**“What Troubles You, Hagar?”**

**On Writing Hagar’s Libretto**

**By Ellen Frankel**

If someone had told me when I finished graduate school in Comparative Literature in 1978 that I would one day be writing librettos for musical works, I would have laughed. My dissertation advisor had already warned me that contemplating a career in adult education was a perfect waste of a Princeton Ph.D. Imagine what he would have said had I told him I planned to work in the performing arts! But life has a funny way of taking us into side streets when we’re not paying attention, and then revealing amazing vistas just when we think we’re lost.

Writing “Hagar” was just such a serendipitous detour.

\* \* \* \* \*

In April 2000, the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony premiered a new cantata by Philadelphia composer Andrea Clearfield, entitled *Women of Valor*, commissioned by the orchestra’s conductor, Noreen Green. The ten biblical women celebrated in the work included the usual suspects—Sarah, Leah and Rachel, Miriam, Ruth, and Esther—as well as some less known biblical heroines—Moses’s mother Jocheved, Hannah, the fierce Jael, and David’s first wife, Saul’s daughter Michal. For the libretto, Clearfield selected an assortment of texts written by women poets, lyricists, and fiction writers, and set them to music in an intricate concatenation of musical styles, drawing from ancient synagogue chants, traditional melodies, and a Renaissance musical technique known as “soggetto cavato dale vocali,” focusing on vowels within phrases. The work was scored for soprano and mezzo soloists, narrator (featuring TV personality Valerie Harper in the premiere), and symphony orchestra.

Among the previously published texts chosen for *Women of Valor* were two drawn from my 1996 book, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah*. These excerpts became the narrated texts for “Sarah” in Movement I, and “Miriam” in Movement II. The composer also asked me to write a new text for the cantata, which became the narrated text for “Hannah.”

And so began my career as a librettist.

Ten years later, the Women’s Sacred Music Project (WSMP), founded by a Philadelphia group of Christian women seeking to enrich the traditional church liturgy with songs for, by and about women, commissioned a new movement for an abridged chamber version of Clearfield’s *Women of Valor*. This new piece was to focus on the biblical figure of Hagar.

The choice of Hagar as a biblical hero was daring for several reasons. First of all, Hagar was not a Jew. That in itself is not a problem; after all, a number of gentile women—Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar, Joseph’s wife Asenath, Pharaoh’s daughter Bitiah, Moses’s wife Zipporah, the Jericho prostitute Rahab—play critical roles in preserving the Jewish people and are lauded in the Torah.

But the Torah’s attitude toward Hagar is much more ambivalent. On the one hand, she is the mother of Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, and as such she receives a powerful divine blessing for her future descendants: “I will make a great nation of him” (Genesis 21:18). She is also the only person in the entire Hebrew Bible who gives God a new name: “’You Are El-roi,’ by which she meant, ‘Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!’” (Genesis 16:13) She is also the first woman in the Bible to encounter an angel of God.

On the other hand, Hagar is clearly a threat to Sarah and Sarah’s son, Isaac, who has been designated the sole legitimate heir of Abraham’s special lineage. In this role of potential usurper, Hagar is characterized by the biblical text as a lowly slave and handmaid, and her son, Ishmael, as *metzahek*, someone who jests, dallies, ridicules and harasses Sarah’s son, Isaac. When Sarah orders Abraham to banish Hagar from the family encampment, God vindicates Sarah’s action over Abraham’s protest: “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says” (Genesis 21:12). It would seem that Hagar, despite her special status as the mother of Abraham’s son, is destined to be an outcast from the Jewish story and, therefore, hardly in a class with the other gentile women who play such a crucial part in ensuring the Jewish future.

So why did WSMP select Hagar as the subject of their new commission and annual concert?

One reason is that in the wake of 9/11, the West has been forced to take a new look at an old story: the intertwined threads of the Abrahamic narrative. All three monotheistic faiths trace their lineage from the same first family, desert nomads staking out a destiny in the land of Israel. Judaism and Christianity follow the line of Sarah’s son, Isaac; Islam follows the other line, that of Hagar’s son, Ishmael/Ismail. Although there was a magical moment in medieval Spain when all three faiths co-existed in relative harmony, the so-called Golden Age or *Convivencia*, for the past five hundred years, their adherents have struggled and fought with each other, sometimes ideologically, sometimes violently. By welcoming Hagar back into the dominant narrative, WSMP was taking a step toward redeeming the story for all three peoples.

