

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5775, 2014:

And Yishmael Did Teshuvah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The progenitor of the Arab nations was Avraham's eldest son, Yishmael. His birth and future was foretold to Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant, in Parashat Lech Lecha, after she ran away from her mistress. The angel's description of Yishmael unmistakably foreshadows our own experience of the Arab world:

And the angel of the L-rd said to her, "Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, for the L-rd has heard your affliction. And he will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be upon all, and everyone's hand upon him, and before all his brothers he will dwell." (*Sefer Bereishit* 16:11-12. This, and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) explains the latter verse in a manner that resonates all too strongly for us today:

A wild donkey of a man who loves the wilderness to hunt beasts, as it is written (below 21:20f): "And he was an archer; and he dwelt in the desert of Paran." **his hand will be upon all** [He will be] a bandit. — [from *Midrash Tanchuma* Parashat Shemot]
and everyone's hand upon him Everyone will hate him and attack him. **and before all his brothers he will dwell** for his seed will be numerous.

Our own experience bears stark testimony to the veracity of the *malach's* (angel's) prophecy and Rashi's subsequent interpretation. Certainly, in the case of radical Muslim fundamentalists such as ISIS, "Everyone will hate him and attack him" rings true,

because of their crimes against humanity in general, and against the Jewish people in particular.

Sarah Emanu (our mother Sarah, the Matriarch) recognized the terrible behavior traits and actions of which Yishmael was capable. Therefore, she saw him as a totally negative influence on her son Yitzhak, and demanded his expulsion from her home: “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, making merry.” The Torah continues and states: “And Sarah said to Abraham: ‘Drive out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 21:9-10) Avraham’s vision and discernment was apparently blinded by his love for Yishmael. As a result, he initially refused to accede to Sarah’s request. At that point in time, G-d commanded Avraham to comply with Sarah’s legitimate demand: “And G-d said to Abraham, ‘Be not displeased concerning the lad and concerning your handmaid; whatever Sarah tells you, hearken to her voice, for in Isaac will be called your seed.’” (21:12)

What exactly had Sarah seen when Yishmael was “making merry?” Once again, we turn to Rashi to understand “the story behind the story”:

making merry An expression of idolatry, as it is said (Exod. 32:6): “and they rose up to make merry.” Another explanation: An expression of illicit sexual relations, as it is said (below 39:17): “to mock me.” Another explanation: An expression of murder, as it is said (II Sam. 2:14): “Let the boys get up now and sport before us, etc.” - [from *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 53:11]

Given the above, it appears that Yishmael can only be painted in the darkest of all colors. He seemed to personify evil incarnate, and to have hopelessly drowned in a polytheistic existence filled with endless forbidden carnal pleasures and murder. Yet, Yishmael

changed. How did he accomplish this amazing transformation? How did he crawl out of the pit of violence, perversion, and nihilism? The answer is clear: Yishmael did *teshuvah* (repentance):

“And Abraham was old, advanced in days, and the L-rd had blessed Abraham with everything.” (*Sefer Bereshit* 24:1) An alternate explanation: Yishmael did *teshuvah* (repented) during Avraham’s lifetime... From where do we learn that Yishmael did *teshuvah* during Avraham’s lifetime? It so happened that Ravina and Rav Chama bar Buzi were sitting before Rava, and Rava had begun to fall asleep. Ravina said to Rav Chama bar Buzi: “Was this not certainly his statement: ‘Whenever the Torah uses an expression of “death” (“*mitah*”) in conjunction with “expiration” (“*geviah*”) – does this not refer to the death of the Righteous [*Tzadikim*]?” Rav Chama bar Buzi responded: “Yes, but what about the Generation of the Flood [wherein it states both “death” and “expiration?”] Ravina responded to him and said: “ [This is why we require not only ‘expiration’ to be stated but ‘gathered’ [to his people, as in *Sefer Bereishit* 25:8] as well. Wait a moment! In Yishmael’s case it also states ‘expiration’ and ‘gathered’ – [and what kind of righteous individual was he?] At this point Rava woke up and said to them: “My children, this is what Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘Yishmael did *teshuvah* during Avraham’s lifetime, as it states in the Torah: “And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which faces Mamre.” (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* 16b, translation my own)

Rashi helps us understand the meaning of this passage in his explanation of *Sefer Bereshit* 25:9, wherein he notes that Yitzhak’s name precedes that of Yishmael: “**Isaac and Ishmael** (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 30:4, 38:12) From here [we may deduce] that Ishmael repented and let Isaac go before him [at the time that they buried Abraham], and that is the meaning of ‘a good old age’ which is stated regarding Abraham [*Sefer Bereishit* 15:15].”

We probably will never know exactly which constellation of factors motivated Yishmael to become an entirely new individual, as evidenced by allowing Yitzhak to go before him, thereby recognizing Yitzhak as Avraham’s rightful heir. One thing we do know, however, is that Yishmael’s spiritual makeover was true and complete. He reconstructed himself into someone different in kind and degree than he had been in the past. If

Yishmael could do this, then his present day heirs can do the same, and cease the murder, terror, and wanton destruction that they relentlessly pursue. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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