

her distance; it could simply mean “facing.” At this pivotal point, Hagar turns from looking away to facing Ishmael. She shifts psychologically from being at a distance to being connected. Hagar emerges and reengages her work as caregiver and activist. She “lifts up her voice.” The next verse states that “God heard the cry of the boy” even though he is not recorded as crying. Perhaps Hagar lifting up her voice is an act of advocating on behalf of Ishmael.

The verse concludes “and she cried.” Her tears may have been tears of desperation, of relief or cleansing, or a combination. She is able to stop moving away from Ishmael and begin moving toward him only after expressing her fears about him dying. By acknowledging these fears she was able to re-emerge from inner conflict as an activist and caregiver.

A few verses later the Torah describes, “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink” (Gen. 21:19). In the earlier story, Hagar had found the well by herself. During this instance, God helped her identify what she struggled to see.

We learn from Hagar that living through difficult times involves movement—distancing oneself, dwelling in place, and drawing near. These are true whether the distance is physical, emotional, spiritual, or ideological. Making space for this complexity in ourselves and in others allows both grieving and resiliency. Allowing for our full experience opens the possibility of seeing our own wells of water.

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Running Far, Drawing Near

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“Shalom, shalom to the one who is far away and to the one who is close.” Drawn from the Yom Kippur haftarah, the editors of *Mahzor Lev Shalem* used these words to open the high holiday prayer book. This year the words held a special poignancy, as each of us was simultaneously “the one who is far away” and “the one who is close.”

We experience distance this year like never before—we are physically separated, and many of us are emotionally downtrodden or feeling spiritually disconnected. Some of us find that differences in politics have created distance between us and our friends, relatives, and neighbors. For many of us, virtual communication has made us feel closer to those who live far away and the world feel smaller even as others have felt an existential isolation like never before.

Parashat Vayera tells a story of someone living through crisis, difference, and distance. When a conflict develops between Sarah and her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, Sarah convinces Abraham to expel Hagar and her son Ishmael from their home. In the wilderness, their water runs out. Hagar responds by moving away from Ishmael (Gen. 21:16). They experience multiple other separations too. Physically, Hagar and Ishmael are far from home. The conflict, expulsion, and separation intensify the power differential between Hagar and Sarah and between Ishmael and Isaac.

Commentators have read this part of the story and characterized Hagar as despairing. However, developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan challenges us to hear the complexity in people’s emotional and spiritual experience.

She affirms that people have multiple and simultaneous feelings and modes for existing, and she refers to them as *contrapuntal voices* (“Listening Guide for Psychological Inquiry,” *Qualitative Psychology* 2[1]:69–77). Listening for the contrapuntal voices in the Biblical text illuminates the array of Hagar’s emotional and spiritual experience and reveals a more dynamic story of her survival, endurance, and even perseverance through the crisis.

The most evocative verse in this story is Gen. 21:16:

And [Hagar] went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears. (NJPS translation)

The beginning of the verse appears to be an intertwining of two different statements—two contrapuntal voices. One of these is “*vatelekh . . . lah*.” “*Vatelekh*” is “she went,” and “*lah*”—“to her”—is rarely included in translations. If these two words are connected, the full phrase reads “she went to her/herself” and resonates with the well-known opening words of last week’s parshah, *Lekh Lekha* (Gen. 12:1). In that case, God had commanded Avram “*lekh lekha*,” “go forth,” and the preposition “*lekha*”—“to him”—is also often not included in the translation. However, the Hasidic commentator the *Mei Hashilo’ah* translated the verse as “Go to you,” elaborating, “[go] to your essential self. Nothing out there in the world is properly alive. The only place you’ll find real life is inside you.” Avram had become restless and begun searching for deeper meaning, and God commanded him to look inward for clarity.

Perhaps Hagar, too, was turning inward, taking some time to connect to her authentic self to gain clarity about how to proceed, taking a moment to breathe and assess her own needs. During a crisis, the roles of caregiver and care receiver often break down. Hagar had been in the role of caregiver for Ishmael, who she feared might die. She was also in need of care. In fact, her crisis may have been more acute than Ishmael’s: even if he were to be revived, the two of them would remain homeless and in poverty.

Hagar had already faced adversity with resilience and a connection with her spiritual life:

Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her. An angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness . . . And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” (Gen. 16:6–7)

In this earlier story, Hagar took clear actions in response to this crisis: she distanced herself from abuse, found a spring of water in the wilderness, and spoke.

We could assume, therefore, that Hagar comes to the crisis in Parashat Vayera already equipped with spiritual and emotional resources. When Hagar “goes to herself,” she is seeking to ground herself in order to better respond to the crisis.

The second of the contrapuntal voices is *vateshev mineged*, “she sat afar.” This appears twice, often understood as a repetition to emphasize that she was despairing and had abandoned Ishmael. However, the first use includes the word *harhek*, from the word “distant.” It is followed by an elaboration on how she experienced this distance—it was “a bowshot away; for she said [to herself], ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’” Here Hagar expresses her fear in a prayerful way, looks away, and is at a loss for her own agency.

Hagar’s two responses to the crisis are quite different: In one instance she turns inward as an act of coping, self-care, and resiliency, re-focusing on herself. This is a healthy distancing, less away from Ishmael and more toward herself. In the second instance, she specifically distances herself from Ishmael. Her turning away is filled with fear, despair, and loneliness. Gilligan encourages us to resist thinking about emotional experiences in binary, either/or categories. Hagar is despairing *and* resilient. Accepting that these are both Hagar’s genuine experience, we can listen to how these voices interact. Are they harmonious, conflicting, silencing? What happens with Hagar’s despair and resilience when they encounter each other? The verse begins with rapid movement between the statements of resilience and despair, then moves to a longer reflection on her fears. We see Hagar experience conflict between her despair and her hope.

Then the verse shifts again with the second mention of the phrase *vateshev mineged*, this time without the word *harhek*. The absence of the word “distance” makes it unlikely that this part of the verse is reinforcing