sh. Shifra in her article that discusses poems by women who find in Hagar’s story “processes of female apprenticeship” She claims that these poets drew upon the figure of Hagar mostly in order to address the breakdown of male-female relationships. 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; es 125-126. On this topic; Wendy Zierler writes: “Early Hebrew women poets, several of whom wrote poetic revisions of the story of Hagar, anticipate these feminist biblical interpretations, reclaiming Hagar as a bona fide spiritual precursor.” See 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; es 112. Aliza Shenhar discusses poems about Hagar written by men and expressing a male voice. See Aliza Shenhar, “Do to Her as You Like – the Exiled Maidservant,” *Ahuvot u-senuot* (Love and Hate: Biblical Wives, Lovers, and Mistresses) (Haifa: Pardes, 2011; Heb.), 17-56. 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-6)
7. 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*”: “The mistress’s son sits below / and the maidservant’s son rules over him.” <https://benyehuda.org/read/15074>. On this topic, see also Aviva Schussman, “Hagar and Ishmael in Islam,” *Qor’ot mibereshit: Israeli Women Writing on the Women of* Genesis, ed. Ruth Ravitzky (Tel Aviv, 1999; Heb.), 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Feminist literary scholarship has disclosed how the use of canonical texts, like the Bible, by female poets can be understood as an act of challenging patriarchal attitudes. See Alicia S. Ostriker, *Stealing the language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (Boston, 1986), 211-213. On female poets who successfully incorporate canonical texts into their poetry while adjusting them to their needs, see E. Showalter, ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,’ in: E. Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York, 1985), 243-266. Tova Cohen discusses female Hebrew poets’ appropriation of “the language of the father.” See 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-8)
9. Aliza Elyon Israeli’s monologue is relevant in this context. In it, Sarah complains about the silencing of women’s voices: “I ask for forgiveness…In the books written about me, they did not let me speak…” (149). Sarah recounts how she banished Hagar to the wilderness and called after her that this conflict is not just between the two of them but is rather a conflict for the generations. See Aliza Elyon, “Where have you been, my son? – A Monologue from a Play,” *Qor’ot mibereshit* (above, n. 7), 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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* (above, n. 7), 127-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 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-11)
12. 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-12)
13. It is likely that Sarah, in saying “It may be that I shall be builded up through her” (Gen. 16: 2), expected to adopt the baby that Hagar would bear. Similarly, after Rachel gave her maidservant Bilha to Jacob and Bilha bore a son, Rachel declared “and has given me a son” (Gen. 30:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 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-14)
15. The verse indicates that Abraham was distressed by the thought of banishing his son, “the matter was very grave in the eyes of Abraham on account of his son” (Gen. 21:11) but does not mention that banishing Hagar distressed him. However, in the next verse, when God reassures Abraham, He says, “let it not be grave in your eyes about the lad and about your maidservant” (Gen. 21:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 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-16)
17. The fact that God did not hear Hagar’s voice but only the “the voice of the lad” (21:17) is significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 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-18)
19. 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-19)
20. Hagar’s courage and independence appear in a number of poems and are particularly notable in Sasonkin’s poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 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 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. Given this tradition, the interpretations of Nachmanides and of Rabbi David Qimḥi are noteworthy, as they both criticize Sarah’s behavior (See their commentaries to Gen. 21:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Some *midrashim* note Hagar’s foreign origins and interpret it negatively. 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.” The midrashic authors also 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). There are even commentators who question Hagar’s motherly devotion and claim its source is in here foreignness. 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-22)
23. 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 poem “The Mother’s Eye” (*‘Ein ha-’Em*) by Yitzhak Lamdan (1899-1954). see: *All the Poems of Yitzhak Lamdan* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1973; Heb.), 163. The justification of Hagar’s banishing in Lamdan’s poem is consistent with the mainstream midrashic tradition of justifying Abraham and Sarah and criticizing Hagar. Lamdan also uses the biblical story to express his political/nationalist agenda. Nevertheless, it appears that the contrast between Lamdan’s approach to Hagar in his poem and that of the poets discussed here is not only due to the difference in the authors’ gender. Lamdan was part of the “Third Aliyah,” the post-World War I immigration of European Jews to the land of Israel, and his immigration was certainly the expression of his nationalist-Zionist ideology. The female poets discussed in this article (with the exception of Else Lasker-Schüler) all wrote towards the end of the 20th century or at the beginning of the 21st. For them, Israel is an independent country rather than an insecure Jewish community struggling for survival, and they all live in societies that stress individualist values. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This study will discuss poems by famous poets alongside those written by lesser-known authors, granting equal status to all. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 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-25)
