

Ishmael Hates Isaac; Or Does He?

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Rabbi Barry Block

Two weeks ago, in northern Israel, our congregation's Israel trip participants had the opportunity to speak personally with Palestinian Arab high school students. Citizens of Israel, they nevertheless attend separate schools from their Jewish neighbors. I had always been told they want it that way. After all, Arabic is their mother tongue, and they cannot perpetuate their heritage if educated in Hebrew. Sitting with these Arab teens, though, I realized I had never heard Palestinian citizens of Israel say that they prefer their "separate but supposedly equal" education. So I asked. I was even specific, naming a nearby school with which I'm familiar, because of family in the area. "We would love to go there," the Arab students responded. And they acknowledged that they could legally do so. Still, they said, "The Jews don't want us there. They're afraid of us and they don't like us. We wouldn't really be welcome."

To be fair, as our guide reminded us, we were speaking to students, not their parents, who would more likely want their children in Arab schools. Still, we have long been told that Palestinian children are taught to hate Israelis, indeed all Jews. The evidence is plentiful and true. How, then, could these bright and articulate teens express the opposite, that the Jews hate them?

The problem is vexing, and it goes all the way back to this morning's Torah portion.

First, some background, which takes place before today's reading: Childless in old age, our matriarch Sarah encourages Abraham to have relations with her maid-servant, an Egyptian named Hagar. A son is born, Ishmael. Later, in today's portion, Sarah and Abraham are blessed with a son after all, *Yitzchak*, or Isaac. *Yitzchak* is based on the word "laugh," recalling that Sarah laughs when she is told that she will bear a son at age 90.

After Isaac is weaned, Sarah sees Ishmael playing; as a result, she demands his expulsion along with his mother. The Torah is not clear about what Ishmael has done to upset Sarah. The verb is *m'tzachek*, translated as "playing" or "making sport," and is based on the same root as *Yitzchak*, Isaac's name, "laugh." Sarah goes on to say that Ishmael "will not inherit with my son." Perhaps Ishmael has made fun of Isaac, taunting him by pointing out that, as the oldest son, he would be their father's principal heir.

Hundreds of years after our people received the Torah, the ancient Rabbis struggled with the meaning of the word *m'tzachek*. What exactly did Ishmael do? They find other places in the Bible where that same verb is used. In one instance, the word seems to refer to idolatry. Perhaps Ishmael is playing around with idols. Another biblical passages uses *m'tzachek* to refer to sexual immorality. The Rabbis suggest that Ishmael might have been abusing Isaac sexually. Finally, the Rabbis point to an instance of the word *m'tzachek* applying to archery. They imagine that Ishmael is shooting arrows at Isaac, attempting to kill him.

Why would the Rabbis suggest that Ishmael has committed such treacherous, hateful acts?

The Rabbis are defending Sarah and even God. When we read the story in the Torah, if we imagine that Ishmael is only “playing,” we will find Sarah unjust. How could she insist on the expulsion of the child and his mother on such a flimsy pretext? Moreover, God tells Abraham to do what Sarah asks. Surely, God would not condone an injustice.

Let's consider the Rabbis' own lives. 2000 years ago, the non-Jewish world was not hospitable to Jews. The Rabbis would naturally imagine that the first Jewish child would have been treated harshly and hatefully by his gentile half-brother.

Later, the Koran designates Ishmael as the father of all Arabs. Ishmael is to Muslims as Abraham is to Jews. Just as the ancient Rabbis were subjected to poor treatment by their neighbors, Israel and the west have been repeatedly attacked by Arabs and Muslims. Therefore, modern Americans, Israelis, and Europeans may easily accept that Ishmael treated our patriarch Isaac treacherously, just as his descendants have abused the United States, Europe, and Israel.

Perhaps there's another way to think about the story, both ancient and modern. Vanderbilt professor Amy-Jill Levine asks us to look at another narrative. Abraham and Sarah leave the Promised Land for Egypt, escaping a famine. Abraham is afraid. His wife is beautiful; and in that world, the Pharaoh could have any woman he might desire. Perhaps Pharaoh will kill Abraham so that he may have his way with Sarah. Abraham asks Sarah to claim that she is his sister, not his wife. Pharaoh does indeed desire Sarah, and he takes her into his house. Ultimately, God intervenes to save our matriarch. But Levine asks us to consider the terror that Sarah has experienced in Egypt. Alone in Pharaoh's palace, Sarah doesn't know that she will be rescued. Sarah is traumatized. Later, she

understandably lashes out at everything Egyptian. When she sees the Egyptian maidservant's son playing, her temper is short. She insists that the boy and his Egyptian mother be expelled. God understands that Sarah's post-traumatic stress is real. Asking Sarah to continue living with these Egyptians in her family is too much. God therefore instructs Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. But the boy and his mother are not at fault. Why else would God promise Abraham that Ishmael will become the father of a great nation?

