

This was the first High Holy Day sermon I delivered as the new young rabbi at UCSB Hillel in 1985. It was in many ways a classic “rabbinic school sermon,” full of textual analysis...and way too long. It was also a bold attempt to address the sensitive subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict; I remember seeing one of the prominent Jewish professors get up and walk out in the middle! (He has since become a dearly beloved friend).

Issac and Ishmael

1985 Rosh HaShanah, UCSB Hillel

This morning we read of the exile of Hagar and Ishmael, what the rabbis later called the most painful moment of Abraham’s life. The portion speaks to us directly in a way that it did not for hundreds of years, because the conflict between the children of Isaac, the Jews, and the children of Ishmael, the Arabs, has become the central fact of Jewish life in the second half of this century. The emotional strain of this conflict is particularly terrible because, just as in the biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael, it is exceedingly difficult to sort out the rights and wrongs. In fact, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that--on certain levels--we, like Sarah, have morally compromised ourselves in this family conflict. The question which this text throws back at us year after year--and with particular vehemence in our generation--is: Can there be peace between Isaac and Ishmael? Or was it necessary, is it necessary, for Abraham’s house to be broken apart?

To most difficult questions, the textual tradition does not offer solution. Whenever I hear the phrase, “Judaism says...” I become extremely suspicious. As we all know, two Jews will consistently produce three opinions; and Judaism is a tradition of argument. Rather than producing unequivocal answers to the great questions, our tradition helps us pose the questions. The problems are clarified; issues are sharpened.

In the case of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, the rabbinic tradition has developed in two directions. Reduced to the simplest terms, one strain of rabbinic thought has sought to justify Sarah’s banishing Hagar and Ishmael, while the other strain of thought is critical of Sarah. I want to present these two Rabbinic approaches to the story this morning, both as a wonderful example of how the Jewish textual tradition evolves, and also as a tool to help us understand better the conflict between the children of Isaac and Ishmael in our own generation.

The entire text of this morning’s Torah turns upon a single word. It appears several times, in various forms. The word is the root of Isaac’s name, TZ-CH-K, which is the root of Isaac’s name, *Yitzchak*, and is also what Sarah sees Ishmael doing, *m’tzachek*, the single action which sets off a chain of events ending in his and his mother’s exile. The common meaning of *m’tzachek* is “to laugh, or to mock” but it has other meanings as well. The different readings of the story depend on different understandings of the word. Each reading draws upon the use of *m’tzachek* in another Biblical story, and each reading also--as you will see--relates to Ishmael as a bowman, an archer.

The first rabbinic comment is that the word *m’tzachek* here functions the same way it does in the story of the Golden Calf. There, after Aaron made the calf out of the people’s gold, they all rose up to *m’tzachek*. This commentary says that when Sarah saw Ishmael *m’tzachek*, he was doing the same thing the Israelites were doing when they were *m’tzachek*—ing around the Golden Calf. In other words, he was committing idolatry. The

full commentary on this interpretation describes Ishmael taking his bow and arrow, shooting a deer and offering it up as a sacrifice to a false god. This commentary explains that Sarah didn't want Isaac picking up Ishmael's idolatrous habits, and was therefore entirely justified in sending Hagar and Ishmael away.

The second rabbinic commentary says that the meaning of *m'tzachek* is here the same as it seems to be in II Samuel, chap 2. The full text there relates that David's general Yoav met with Saul's general Avner during the time when Saul and David were at war. Avner proposes that each send a group of soldiers, and that the soldiers should *m'tzachek* together. Well, the next thing we read is that all 24 soldiers are lying dead and there is a huge and bloody battle. *m'tzachek* must mean, according to this rabbi, to kill; and he claims that Sarah saw Ishmael trying to kill Isaac. The further elaboration of this interpretation is wonderful. It relates that Ishmael said to Isaac:

"Let us go out to the field together" and when they are out there, Ishmael starts shooting arrows at Isaac. When Isaac gets upset and demands an explanation, Ishmael laughs and says "Can't you take a joke?!" This rabbi retells the story of Isaac and Ishmael in a way which alludes strongly to the story of Cain and Abel--the first instance of a man murdering his brother. Again according to this commentary, Sarah was clearly justified in her complaint.

Finally, the third commentary on *m'tzachek* refers to the story of Joseph and Potifar's wife. Potifar was Joseph's first Egyptian master, and Potifar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. But Joseph was not corruptible--or too nervous, or whatever--and when he fled, she screamed and accused him of trying to *m'tzachek* with or to or at her. We can guess what she meant by that, and by connecting our Torah portion to the story of Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar, this commentary suggests that Sarah saw Ishmael committing a sexual sin. The full commentary describes Ishmael going out with his bow and arrow--of course--and hunting women and raping them.