26. Dahlia Ravikovitch, “Jealous Woman,” *Iton 77 Literary Magazine* (July, 1977, Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Malka Shaked, *Lanetzaḥ ’anagnekh*, 515. [↑](#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: “He gave her a son who will be a wild man, to oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah in many different ways” (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,* 551, 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-29)
30. Zrubavela Sasonkin, *Shkifuyot* [Reflections] )Tel-Aviv, 1992, Heb.), 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Zerubavela Sasonkin was an Israeli poet, songwriter and actress who was the poet Alexander Penn’s first child. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 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-32)
33. Alexander Penn, “Hagar,” *Roofless Nights* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985; Heb.), 139-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Shacham, *Nashim u-masekhot* (above, n. 2), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Shacham, *Nashim u-masekhot* (above, n. 2), 122-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 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-36)
37. Nava Semel, “Sarah, Sarah,” *Mizmor laTanakh* (Ra'anana: Even Hoshen, 2015; Heb.), 34. The poem “Blood Brothers” (p. 17) that describes Cain’s murder of Abel, is another example of a biblical narrative wherein Semel expresses her frustration at the absence of peace in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 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. The poem depicts the life situations of tens of thousands of foreign workers who are part of Israeli society. The narrator in the poem is Naomi, who tries to convince her daughter-in-law Ruth not to come with her to Israel. Nava Semel connects Ruth to Hagar, two women who are “Others” who symbolize the female foreign workers. In the eyes of the permanent residents of Israel, who, according to Semel, have lost their basic human compassion, these women will always be foreign women who are subject to abuse. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 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-39)
40. The political aspects of Serri's writing express left-wing ideology and issues relating to Mizrahi culture and identity in Israel.

    See: “[Ha-’isha ‘im ha-’or ha-ganuz](https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/obit/1.2028874),” [The Woman with the Hidden Light] [Ha'aretz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ha%27aretz) (Hebrew). May 24, 2013. Retrieved July 20, 2021. Her often overtly political and feminist poetry draws heavily on the metaphoric tradition of the great Yemenite poets such as Shalom Shabazi. See: Henriette Dahan Kaleb (ed.), *In Blessing Secret : the Poetry of Bracha Serri* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2003). [↑](#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: “Our mother Sarah / A barren matron… the nearest maidservant / She tried to abuse. / Just a jealous woman / Lacking sensitivity / Struggling against the rights of the concubine.” Regarding Hagar: “Single mother, neglected / Whose only son was found in the desert / Nearly dead of thirst and fear.” (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. 37), 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. Yoḥai Openheimer discusses the question of the degree to which Mizrahi poetry’s attitude to Arabs expresses more than a political stance to the “other” nationality and is also a central means of generating a Judeo-Arab identity for the poets. 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. See Sigrid Bauschinger, “Else Lasker-Schüler,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. access date: February 11, 2021 <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lasker-schueler-else>> [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See Gitta Avinor, “*HaPoretet ‘al HaPesanter HaKaḥol”* [The Woman who Played on the Blue Piano], (Haifa: The Haifa Authors’ Project, 1974, Heb.), 84-86. <https://library.osu.edu/projects/hebrew-lexicon/01680-files/01680002-files/01680002-084-086.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See below in the discussion of Lynn Gottlieb’s poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Samuel Jacob Spinner, “Else Lasker-Schüler and Uri Zvi Greenberg in “The Society of Savage Jews’: Art, Politics, and Primitivism.” *Prooftexts* 38, no. 1 (2020): 60–93. https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.38.1.03. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Lasker-Schüler wrote in German. The English translation of the quotations here is by Joshua Amaru. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See above, n. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The fraternal solidarity between Isaac and Ishmael depicted in the poem recalls the midrash on their joining forces to bury Abraham. See Rashi’s commentary on Gen. 25:9 (following Genesis Rabba 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. 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-54)
55. Lois Miller Bar-Yaacov, [“Shirley Kaufman.”](http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kaufman-shirley)  [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. 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-56)
57. 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-57)