The Jewish people came to Palestine traumatized by the persecutions of Christian Europe, terrorized by the Holocaust. We suffer the most dramatic post-traumatic stress. That should have made us more sensitive to others' trauma. From the dawn of modern Zionism to the present, though, few of us have recognized the pain and dislocation that Israel brought to the Palestinian people. We focus only on the fact that Arabs and Muslims have reined terror down upon Israel – and, more recently, upon much of the western world.

When the topic of Middle East peace is raised, one will often hear that we cannot expect these parties to reconcile, given that Jews and Arabs have been enemies for millennia, warring since the very founding of these people, in conflict from the time that a common ancestor, Abraham, gave birth to both peoples. We are reminded that Ishmael hates Isaac. Thus it always was; thus we may always expect it to be.

The facts of history, though, are much more complicated. Throughout the broad sweep of the Middle Ages, for more than a millennium, Jews lived in Diaspora. We were subject to Christians in Europe and lived under Islam in North Africa and the Middle East. Neither was ideal. That being said, there was a big difference between Jewish life in the Christian world and Jewish life under Muslim dominion.

Take Spain, for example: While the Muslim Moors ruled, Jews mostly flourished, achieving a golden age of religious thought and poetry, with unusual security and prosperity. When the Church reestablished its dominion in Spain, our people faced the Inquisition. 1492 offered the Jews of Spain a stark choice: kneel at the Baptismal font or flee the land that our people had called home for centuries. When Jews did leave Spain, they typically went to lands that remained under Muslim rule, where Jewish life generally flowered. All that is not to say that life was ideal for Jews under Islam. In the Muslim world, we were second class citizens. We did face pogroms and persecution even in Muslim countries, but

nothing to compare with the constant expulsions and ultimate genocide of Christian Europe.

Everything changed in the 20th Century. After the Holocaust, the Christian world repented. We modern Jews enjoy unprecedented relations with our Christian neighbors in America and around the world. Meanwhile, the Arab and Muslim world rejected large-scale Jewish settlement of Palestine. When Israel declared its independence, the Arab world attacked. Life became unbearable for Jews in Muslim lands. Today, almost no Jews remain in the Muslim world.

In our own day, Jews are no longer the only targets of the violence perpetrated by Muslim and Arab extremists. Since 9/11, we have been increasingly aware that a terrifying and controlling segment of the Muslim world today is bent on the destruction not only of Israel, but of the entire western world. The United States, Israel, and our friends face a perilous threat from ISIS, from Iran, from al-Qaeda, and from their allies in the Palestinian community and throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds. Many Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian voices are moderate; but the violent, extremist ones carry the day.

Many westerners conclude, therefore, that all Muslims are at least potentially dangerous. They point to horrors that terrorize all of us, from San Bernardino to Orlando, from Brussels to Paris. They close their hearts and seek to close their borders even to the most desperate of refugees from war-torn Muslim countries. Ishmael hates Isaac, they tell us. We must not let him in the tent.

Perhaps, though, we do not have to imagine that Ishmael hates Isaac. Indeed, Torah tells us that, when Abraham dies, the two half-brothers come together to bury their father. No ill feeling is reported on that occasion. No murder is attempted, no idolatry suggested. The brothers move beyond the suspicions and ill-treatment that marked the relationship between their mothers and their own childhood. They gather peacefully to honor their father.

Let us all listen to each other's trauma, and let us hear it. Let us understand that trauma does lead to lashing out. No suffering excuses violent extremism, and certainly not terror. Fighting the terrorist with every fiber of our being, though, must not make us callous to individuals suffering devastation. Refugees escaping the Syrian Civil War, for example, invite us to provide shelter and comfort – with verification of their intentions, to be sure – but love all the same.

The Torah story of Ishmael and Isaac ends in cooperation to perform an act of lovingkindness, burying their father together. Let the story of Isaac and Ishmael

similarly progress toward peace in our own day. Let us pray that Ishmael does not hate Isaac, and let us assure that those Israeli Arab teens are wrong: Isaac must not hate Ishmael. Let us hope that, one day, the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac will come together, transcending the suspicions and ill-treatment of the modern world. Perhaps Christian-Jewish relations, so radically repaired since the Holocaust, may serve as an example to Muslims and Jews, to Arabs and Israelis – and, more broadly, to Muslims and the west – today. Let the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael recall the peaceful coexistence in our shared history. Let that peace be in our future. For Israel. For America. For Europe. For all the world.

Amen.