All three of these interpretations of *m'tzachek* assume that Sarah did see Ishmael sinning--committing either idolatry, murder or rape--and that she was entirely justified in having him driven from her house. As I have mentioned, however, there is another side to the story, a second group of responses found among the rabbinic commentaries.

The medieval Spanish exegete Abraham ibn Ezra is known for rejecting the more elaborate rabbinic interpretations, and demands to know the *pshat*... the simple meaning of the text. Ibn Ezra, says, "Ishmael was teasing Isaac, the way all boys do... and Sarah was jealous because Ishmael was older than Isaac and would receive at least half, if not more, of Abraham's inheritance. R. Shimon b. Elazar, a thousand years before ibn Ezra, had also written as follows: "Rabbi Akiva has argued that Ishmael was sinning, but I disagree. Sarah simply did not want Ishmael to receive any of Abraham's inheritance, as she says explicitly 'The son of that slavewoman shall not inherit together with Isaac.'" And there is one further commentary to include in this second strain of the tradition. The Midrash teaches that when Ishmael was dying of thirst, the angels couldn't believe that God was going to provide him with a well and rescue him. "How can you save from thirst one whose descendents are destined to destroy your children with thirst?" And God replied, "What is he now, righteous or wicked?" The angels had to reply "righteous," and then God concludes with verse 17 of our text: "I shall treat him just as he is, now." A later

commentary, the Lips of the Wise, points out that Ishmael would not have been considered righteous at that moment if he was already guilty of idolatry, murder or rape.

These, then, are the two great divergent readings of our Torah portion; according to one, Sarah saw Ishmael committing one of three horrendous sins, and was correct in having him sent into the desert. According to the second,-- what does seem like the simple meaning-- Ishmael was doing nothing terrible. At worst, he was teasing Isaac--but his teasing inflamed Sarah's jealousy, and she had him banished so that Isaac would receive the full inheritance... not something really to be proud of.

I believe these rabbinic readings of the Biblical text hold a profound message regarding the conflict today in the Middle East between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael. The lesson lies in the nature and the power of interpretation; there are many ways to understand a situation, a written text, or a socio-political reality. As in the rabbinic struggle with our Torah portion, so in Middle East politics, interpretation is everything. The text itself is so confused, mysterious, and complex that on its own it gives no clear teaching. Interpretation is everything.

If I might offer my own commentary on the commentaries, it seems that corresponding to each rabbinic reading of the Ishmael text, there runs a parallel contemporary interpretation of the Mid-East conflict. Let me touch briefly upon each of them.

The first commentary argued that Sarah saw Ishmael committing idolatry. There are those on both sides of the Jewish-Arab conflict that believe they are engaged in a Holy War, a mighty battle between the great religions of Islam and Judaism. This perception is especially powerful in the fundamentalist camps on each side, and religious fundamentalism on both sides growing. I quote from Amos Oz's interview with some Jewish settlers on the West Bank. Oz mentions Israel's need for American weapons, and the settler, named Harriet, replies: "Weapons aren't what win a war! Men win wars! Faith wins! God almighty wins! The world has to realize that. In the six-day war, and the Yom Kippur war also, we should never have stopped. We should have gone on and smashed their capital cities! . . . But that wouldn't have brought peace either. Maybe it would have given us some quiet, but not peace. Because this is a religious war! A holy war! For them and for us! A war against all of Islam!"

There is no question that there are plenty of Harriets among the Arabs as well; Moslem fundamentalism has become an increasingly crucial factor in Middle East politics, primarily--of course--since Khomeini's rise to power in Iran. For Harriet and her counterparts, the Arab-Jewish struggle is ultimately a religious battle--just as one rabbi saw the conflict between Sarah and Ishmael as being between Judaism and idolatry.

The second rabbinic commentary asserted that Sarah saw Ishmael as a murderer. As I pointed out, the Midrash echoes the story of Cain and Abel...the first murder. Many Israelis and Arabs--indeed most of world opinion pro-Israeli and pro-Arab, and much of the mainstream American Jewish community, have interpreted the Middle East conflict on this level. Both sides have their martyrs, so many, on both sides, and both sides have come to see each other as murderers. We have our litany of the Maalot massacre, the Coastal road massacre, the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem bus station bombings--- the victims in all these instances were not soldiers but women, infants, school children.

The Arabs, for their part, cannot forget the massacre at Deir Yassin, the bombing of Beirut, Israel's complicity at Sabra and Shatila. No one knows the number of civilian dead in Lebanon, for whose destruction the Arabs hold Israel responsible. In the minds of both sides, this has not been simply war; there has been murder. And how can one make peace with the murderers?

