

The Children of Abraham Reunite

Rosh Hashanah am2

Rabbi Amy Joy Small 2017/5778

In yesterday's Torah reading, we recall the schism of two peoples, as it began with the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael by Abraham. Here is the story:

Story--Genesis 21: Sarah And Hagar¹

“Desperate Housewives has nothing on Genesis. In earlier episodes of our story, an old woman, who has lost hope of ever having children, encourages her husband to take her maid and have a child with her. The old man does, a child is conceived, and the pregnant servant begins to despise her barren mistress.

A son is born, and his father loves him and has high hopes that he'll go far. But the story has a twist ahead – the wife, with whom it has “ceased to be after the manner of women,” who “Is old and well stricken with age, as is her husband” – the wife is told that she'll get pregnant, too! She laughs when she hears that, to the frustration of the scriptwriter, who tells the husband, “Is anything too hard for me? At the set time I will return and she will have a son.”

¹ Torah story by Julie Burstein, (Edited by Amy Small). Unpublished

Today's story picks up in a tent in the desert, where Sarah, the wife, does bear a child to Abraham, her husband. They name the boy Isaac - for laughter -- and he's the first baby circumcised at eight days old.

Our storyteller had a flair for hyperbole. So, it is written that Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is just ten years younger. As she holds her son, Sarah says "God has brought me laughter!" Who would have thought this could happen?

Isaac's father throws a splendid feast when his son is weaned. But don't expect a happy ending -- there is still the matter of Sarah's maid, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, whom Abraham also loves. Sarah catches Ishmael mocking Isaac, and is furious. "Cast out this boy and his mother!" she demands of Abraham. "This servant's child will not inherit with my son, with Isaac!"

Abraham is in a terrible bind. But God tells him to listen to his wife, "Because through Isaac your name will continue." God consoles Abraham

by telling him that Ishmael will become a great nation, too, because he is also Abraham's child.

So the aged father wakes early the next morning, and goes to Hagar's tent with a loaf of bread and sack of water. He gives them to her, puts Ishmael's hand in hers, and sends them both away.

The scene shifts from the gathering of tents where Abraham and his people live, into the desert of Be'er Sheva, where Hagar and Ishmael wander. Their food and water are quickly gone, and Hagar is sure that both she and her son will soon die. She places the boy in the bleak shade of a bush, and goes to sit "a bowshot's length" away from him. "Let me not watch as my boy dies," she cries as she begins to weep.

God hears Ishmael's cries and sends an angel to call out to Hagar from heaven "What's wrong with you, Hagar? Don't be afraid. For God has heard the voice of Ishmael from where he sits."

The voice continues "Get up! And take the boy by the hand, for I shall make him a great nation."

Hagar looks up, and God opens her eyes to a well of water that had been nearby all the time. She fills her water sack, and gives Ishmael a drink. In this way, they survive, and Ishmael grows up and settles in the desert. He becomes a skilled archer, and his mother finds him a wife from Egypt.

There's more – a conflict that Abraham has with a local king -- it was all about water. Water is more precious than gold here. The king and Abraham make a covenant. And the place is called Be'er Sheva – the well of Oath. There Abraham plants a tamarisk tree, and calls out the name of the Eternal One, God of the world.

So this story, which begins with a Bris, ends with an oath, a covenant that allows Abraham to live near the country of the Philistines for many days.”

In today's Torah reading, we meet Abraham and Isaac once again. This time, Abraham is called to put his fear and love of Gd to the test. On its most basic level, the *Akedah* (binding of Isaac) is a test of faith.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz² commented, "When his faith was put to the test—he is silenced...." "He could have said, 'Yesterday you told me that

² Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Abraham and Job", *Judaism, The Jewish People and the State of Israel*, p 393

Yitzhak will be your genealogical line, and now you tell me to slaughter him?’ And yet he said nothing.” Avraham’s silence demonstrates that his faith is not a conditional faith and is not limited by the limitations of human morality.”

Rabbi David Hartman³ taught, “The *Akedah* is a moment in a religious life, but it is just that: a moment... Eventually, we all reach a moment in our lives when we feel the world is absurd....The *Akedah* means we acknowledge—and allow a place for—*resignation as a moment in the spiritual life.*”

These dramatic stories reach deeply into the human psyche and the dramas we experience individually and interpersonally. It is in these moments that spiritual development is most intense, real and transformative. Here is where a people is born and shaped.