\* \* \* \* \*

Because we had worked together so successfully on the original *Women of Valor*, Andrea Clearfield asked me to write the libretto for “Hagar.” I was already quite familiar with her story. Several years earlier, I had acquired and published, as Editor in Chief of The Jewish Publication Society, a small, illustrated book called *The Cave of Reconciliation: An Abrahamic/Ibrahimic Tale,* written by Pecki Sherman Witonsky, which tells the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and their sons from both sides—literally. Beginning at one end, the story narrates the story as told in the Jewish Torah; flipping the book over and reading it the other way, it tells the Quranic version. In the middle, all three Abrahamic stories meet in a three-column side-by-side ancestry of the First Family, as understood by each faith.

But when I began my research for the libretto, delving into the rich literary traditions that have grown up around these foundational figures, especially in rabbinic Midrash and Islamic Hadith, I was astonished to learn how tenaciously this story has gripped the religious imaginations of Jewish and Muslim readers. My goal in writing this libretto was ultimately twofold: first, to reclaim some of these lost legends for modern readers; and second, to give Hagar an opportunity to speak to us today, armed now with the knowledge of Western history, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and 9/11.

What I’ve learned in writing librettos is that the words always come first. That places quite a burden on the writer. What story will the work tell, or will it follow some other logic or shape besides narrative? What will be the level of diction, the specific verbal register indicative of class, education, age, geography, frames of literary and ideological reference, character, and attitude toward the reader? What is the text’s point of view, its voice? Will it remain consistent or change? What will be the text’s rhythm, created by meter, length of lines, length of stanzas, repetition, the presence of enjambment or end-rhyme? What about the range and pattern of sound, not only rhyme (if there is to be any) but other devices such as assonance, alliteration, an overabundance of vowels (usually desirable in words set to music)? What emotional resonances will the text embody through its rhetorical strategies—passion, musing, apology, objectivity, diatribe, polemic, self-justification, seduction?

The other lesson I’ve learned in working with half a dozen composers over the past fifteen years is the importance of flexibility and negotiation in creating a successful musical text. Although all vocal compositions begin with the words, they all end with the music, which, I believe, should have the last word. The composer should definitely have a veto. My librettos have all gone through multiple drafts, with the average being six versions before the final one. Once the composer begins putting words and notes together, the words need to stretch and bend to fit, much as a bird’s wings need to swivel and yaw as they catch the wind.

\* \* \* \* \*

I always begin with research. For this libretto, I started with Louis Ginzberg’s capacious *Legends of the Jews*, which often includes Muslim and Christian sources in the notes. I also consulted several encyclopedias and numerous online articles. I tried not to get lost in the weeds of scholarship, since the secret of a good libretto is compression. In fact, in writing all my librettos, I have seen the text shrink steadily between first and last drafts, often ending up 50% shorter than where it began. When I felt I knew enough about the subject to begin writing, I wrote down the major themes I wanted to focus on. I also wrote down suggestive quotations from primary sources, mostly the Bible but also the New Testament and Quran.

I came up with thirteen themes: Names, Well, Hearing/Seeing, Encounters with Angels, the Suffering of Hagar, High vs. Low, Struggle with Sarah, the Arab/Jewish Conflict, Mecca, the Reason for Hagar’s Banishment, Hagar as Redeemed Figure. As I meditated on these themes, my libretto began to take shape.

I was particularly intrigued by Hagar’s name, which in its Arabic form, *Hajar,* comes from *ha-ajruka*, which means “here is your recompense.” In both Jewish and Muslim versions of the story, the Egyptian Pharaoh gives Hagar to Abraham as a gift. Previously I had associated the name with a different etymology, *ha-ger,* meaning “the stranger,” or perhaps *hajira*, the wanderer, from the Arabic word, *hajj.* I was then surprised to discover that the Rabbis’ etymology for Hagar is similar to the Hadith’s. According to the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 45:1), Pharaoh gave his daughter Hagar to Sarah, saying: “This is your reward, *agrekh*.” What surprised me even more as I read about Hagar’s name was that she is unnamed in the Quran. (In fact, only one woman is named in the Quran: Maryam, mother of Jesus.) In the end, I chose to ignore both Midrash and Hadith and to stick with *ha-ger*, “the stranger,” which worked better with the persona I was developing for this piece. The Hebrew spelling of Hagar’s name clearly supports this reading.