58. See “Lynn Gottlieb,” *Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of Aice*. < <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lynn-gottlieb>> [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. 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-59)
60. Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: Feminist Vision of a Renewed* Judaism (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Amit, “And why were the Mothers Barren?,” (above, n. 6), 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. 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.” This phrase, evoking warmth and intimacy, is derived from the verse “we have a little sister” (Song of Songs 8:8) alluding there, according to the Rabbinic interpretation, to the congregation of Israel. Using it to refer to Hagar is laden with significance. 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-62)
63. 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. 3), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. For example: “Rabbi Yitzḥak said: The members of Abraham our forefather’s household were viewers (of angels) and she was used to seeing them” (Genesis Rabba 45:7). According to this midrash, angels were regular visitors in the Abraham’s household and its members, among them Hagar, developed the capacity to perceive them. This midrash bolsters Abraham’s status at the expense of that of Hagar. Another example: “She said, ‘not only did it occur that I saw an angel together with my mistress but also my mistress who was with me did not perceive…’ Rav Shmuel bar Naḥman said: It is analogous to a noblewoman to whom the king said: ‘come before me.’ She came before him and was leaning on her maid; she hid her face, while her maid saw” (Genesis Rabba 45:10). This midrash praises Sarah for hiding her face out of modesty, resulting in her not seeing the king while it criticizes Hagar who not only immodestly looked upon the face of the king but afterwards bragged about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Scholars have pointed out the parallelism between the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and the binding of Isaac. See Uriel Simon, “Expulsion of Ishmael: The binding that preceded the binding of Isaac,” *Bakesh shalom ve-rodfehu* [*Seek Peace and Pursue It*] (Tel-Aviv: Sifre Hemed, 2002; Heb.), 54-57. See also Menachem Perri, “A Help-Meet for Him: Rebecca and her Groom Slave, and God's Coalition with the Women in the Biblical story,” *Alpayim* 29 (2005), 193-278 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Lally Alexander is a member of Kibbutz Ein Tzurim where she has a private clinic as an art therapist. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See: Lally Alexander, *Stones* (Haifa: Pardes, 2018; Heb.), 33. My thanks to Jeremy Kuttner for his translation of the poem into English. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See: [Hava Pinhas-Cohen](https://sites.google.com/site/havapinhascohenenglish/), *Mashiah* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003; Heb.), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Hava Pinhas-Cohen also refers to Hagar in her poem “Signs:” כְּמוֹ אֵשֶׁת לוֹט. / כְּמוֹ שָׂרָה מֵהָגָר בִּקְשָֹה אֶת יָדוֹ / הַקָּשָׁה שֶׁל אַבְרָם רַךְ-לֵבָב' (“Like Lot’s wife / Like Sarah, from Hagar she requested the hand / the harsh hand of Abram the gentle.”; “simanim,” *Mostly Color* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990; Heb.), 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. “Some say, Menachem son of Hezekiah is his name, as it is said: For Menachem, restorer of my soul, is far from me (Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 98b). ‘Menachem’ (meaning consoler) is the messiah’s name because he will console Israel, and in doing so bring an end the Exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See “[Rivka Miriam](https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/25000/Rivka-Miriam/en/tile),” *Poetry International Archives*. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See Rivka Miriam*, Moshe: Poems* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2011), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See Genesis Rabba 45:1; *Pirqei de-Rabbi ’Eli‘ezer* 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. This comment that Egypt is speaking Hebrew is significant and is another instance of the role of the choice of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The poem’s meaning can be clarified from other writing by its author: “The story of the Exodus, in my opinion, was not just a story of escape from a place where Israel suffered bitterly… The relationship between the Hebrews and Egypt was, in my eyes, a connection that included deep attraction. This can be seen already in the connection between Sarah and Pharaoh, or that between Abraham and Hagar the Egyptian… Israel, after escaping Egypt, expressed the desire to return to there and the Egyptian chased after them – and not only, I think, out of the wish to subjugate them. The enslavement was not merely physical bondage, it was emotional bondage of mutual attraction and need. Israel needed to escape from that in order to achieve self-realization.” (Rivka Miriam, “Like two lovers or like two wrestlers,” 929 website on Ex 11, published 30.6.2016; Heb.; <https://www.929.org.il/page/61/post/1721>) [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. 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. 2), 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. With regard to the motherhood motif, the poems about the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael recall poems by women about the binding of Isaac. For an example, see the poem “Request” by Hava Pinhas-Cohen (*Journey of the Doe* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985; Heb.), 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)