



**“She Called God by Name”:
Between Seeing and Hearing in the Meeting of Hagar and
the Angel**

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@mechonhadar.org

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In this week’s *parashah*, we learn an important lesson about the difference between seeing and hearing, both in the context of the specific relationship between Hagar and God and in terms of human relationships more broadly. Seeing connects with the concrete; to see people means to accept their presence, to reject the possibility of avoiding them. Moreover, the experience of *being* seen can help a person to see, thus creating the possibility of a mutual relationship.

This lesson emerges from two contrasting interpretations of the encounter between Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, and the Angel of God that Hagar sees, one offered by the Angel, and one by Hagar herself.

Chapter 16 of Bereishit opens with the following description: “Sarai, the wife of Avram had not borne children to him.” Sarai offers Avram (as Sarah and Avraham are known at this point in their lives) a solution, albeit partial, to her barrenness: “Behold, God has prevented me from giving birth. Be intimate with my maid, maybe I will be built up through her.”

Technically, this solution appears to be successful as Hagar does, in fact, become pregnant. However, Sarai’s plan has a negative impact on the relationship between herself and Hagar: “And her mistress was lightly esteemed by her.” Avram’s response to this difficult situation

is: "Avram said to Sarai, Your maid is under your authority. Do with her as you please. Sarai abused her and she ran away from her."

Hagar runs away to the desert and is found there by the Angel of God who engages Hagar in conversation:

"[The Angel] said: Hagar, Sarai's maid, where did you come from and where are you going?

She said: I am running away from Sarai, my mistress.

The Angel of God said to her: Return to your mistress and suffer the abuse at her hands.

The Angel of God said to her: I will greatly increase your offspring, and they will be too many to count."

The Angel tells Hagar that she is pregnant and advises her to return to her master's house. However, the conversation does not end there. It ends with an instruction to Hagar regarding the young child about to be born, "The Angel of God said to her: You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. And you will call him by the name Yishmael, for God has heard (*shama*) your suffering." The suffering that the angel refers to could be the suffering that Hagar has undergone in the past, due to Sarai's mistreatment: "She abused her." Since Hagar's suffering has been heard by God, the commandment to her is that she call her son Yishmael, meaning "God will hear". Even though the conjugation of the verb "to hear" in the name Yishmael is in the future tense, "God *will* hear", the explanation offered describes a past experience: "God has heard (*shama*) your suffering". The Angel of God is thus describing an act of active listening, listening that leads to action: God has heard your suffering and God has responded.

In effect, the reassuring words of the Angel deprive Hagar of her parental right and responsibility to name her own child.¹ Hagar does not refuse to comply, but subtly and perhaps subversively, responds by naming, not her child, but God: "She called the God who spoke to her, You are El Ro'i". This name itself is subversive, reflecting Hagar's understanding of the experience at hand: Whereas the child's name as suggested by the Angel of God refers to God as *hearing* (*shemu'ah*), Hagar's name for God "El Ro'i" refers to God as *seeing* (*ra'ayah*). Hagar changes the description of the way that God relates to her: Her experience is not one of being heard, but rather of being seen.

The name that Hagar puts forth, El Ro'i, can be understood in a number of ways. It could refer to God, establishing that God is the One who sees, or it could be referring to God as the One who grants vision and allows others to see. In addition, though it is a name for God, El Ro'i could also refer to Hagar's experience regarding sight. It could refer to Hagar as either seeing or being seen. The name could refer to Hagar's experience, that El Ro'i is the God who I, Hagar, have seen.² The name is thus connected to this specific and personal event that Hagar experienced when she actually *saw* God. Yet another way to understand the name is that it is not about Hagar seeing God, but actually about Hagar's being seen *by* God. "The God who sees me", Hagar.³ This is the possibility I would like to focus on, that the name that Hagar gives relates to her experience of being seen, exposing a significant gap between two varied interpretations of Hagar's experience.

Of course there is a certain similarity between seeing and hearing. These are two activities tied to two senses, and two processes that can include multiple inputs. One can hear many simultaneous voices in harmony, and one can see many images in one glance. Seeing, as well

¹ The Ramban (R. Moshe ben Naḥman, Spain and *Eretz Yisrael*, 13th c.) offers an interpretation on these verses that retains Hagar's naming rights over her son Yishmael. "You shall call him by the name Yishmael – The angel notified Hagar that his name would be Yishmael... and he told her that that she should name him thus and thereby remember that God heard her suffering".

² The Bekhor Shor (R. Yosef Bekhor Shor of Orleans, France, 12th c.) follows this path.

³ This is the approach of Radak (R. David Kimḥi, France, 12th-13th c.).

as hearing, is enriched by varied intensities—there is a loud or soft sound, a bright or dim light. However, a sound is perceived by its different frequencies, high or low pitch, whereas a picture is perceived by the composite of light that emerges from vertical and horizontal axes, and from its colors. Sound is perceived through one dimension, whereas images are perceived through three. Further, due to its spatial nature, the process of vision is very similar to the process of touch—both are spatial and somehow “tangible”. In contrast, the product of sound is more abstract, and might thus lend itself to more spiritual depth rather than concrete experience. Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that the angel relates to the more spiritual sense of hearing, whereas Hagar, a human being, related more to the tangible sense of sight.

