

SHABBAT SERMON
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What ever happened to Ishmael?

Today marks the end of an era ... the passing of the torch ...the closing chapter ... the end of the beginning. For the past few weeks our Torah portions have focused on the story of our first matriarch and patriarch, Sarah and Abraham, whose impact is felt to this very day. Half the people on the planet earth – Jews, Christians and Muslims – consider themselves the children of Abraham. In our Torah portion today their story came to an end. Our Torah portion began with a description of the death and burial of Sarah. Our Torah portion ended with a description of the death and burial of Abraham. But before they are gone, let us remember that in their death we are left with many questions. What caused the sudden death of Sarah? Why didn't she try to stop Abraham from sacrificing their son? And whatever happened to Isaac after that awesome moment on Mt. Moriah when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice him? We never find the two of them ever talking again. The Bible itself provides us with no answers. It is left to the sages in the Midrash to try and fill in the gaps ... something Islamic sages try to do with yet another question involving Abraham: What ever happened to his son, Ishmael?

You remember the story? Sarah is barren, and so she gives Abraham Hagar to provide him with a child. That child is Ishmael. But then Sarah becomes pregnant and has her own child. And from that day on, there is trouble in the family. Sarah insists that Ishmael and Hagar be banished. And the last we read of them in the Bible is that they are left wandering in the wilderness, where God hears their cries and saves them. But what happens then? The Bible doesn't tell us! But the question of what happened to Ishmael is an important one, if not for us as Jews, then surely for the more than a billion people in this world who are followers of Islam, for the more than a billion people in this world who are Arabs and consider themselves descendants of Ishmael. What ever happened to him?

The Bible doesn't tell us, but there are Islamic Midrashim which attempt to fill in the gaps. Let me give you one perspective given by Ibn Kathir, a great Muslim thinker writing in the

12th century. Ibn Kathir tells us that after Hagar and Ishmael were banished from Abraham's home, Abraham went to visit him to see how he and his family were doing. Abraham cared about him; he was his son. And when Abraham came to Ishmael's home, he didn't find Ishmael there but he did find Ishmael's wife. And when Abraham asked her how they were doing, she said, "We are living in misery, we are living in hardship and destitution." And Abraham said to her, "When your husband returns tell him a guest was here, and tell him to change the threshold of his house." The story goes on that when Ishmael returned home he felt something unusual had happened and asked his wife, "Has anyone visited you?" And she said, "Yes, an old man," and gave a description. And she re-told their conversation - what she had said and what Abraham had said – and after hearing this, Ishmael said, "It was my father. And he has ordered me to divorce you." And he did! Ishmael could tell that his father had found his wife to be inhospitable and insensitive. And so, he divorced her. And the Islamic tradition continues, and I quote: "Then Abraham stayed away from them for a period as long as Allah wished, and called on them again but again did not find Ishmael" ... who was away. So once again, he had the same kind of conversation with Ishmael's new wife asking how they were doing and she replied, "We are prosperous and well-off. Then she thanked Allah." This time Abraham said to Ishmael's wife, "When your husband returns give my regards to him, and tell him he should keep firm the threshold of his gate." Once again when Ishmael returned home his wife told him what had happened, and Ishmael said, "It was my father and you are the threshold of the gate. He has ordered me to keep you with me."

What do you think of that Islamic medrash? Tell the truth ... what do you think? Doesn't it go counter to everything we would have thought? Abraham listens to Sarah and throws Ishmael out, and without there being any Biblical text to base it on, Islamic scholars tell us that Abraham – who we believe and who the Torah tells us – was thrilled that it was his son, Isaac, who was going to continue the tradition ... despite what we've been taught, according to the Islamic midrash, Abraham really loved Ishmael and cared about him and went on visiting him, and gave him advice and blessings. What do you think when you hear this?

I venture to say that many Jews – most Jews – on hearing this would have the reaction of: It's a make-believe story. The Muslims and the Arabs are just making it up, because they don't like the idea of Ishmael being depicted in an unfavorable light as he seems to be in the Bible. They don't like the idea of Ishmael being considered a second-class citizen. They want to make

Ishmael look good, they want to make it look like Abraham really cared about Ishmael because they want to make their founding father a person of importance.

Tell the truth, isn't that your reaction? One I guess we would call "a natural" reaction? But now let me ask you something else. What if I were to tell you that the story as I related it to you is not only found in an Islamic writing, but it is also found in a Jewish Midrash as well.

There is an aggadic-Midrashic work entitled, "Pirke De Rebbi Eliezar" which is ascribed to Reb Elierzer ben Hyrcanus. It is an established work quoted by Rashi and Maimonides and many others. It tells the same story about Abraham and Ishmael as is found in the Islamic text. Now tell the truth ... doesn't that change your perspective on the Islamic text a bit? Doesn't that add credibility to the Islamic tale? Of course it does! It has to! So, let me ask you another question: Why weren't you and I ever taught this Midrash? Most all of us were taught the Midrash that says that Pharaoh's daughter's hand miraculously stretched out for yards so that she could reach Moses floating down the river. Most all of us were taught the Midrash that tells us that Vashti, the queen in the Purim story, couldn't come to the party because she had a tail? Why were we taught things like that but not this Medrash, which certainly contains an important lesson within it.