In both Quranic and biblical versions, Hagar finds a well in the desert. In the Hebrew version, she names the well *be’er-lahai-roi*, the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me, since she encounters God there. And she names God *El-ro’i*, literally, the God-Who-Sees-Me, although the biblical text has her say: “Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!” (Genesis 16:14) In Islamic tradition, this well becomes significant because it is located in Mecca. To this day, Muslim pilgrims drink from this well as part of the Hajj ritual. The Zamzam Well, as it is called, gets its name from the phrase, *Zome zome*, meaning “Stop!” which was said by Hagar when this well miraculously sprang up under Ishmael’s feet, summoned forth by the Angel Jibril (Gabriel), who struck the ground with his staff.

Related to the well are the themes of hearing and seeing. In fact, these two themes, with their many Hebrew verbal forms, reverberate throughout the early patriarchal stories in Genesis, sometimes ironically. Hagar associates God and the Well with her being seen. The name of her son Ishmael means, “God will hear.” God hears the boy’s voice crying in the wilderness. And God tells Abraham to listen to his wife Sarah’s voice and banish Hagar from the camp.

As mentioned earlier, Hagar is the first biblical woman to encounter an angel of God. In the biblical story, the angel is nameless; in the Quranic story, it is the angel Jibril who appears to her. Hagar is also the second woman in the Bible (after Eve) to whom God speaks directly. And she is the only human being in Hebrew scripture who gives God a new name. I knew that I wanted to explore Hagar’s relationship with God and names in this piece.

Despite the later Rabbis’ attempt to justify Sarah’s actions vis-à-vis Hagar--as a threat to her own son, Isaac, and as a foreign influence jeopardizing nascent Judaism--she is ultimately a sympathetic figure, an archetype of suffering. She is a slave, given away to strangers by her own father. She is a handmaid, abused by her mistress. She is sent off into the barren desert, equipped only with a water skin and some bread. Outcast by her master, she returns in shame to her father’s home in Egypt, with a bastard son. No wonder the fledgling Muslim community at the birth of Islam, likewise children of the desert, persecuted by the reigning powers in Mecca, rejected by the Jews of Medina, eagerly embraced Hagar and Ishmael as their own. What’s less understandable is why Jews have selected this story as the Torah reading for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah. The story presents a rather unflattering portrait of Abraham and Sarah, and highlights the pathos of Hagar and Ishmael. So why does the Jewish community continue to confront this problematic story year after year? In writing my libretto, I wanted to explore my own ambivalence about this troubling story to see if I might find an answer to this question.

I haven’t said anything yet about Christian interpretations of this story. The reason is that Christian scripture has little to say about it, even though Ishmael could have been viewed as a typological precursor to Jesus, and Hagar likened to Mary. But the only reference to this story in the New Testament is Paul’s use of Hagar as a symbol of the “earthly city,” i.e., Jerusalem: “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Epistles to the Galatians 4:25-26). For whatever reason, this Jewish story of a gentile’s suffering and redemption did not catch the imagination of the early Christians. And it is therefore only logical that they did not embrace the Quranic substitution of Ishmael for Isaac in the story of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, but continued to focus on Isaac as a precursor to the martyred Jesus. So, in the end, my libretto included no Christian references.

In the physical details of the biblical story, I was struck by musical possibilities presented by the motifs of “high” and “low.” First, Sarah is lowered in Hagar’s eyes; later, Hagar is “brought low” by Sarah. In the wilderness, Hagar raises her eyes and sees the well. Ishmael grows up to be an archer; in Hebrew, an archer’s bow, *keshet,* is the same word as rainbow, which rises high into the sky. In the Quranic version, Hajar runs seven times up and down two hills, Safa and Marwa, looking for water for her thirsty son. (In the Hajj ritural of *Sa’I*, Muslim pilgrims mimic her actions*.*) Ibrahim, Hajar and Ismail fly to Mecca on the mythical steed, Mubarak, whose name means, “lightning.” The miraculous Zamzam Well springs up from beneath the ground.

At the heart of this poignant story is a struggle between two women—Sarah and Hagar. Sarah mistreats the pregnant Hagar, and the latter runs away--until she encounters God and returns to her mistress. After Sarah gives birth to her son, Hagar is banished to the wilderness at her mistress’s command, only to meet God a second time and be saved by a miraculous well. True to her name as “recompense,” Hagar gets her revenge eventually when Sarah’s descendants are enslaved by Hagar’s descendants, the Egyptians, for four hundred years. Taking an even longer view, we see the enmity between Sarah and Hagar played out to this day as their descendants, Arabs and Jews, struggle for control of the desert land where they first sheltered under a common tent.