Finally, the third commentary held that Sarah saw Ishmael raping women. There is an interpretation of the Arab-Jewish conflict that corresponds to this reading of the Ishmael story; it is the ugliest dimension of Israeli life today and it is gaining strength. Rabbi Meir Kahane's racism, and historians have noted this about almost all forms of passionate racism, rises out of and plays upon sexual fears. Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda returned again and again to the image of the lascivious Jew; Nazi academics wrote papers establishing the sexual perversity of Jewish men and women. White racist literature here in the States, particularly in the 19th century, reflected a terrible fear of black sexuality. A powerful and respectable argument for opposing the abolition of slavery in the 1840's and 1850's was that black men would go wild raping white women.

This is the oldest form of racism, and it exists even in our Jewish tradition. The 17th century commentator Kli Yakar accepts the reading that Ishmael was raping women, and comments: "This behavior Ishmael inherited from his mother, and it is typical of the Egyptians; the Egyptians have always been over-sexed."

Kli Yakar's comment would be funny to us, except that his understanding of the Arab-Jewish conflict has recently found a slick; persuasive spokesman in modern Israel. Meir Kahane's ultimate agenda--when looked at systematically-- is not a Holy War against Islam, nor is it avenging the murder of Israeli children. Kahane preaches the need to guarantee the purity of Jewish blood. He has been fighting for legislation expelling all Arabs from Israel, with the explicit purpose of preventing the mixing of Arab and Jewish blood. He has adopted the classic racist polemic: "The Arabs cannot be allowed to defile our Jewish daughters.

These, then, are the three current visions of the Arab-Israeli conflict that correspond to the first three rabbinic interpretations of the Ishmael story. Just as the rabbis claimed that Sarah saw Ishmael committing idolatry, murder or rape, so there are many--probably a majority of those involved in the Middle East today--who perceive the conflict in terms of religion, murder and a sexually racism.

For those who interpret the conflict in these ways, there can be no reconciliation. The rabbis who believed that Ishmael was a sinner saw no means of and no reason for reconciliation. They justified Sarah's banishing of Ishmael from her house. For the Arabs and Jews in the Middle East who see the other side as idolators, murderers and rapists, likewise, there is no means of and no reason for reconciliation

It is this mode of interpretation which has recently created a groundswell of opinion in Israel that sees nothing wrong with Kahane's program for expelling all the Arabs from Israel. It is the same impulse which has led the majority of in the region to take a totally rejectionist stance toward the Jewish state ever since it was founded. On both sides, many have come to the conclusion: there can be no peace with the sinners.

If the first three readings of the Ishmael story--and the corresponding interpretations of the current Middle east conflict--deny the possibility of reconciliation, let us look carefully at the fourth reading--the rabbinic response to those interpretations. If you will recall, Avraham ibn Ezra, R. Shimon bar Elazar, and the Lips of the Wise all agreed that Ishmael was not a sinner. These commentaries conclude that the conflict in Abraham's house arose over the inheritance. The Arab-Israeli conflict can also be understood as a struggle for Abraham's inheritance, a struggle for the land. I believe passionately that just as the rabbinic tradition, in the later commentaries, seems to settle on the interpretation that Ishmael was not a sinner, we have got to bring ourselves to the same understanding of the Arab Israeli conflict.

It may well be that the two peoples cannot live together on the land; it is a small piece of property, with few resources. But if the crucial issue is the inheritance--the distribution of the land--then there can be discussion, and negotiation, and a glimmer of hope for reconciliation. This is the power of interpretation. We must reject unequivocally Harriet's notion of a Holy War; and, without in any way diminishing the memory of those who have died, we have to relinquish the conviction that the other side are murderers and finally, we have got to root out the racist venom that feeds on sexual fear.

We know too well that we have been at war; but there will be no peace as long as we see each other as essentially wicked. Peace requires a new interpretation of the text.

The rabbis noticed that the Bible, in a much overlooked verse, does hold out the possibility of reconciliation between Isaac and Ishmael. Many years after this story occurs--long after Hagar and Ishmael have been sent out into the desert--we come across a surprising verse at the end of Abraham's life. "Abraham breathed his last," says the text, "and he died at a ripe old age and was gathered to his people. And he was buried in the Cave of Machpelah by his sons Isaac and Ishmael."

We are not told how this came about, but, in their common grief, the two antagonists Isaac and Ishmael must have remembered that they were brothers, joined together in the mitzvah of burying their dead. Hasn't the time come for us, the descendents of Isaac and Ishmael in this generation, to realize that we are in fact brothers... and to mourn for our dead together?