

Hagar and Enduring Conflicting 'Realities'

This, the second issue of "Hagar", is being printed during difficult times of violent conflict in Palestine/Israel. The recent events exhibit clearly the violence, brutality and immense human cost generated by Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, and the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel. At the same time, the events expose the differing interpretations of histories and rights held by Jews and Palestinians. Descriptions and analyses of the situation reveal radically varying readings, which reflect the very different power positions of Jews and Palestinians in the current stage of the struggle over their homelands.

In many ways, the legacy of Hagar/Hajr is ever-present in the historical unfolding here and now. The icons and myths involved in the stories, and the manner in which they are told (differently) by Muslims and Jews, reflect the tendency and ability of human cultures to mold 'realities' according to their own interests and power.

We have alluded to this briefly in relation to the place and meaning of Hajr/Hagar in both Islamic/Arabic and Jewish narratives in the introduction of our first issue. But we aim to continue and shed light on this rich topic, often inviting guest scholars to make their own interpretations of the age-old, and ageless, motive of Hagar/Hajr.

Let us touch here briefly one such issue and place – the Temple Mount, *Har Moriya* or *Haram al-Sharif* where the current wave of violence began. Hagar is linked to this site in several indirect ways. According to Jewish tradition, it was here that Abraham – Hagar's husband and father of her only son – attempted to sacrifice his other son – Isaac – to almighty God. This is portrayed in the bible as an act of extreme, even unimaginable, faith and devotion. This dramatic, and eventually aborted, act of human sacrifice enshrined the place of Abraham and Isaac as forefathers of the Jewish 'chosen' people.

"God tested Abraham and told him: ...please take your son – your only son – whom you loved, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriya, and sacrifice him to me on one of the mountains... (Genesis, 22: 1-2)."

But some Islamic texts contest this story and bring these events far closer to Hajr. As reported, for example, in al-Tabari (pp. 88-89):

"Which of his two sons was Abraham commanded to sacrifice? ... Ishmael, by God, O Prince of the Believers! The Jews know that, but they are envious of you, O Arabs, because it was your father who was named in

God's command and to whom God ascribed such merit for his steadfastness in obeying God's command.

The idea here is not to enter this polemic, but rather to illustrate its presence and connection to contemporary events, and its proximity to the figure of Hagar/Hajr. The similar yet varying stories of Jewish and Islamic traditions, often revolve around the same mythical figures and places. But given the amount of ignorance evident to the stories and histories of 'the other side', the similarity is often unknown among the wider publics, and is lost on most community and political leaders. Furthermore, the relatively small differences are often highlighted and used to congeal rivalries and deepen conflicts.

As we know from the ancient texts of the peoples of this land, and as we can see so vividly during the events of the last few weeks, the two histories, geographies and futures are intertwined, and the many faces of Hagar/Hajr are still alive today. In more ways than one, the 'realities' caused by Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and their conflicting interpretations, still mobilize energies and violent conflicts, and are at the heart of the immense, almost inhuman, value attached to several places and stones, such as Temple Mount.

In this issue we have assembled six enlightening, original and critical papers which explore issues at the heart of conflicting interpretations of 'realities', and their embeddedness in the webs of power and identity. In this manner, Ranabir Samaddar explores the meaning and implications of 'peace processes' and 'peace accords' to the uneven relations between the powerful Indian state, and peripheral regional minorities. But Samaddar's insightful analysis echoes far wider than the Indian subcontinents, and strikes a particular cord in the troubled land of Israel/Palestine, still awaiting the dawn of peace.

Jan Penrose, similarly, delves into the problematic and oppressive relations between Canada and its indigenous northern peoples. She critically analyzes the rhetoric of Canadian 'democracy', and constructs an alternative model, based on indigenous forms of governance. Both Samaddar and Penrose highlight the gaps and manipulations in interpretations of 'realities' and justice by minorities and states. Both also illuminate the manipulative, uneven power structures involved in the use of the concept of 'democracy' as a sophisticated and multifaceted instrument of control.

The following article, by Michael Mann, takes the issue of democracy a step further, by vividly illustrating the rampant misrepresentation and distortion of the democratic ideal, and its possible and actual use to promote the oppression, removal and brutal control of minorities and peripheral groups. In the next paper, Anssi Paasi also shows the power of states, leaders and dominant discourses, to mold national identities and spatial imaginations which draw on one, partial, and often distorted, interpretation of history, geography and society.

In the final article we approach the actual lands of the biblical Hagar, through Pnina Mutzafi-Haller's journey into Arab feminism, and its own contested and tension-laden relations to issues of democracy, equality, gender

relations and Arabness. The debates highlighted and analyzed by Mutzafi-Haller draw again on conflicting projects of 'importing' contemporary political discourse of individual and women's rights, with ancient understandings of the roles of men and women in the Middle East, and with the trajectories and dynamics of the national and the nation-state projects.

In the sixth article, appearing in our 'open space' section, Alex Motyl takes us deeper into the polemics of nationalism, democracy and liberal rights, by arguing for the compatibility of ethno-nationalism and liberalism, using as a basis, no less, the seminal works of John Rawls. Readers are invited to react to Motyl's fresh interpretation of liberalism, and to his claims regarding its ongoing relevance to the nation-state project at the beginning of the twenty first century.

Nationalism, and the colors with which it paints 'realities' is at the center of the review essay by Haim Yacobi. Yacobi visited an exhibition showing 'images of homeland' in Israel/Palestine. He outlines a series of observations on the links between national narratives, actual geographies, and the ways in which these intertwine into the 'realities' we observe around us daily in this divided and contested space. Closing the issue are several book reviews which, hopefully, will keep our readers abreast of the latest publications on the issues explored by "Hagar".

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