Which leads me to my last two themes: the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution. What’s most fascinating to me about this biblical story is its latent potential as a fable of redemption. For despite the competition between Sarah and Hagar, inevitably transmitted to their sons; despite Hagar’s banishment to almost certain death in the wilderness; despite Abraham’s inability to effect reconciliation between his two lovers—the story’s ending is hopeful. Later in Genesis, after decades of separation, Isaac and Ishmael come together again to bury their father Abraham in the cave of Machpelah in Hebron. And a generation later, Abraham’s grandson Esau, himself an outcast, stripped like Ishmael of the Abrahamic lineage, marries Mahalath, Ishmael’s daughter, his first cousin and like himself, Abraham’s grandchild.

But there is no reconciliation between Sarah and Hagar in the biblical narrative. As mentioned above, Hagar is ultimately avenged for her banishment by the enslavement of Sarah’s people by the Egyptians. Interestingly, the Rabbis attempt to reintegrate Hagar into Jewish tradition by transforming her into an earlier avatar of Keturah, the second wife that Abraham marries near the end of his life after Sarah dies. The Midrash claims that when Hagar cries out to God in the desert: “See my shame!” God answers her demand for justice by instructing Abraham after Sarah’s death to take back his divorced wife, Hagar-Keturah (*Genesis Rabbah* 45:1).

But there is no biblical or rabbinic stratagem to make peace between the wives. Sarah goes to her death, satisfied that Isaac has been spared any future claims by Hagar’s son. And Hagar never returns home to Canaan after her banishment.

When I finally sat down to write my libretto, after doing my homework, after enumerating the many themes that interested me, after compiling a list of juicy quotations, I knew that the dramatic arc of my text would demand an act of redemption, would reopen the story of Hagar and Sarah. And so it did.

\* \* \* \* \*

The final libretto for “Hagar” was the fifth version of my initial draft. When I sent the first draft to the composer (normally I wait and send a second or even third draft to composers but this text was short and I felt that it was close enough to what I wanted to begin the collaboration with the composer early on), she suggested some changes even before she began working on the music. (She is experienced enough as a composer to know what kinds of texts work best with her music.) We went back and forth a few more times until the text was ready, including one more draft once she began putting the words to music.

Ultimately, the text shrank by 25%, from 345 words to 250. Although the number of lines and stanzaic divisions remained fairly constant, the number of lines per stanza changed as did the line lengths. The Hebrew phrase, *Mah lakh, Hagar?—*“What troubles you, Hagar?”—became a refrain, repeated twice.

The final score--for soprano, one or two mezzos, narrator, violin, percussion and piano, running about seven minutes--is haunting and exotic, beautifully capturing the tenor and emotional themes of the text. It was presented first at a Catholic abbey and then before the Selichot penitential service at my synagogue in September 2011.

\* \* \* \* \*

**“Hagar”**

**For *Women of Valor Suite***

**Music by Andrea Clearfield**

**Text by Ellen Frankel**

*‘Mah lakh, Hagar*?

’What troubles you, Hagar?

I am Hagar, Hajar. The rejected one.

My name speaks my fate:

*Ha-gera*, the Outsider. *Hajira*, the Wanderer.

I am an empty water skin, a borrowed womb.

‘Slave of Sarai, where have you come from?

And where are you going?’

I am known only by the conflicts I engendered.

I am Israel's faithful shadow--Egyptian, Canaanite, Arab.

My grandsons still snap at Jacob's heels.

‘Cast out that slave-woman and her son!’

I am forever cast down.

*Ha-g’rusha,* the one-cast-out.

As mother to Abraham’s first-born son,

I usurped her place,

And she brought me low.

*‘Mah lakh, Hagar*?

What troubles you, Hagar?’

Ibrahim left me, with my infant son, thirsting,

In a dry valley near Mecca.

If not for the miracle of the Zamzam Well,

We would have died!

Pilgrims still honor me at Hajj,

Racing between bare hills,

Crying out: ‘Slake my thirst! Save me! See me!’

But my name’s invisible in your Holy Book.

I named the One who spoke to me, *El-ro’i*,

‘the God of Seeing,’ the One who saw me.

One day, I will fly home on Al-Buraq,

To the well where I was seen,

Where God listened to a mother’s voice,

*Yishma-el, Isma’il,*

Where tears became the arrow that pierced a father’s heart.

And she called the Lord Who spoke to her;

God opened her eyes, and she saw the One Who sees us.

Quick, Hagar, fly home on Al-Buraq, the Magic Steed!

Lead us where we can be seen!