Among the many challenges presented by these stories is this: it marks the historic breach between two peoples (Jews and Muslims), while at the same time it is the spiritual birth story for each of these peoples. The descendants of Abraham, those from the line of Isaac, and those from the line of Ishmael have shaped narratives of faith with deep intersection. But the wounds from our origin stories and the accumulation of centuries of experiences in opposition to each other remain with us.

That is one reason why our development of a close relationship with the Muslims of our community is so important. Ultimately, we are siblings with a long, long breach in our relationship. This moment in our world calls

³ R. David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic* , p171

us to come back to being family.

This past year we reached out to our neighbors at the Islamic Society of VT, and the results have been heartwarming and deeply meaningful both personally and communally. I initiated the *Children of Abraham* program, enlisting the support and collaboration of Imam Hassan, Rev. Ken White, and Rev. Laura Engelken who were wonderful partners in developing and teaching the program. We gathered 7 members from each of our three faith communities to join together in the program. The experience fostered deep relationship building for all those who participated. It was indeed the beginning of a new path for all us. While the relationship with our Christian partners has been very significant and important, I want to focus today on the relationship with our Muslim friends.

The *Children of Abraham* program featured an intensive week of learning and relationship building. We devoted one 3 three-hour session for each spiritual community to present their faith's fundamentals, and another day for each community to share prayer with the group in our respective houses of worship. Along the way, we shared meals, personal stories, questions, and hopes. Even after the 8 day intensive program ended, participants continued to gather for worship, meals and friendship. No one wants it to end -- it led not only to new friendships, but to an appreciation for our shared religious ideals and a means to work together to repair our world.

One critical moment came when we touched upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In my initial design of the program, to the approval of my fellow clergy, we intended to carefully and thoughtfully share feelings

about Israel-Palestine through structured activities. We hoped to facilitate hearing each other. But the entire group pushed back. They weren't ready. And, it turned out, that topic was not what was most important to everyone as they were getting to know each other. What was important was the continued sharing and relationship-community-building. We didn't want to harm that by opening deep and painful wounds. Maybe we'll get there after we have been down this road for a long while. But it will be a long while, and that felt good to everyone.

Both Judaism and Islam trace their roots to Abraham and Sarah. The Hagar/Ishmael narrative and *Akedah* story are told in parallel in our sacred texts within the context each of our people's spiritual memories. We are learning how we can animate holy sparks of Gd's love by hearing each other's narratives and honoring each other's sacred texts.

Within our sacred texts there are many similarities and overlapping narratives. Judaism and Islam are different religious systems, but at our core, we are very similar. Our language and beliefs parallel each other -- from the Hebrew and Arabic similarities, to the words that describe our religious commitments. For example, Jews are commanded to give *Tzedakah*, while Muslims obey one their five pillars *Zakat* -- these are very similar ideas. We are both religions of law and practice -- *Halakhah* and *Sharia*; and we are similar in our monotheistic beliefs. Yes, we are certainly different religions, especially as it relates to women's status. But then again, the most traditional Orthodox communities uphold the centuries-old rules about the separation of roles of men and women in similar ways to Islam. As we explore our differences, we can see how we are remarkably similar.

We have been appreciating a growing warmth and friendship with the Islamic Society of Vermont, learning to enjoy and appreciate each other's beliefs and cultures. This year our community was invited to Saturday dinners at the mosque, first during the year and then during the fast month of Ramadan. One of our Ohavi Zedek members sat with me at a Ramadan dinner with the women, and as we talked about our customary foods and exchanged recipes, the OZ member exclaimed, "I think I want to convert!" We all laughed, while I replied, "Hold on, we can keep sharing recipes!" The warmth between us was joyous, as it was in my friendship with Imam Hassan, who was the first person to call me when I seriously injured my knee last year.

As Rabbi David Hartman⁴ observed, "Eventually, we all reach a moment in our lives when we feel the world is absurd....The *Akeidah* means we acknowledge—and allow a place for—*resignation as a moment in the spiritual life.*" Here is the key. We, Jews and Muslims, have our differences. Our history together has been marked by cooperation as well as hostility. Our history and our present have been intertwined with political events that shake us to our core. But as spiritual communities, setting aside political issues and hostilities, we reach a moment of resignation. Today, we know we need each other. The world calls to us to be united in the cause of friendship and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world.) We are both the children of Abraham, and this is the next chapter of our story; we are writing it together.

⁴ R. David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic*, p171