Why weren't we taught it? I don't know. Is it possible that our teachers purposely chose not to tell it to us? Is it possible that our teachers didn't want to put Ishmael, and indirectly, Islam itself into a good light? I don't know. But it would be understandable. For many centuries Jews were treated as second class citizens in Islamic and Arab countries. Why should we then go and teach anything that makes their roots look any better than is necessary?

Which brings us to today. In an effort to strengthen understanding between Muslim and Jewish communities in America, today our synagogue joins with the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore, today our synagogue joins in a twinning program that is taking place with 50 mosques and synagogues across our country and Canada. We are honored and we welcome Imam Earl El-Amin and his worshippers to our synagogue this morning. Why have they come here? Because we live in a time when neither Jews nor Muslims know the whole story about each other. We Jews have long known what it feels like to be discriminated against just because we are Jews. There are a lot of Muslims in our country these days who feel the same. Many Americans, indeed, many Jews would find no difficulty in completing a sentence that

began with the words: “All Muslims are” ... But we should know that just as it is wrong and impossible to complete a sentence that begins with: “All Jews are” ... the same is true of our co-religionists. Yes, I have spoken quite forcefully about the war America confronts in fighting terrorism that comes in the name of Islam. And it is a very real war! But it is not *all* Arabs, and it is not *all* Islam. And it is important for us to know that, otherwise there is no hope.

Since Vatican II, Jews and Christians have started studying texts together and have learned so much about each other. We have learned that there is much we both agree on; we have learned that there is much we disagree on. And we have learned that there is much that Christians disagree on amongst themselves. It took us close to 2000 years to get to this point in our relationship with Christianity. We dare not wait that long to do the same with Islam because as Americans we are all in this together.

Of all the stories I’ve heard – that you’ve heard – about what happened on that dark, September 11th day, for now let us keep this one in mind. There was a Pakistani, a Muslim, who was dressed in Muslim garb. His name is Usman Farman. He worked in building 7, not far from the two buildings that went down. He writes: This is what happened. We were evacuated to the north side of the building and then the guards told us to leave the building and go north and not to look back. Five blocks later, I stopped and turned around to watch, and we saw the first tower collapse. No one could believe it was happening. It still seems too surreal to imagine. The next thing I remember is that a dark cloud of glass and debris, about 50 stories high, came tumbling down toward the ground. I turned around and ran as fast as I could.

And then I tripped and fell. I was on my back, facing this cloud that was coming at me. It must have been about 600 feet away, but I was so stunned that I simply couldn’t get up. And then, a Hassidic Jewish man with a beard and black suit, came up to me and with a deep Brooklyn accent he said to me, “Brother, let’s get the hell out of here!” And he lifted me up and we ran together for what seemed like forever, without looking back.

He was the last person I would have ever thought would help me. But if it were not for him, I probably would have been engulfed in that tornado of shattered glass and debris. We ran together, hand in hand, for about 20 blocks. And then we looked up in horror as tower number 2 came down. We looked behind us and saw it come down. And then we saw a high cloud of dust and debris, as tall as a mountain, come up toward the sky and then come crashing down. And

then, we turned around and kept going. And when we got to the middle of Manhattan, the Jewish man checked me over to make sure I was okay, and then he said, “Shalom” and I said, “Salaam,” and he went one way and I went the other.

That’s the story, and that must become the story of America these days. Usman Farman took the hand of a Hassidic Jew and a Hassidic Jew took the hand of Muslim Usam Farman. As Americans, we dare not turn on each other.

Sure, there is much that we disagree on and we must go our own way. The Islamic and Jewish Medrash I told you about Abraham’s visits with Ishmael we agree on. We don’t agree on what happened after. For the Islamic Medrash goes on to tell us that Abraham visited Ishmael again and together they went and built the Kabaaa – the central Islamic shrine in Mecca. No, that we don’t agree on! But there is something we most certainly do agree on. For it is not a Medrash, it is not the opinion of rabbinic or Islamic scholars ... but it is written in the Bible itself in describing the death and burial of Abraham, were we are told at the end of this morning’s Torah portion that Abraham died “*vayik’bru oto Yitzchak v’Ishmael bonov* – and he was buried by Isaac and Ishmael, his sons.” And as the commentators point out, the description of Ishmael as being Abraham’s son – no different than Isaac – implies that Abraham regarded both of them as his children in every sense of the word. Does that surprise you? It shouldn’t! Was it not the Prophet Malachi who said, “Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother, so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?”

Isaac and Ishmael were reunited together as children of Abraham at their father’s grave. Let us – their descendants – do it while all of us are still alive. For then, and only then, will we find the fulfillment of that other prophetic vision: “*Bayom hahu yihyeh Hashem echad u’shmo echad* – on that day God will be one and His name will be one.” Amen.

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