Let's return to the proposed names and how they relate to Hagar's experience. Through the name Yishmael, the Angel points to the fact that Hagar has a voice, not only in the literal sense of something that makes a sound, but in the deeper sense of something that is heard and recognized. Hagar expresses suffering, her suffering is heard and is no longer ignored. In contrast to this, the name that Hagar supplies, El Ro'i, describes how it feels to have her *existence* recognized, to be seen rather than to be invisible. The experience of being listened to infuses Hagar with a sense of “there is a value to my voice, to my words,” whereas the experience of being seen infuses Hagar with the sense of “there is value to my existence, my being.” This is the opposite of the way that Sarai made Hagar feel. Hagar feels like she just can't exist under the same roof as Sarai, and that's why “she ran away from her.”

There is an additional component to the verse where Hagar gives God a name, “For she said, even here have I seen God after being seen.” The second half of this verse is very difficult to understand—the words are unclear and the tone is hard to read; the only thing that *is* clear is that the theme is seeing. This phrase is presented as an explanation of the name El Ro'i. Here Hagar is making a link between her being seen and her ability to see. As

if to say: I am able to see after God has seen me.⁴ This experience of visibility, of having been seen, both defines how Hagar sees God and is connected to her being a seeing person: "Even here I see after being seen". Hagar makes the connection between her having been seen and her ability to see others, as if she is saying, "After having the experience where others see me, I can also see others."

There is one more fascinating distinction between seeing and hearing which arises from this. The Angel describes hearing as something that causes a reaction, a reaction in the person who hears. In this incident it is God who hears Hagar's distress and then responds to it. However, Hagar describes seeing as something that evokes a response not in the one who does the looking, but in the one being seen.

Two things result from seeing after being seen: First Hagar sees God once he sees her, as if saying, "I saw you because you saw me". The seeing here is reciprocal. Being seen is an experience of being reified, and it leads Hagar to a reciprocal relationship with those who see her.⁵ Second of all, she sees the one who sees her in a way that enables her to give a name, this is seeing the essence of the other, as though saying, "Not only did I see you but I can name you, I understand who you are".

⁴ It's possible to understand the verse in the opposite way, as saying: I am able to see now that I have seen God. Rashi relates the astonishment that Hagar expresses in this verse to the fact that she was actually accustomed to seeing angels as regular visitors to Avraham's house, but she did not expect to see them in the desert. "Even here- is language of shock. Could I have possibly known that here in the desert I would see the emissary of God after having seen them in Avram's house, where I was accustomed to seeing angels?!" Other Biblical scholars read this in the opposite way. They suggest that Hagar is shocked that she can still see even after she looks at God. The shock is really about her remaining alive after the sight of God. This view might be supported by the name given to the well in the next verse, "well of seeing alive."

⁵ This being visible that leads to reciprocal seeing is, perhaps, also a way of understanding the seeing that is described at the archetypal public meeting between God and people, at Mount Sinai. The verb chosen there is seeing, despite its linguistic awkwardness, "They saw the voices/thunders (*kolot*)" (Exodus 20:14). This seeing is an acceptance of visible existence by the seers—the Israelites see God. Perhaps this points to the hope of the Israelites to continue to be actually *seen* by God.

Seeing punctuates so much of Parashat Lekh Lekha. At the very beginning of the *parashah* we are told, "God appeared to Avram", and God appears to Avram over and over again. God also tries to *show* Avram different things: the vastness of the land, the stars that represent Avram's children. Avram responds by building altars, calling out in the name of God, and believing in God, but in opposition to Hagar who feels visible and says, "I have seen", Avraham is not described as feeling seen by God or of seeing God! But there is a change that takes place before the story of Hagar and after it that is noteworthy, and expresses itself in the uses of the verb "to go" (*HaLaKH*):

At the beginning of the *parashah*, God commands Avram, "*Lekh lekha*", "You must go," but after the story with Hagar, God tells Avraham, "*Hithalekh lefana*", "Go before Me." The walking of Avraham shifts from being his own, solitary journey, "*lekha*" to a relational walking before God. This second type of walking makes visibility possible. It is Hagar who taught us that being visible is the key to actually being able to see, seeing that leads to mutual relationship. Our *parashah* begins with Avram walking on his own, but shifts to Avraham walking in relationship. This culminates in next week's *parashah* Va-Yera, where indeed after being seen, "Avraham lifted his eyes and saw."

Thus, Hagar teaches us that vision has tremendous power in relationships. Seeing causes the one being seen to feel that their existence has been acknowledged and accepted. This can lead those who are seen to become seers themselves, thus creating a kind of reciprocal seeing that is the key to deep knowledge of the others with whom we share our lives.