



# Can the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael learn to live together?

**DURING THE** two days of Rosh Hashanah every year, we read the stories of the birth of Ishmael – a son of Abraham, who becomes the father of the Muslim people – and that of Isaac, another son of Abraham, who becomes one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people– in chapters 21 and 22 of Genesis.

I have always been mindful that on these very special days – our “High Holy Days” – we read about Ishmael as well as Isaac. (I have preached about God’s caring for Ishmael more than once on Rosh Hashanah.) I have always found the fact that we Jews read about the patriarch of the Muslim people on one of most important Jewish holidays – the birth-day of the world”– to be quite amazing.

Various reasons have been advanced for the choice of these Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah. One link can be found in the opening sentence of Genesis 21, “*The Lord took note...*” which fits with the theme of remembrance (*zichronot*), one of the many themes in the liturgy of this holiday. Another idea is that the rabbis of the Talmud selected Genesis chapter 22, the binding of Isaac, because a ram figures in the story, connecting it thereby with the practice of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

Why are these foundational stories so essential to our identity as Jews?

Chapter 21 – the story of the birth and banishment of Ishmael – establishes our connection to all of God’s children. When God saw that Ishmael was suffering and about to die, the text tells us:

*And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her: ‘What ails you, Hagar? fear not; for God has heard the voice of the young man where he is. (Genesis 21: 17)*

The God of the Hebrew Bible hears the voice of all children, including Ishmael, where they are at, in their existential situa-

tions, in their suffering and misery, as well as in their joyous and hopeful moments, anywhere in the world. This is a universal God, as we learned from earlier in Genesis, whereby every human being is created in the image of God.

This very clearly means that God hears the voices of children and youth who were massacred and kidnapped on October 7th, 2023. In addition, God hears the voices of those who are being killed in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as the voices of children all over the world who are suffering and dying in other terrible conflicts, as well as through famine and disease.

After this story, we don’t hear much about Ishmael in the Torah. But we do hear something about him a few chapters later, which I will discuss below.

Chapter 22 of Genesis relates the famous and very complicated story of the birth and binding of Isaac. It is a very difficult story, but one with a happy ending. In the end, Isaac is not sacrificed. He is saved by the ram’s horn, the shofar, which is why we remember him on Rosh Hashanah. The moral of the story is: we Jews don’t sacrifice children! We love our children, all of God’s children – the children of Ishmael as well those of Isaac.

When do Isaac and Ishmael meet again in the unfolding story of the Jewish people and humanity in the book of Genesis?

In Genesis 25:9, they meet at the funeral of Abraham:

*His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him (Abraham) in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, son of Zohar, the Hittite, facing Mamre.*

Estranged brothers (or sisters) meeting at the funeral of a parent!! Who ever heard of that one? Has anyone ever run across such a phenomenon in contemporary Jewish families?!?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the editor of the



Conservative movement’s Etz Chaim commentary on the Torah, offers this poignant commentary on this verse:

*Isaac and Ishmael are reunited at their father’s funeral, a sign that Ishmael has changed his ways and matured (according to the Babylonian Talmud). Although he could not have forgotten how his father treated him and how his brother supplanted him, he seems to have forgiven Abraham for having been a less-than-perfect father. Isaac too seems to have come to terms with his father’s near killing him on Mount Moriah.*

*Might these reconciliations have occurred in Abraham’s lifetime and be the reason for the Torah’s describing him as ‘contented’ in his old age (according to a midrash)? Can we see this as a model for family reconciliations, forgiving old hurts? And can it not be a model for the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, contemporary Arabs and Israeli Jews, to find grounds for forgiveness and reconciliation?*





The hug: A rabbi and Muslim Palestinian greet each other at the Gush Etzion Junction to hold joint prayers in the summer of 2014.

a few things. Hamas, which is an extreme fundamentalist Muslim organization does not represent Islam. In fact, most of the Muslims of the world are moderate, based on a more authentic understanding of their religious sources, rather than a politicized and distorted one. The same can be said about Israeli Jews: most are much more moderate than the extremist version of violent settler Judaism, represented by “Religious Zionism” and “Jewish Power” (Otzma Yehudit), two fanatic political parties in Israel which have twisted authentic Judaism, for their own political purposes.

We Jews need to find Muslim partners with whom we can be in meaningful dialogue. For nearly 25 years, I found many such partners within Israel and around the world (I met many of them at international conferences and seminars, as well as local ones). And I know that many of my American colleagues have created meaningful relations with Muslim colleagues who came to their aide when synagogues were attacked in Pittsburgh and Colleyville and other places.

As we approach the study of these classic texts – chapters 21 and 22 of Genesis, on this Rosh Hashanah, I believe that it is morally imperative for the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael to seriously and systematically search ways to coexist and cooperate for the common good.

For three reasons:

- Our Torah and Jewish Tradition teaches us that this is the correct thing to do.
- Our understanding of history should help us understand why this is essential now
- And it is in our enlightened self-interest to do so.

This war between Israel and the Islamic extremists of Hamas will be over one day. All wars end. We don't live in a state of war forever. It is time to think about “the day after”, a time when there could be stability and peace between Israel and her neighbors. Then, we will need dialogue not diatribe, reconciliation rather than retribution between Jews and Muslims in this region and in our world.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we read about Isaac and Ishmael, from the Torah in our synagogues, let's reflect upon how Jews and Muslims could meet each other not at funerals, but at moments of cooperation and coexistence in the future. ■

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This is one of the key existential questions for our time, certainly for those of us who live in Israel, but also for Jews and Muslims in general. Can the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael reconcile with each other, not only at funerals but in real life?

In other words, can Jews and Muslims in the contemporary world coexist with one another? In Israel? In America? Wherever Jews and Muslims are living in the same communities, countries and regions?

My answer, of course, is Yes. But it is not that simple.

We Jews and Muslims have to overcome deeply ingrained negative stereotypes of each other.

Some of this comes from our understanding – or often purposeful misunderstanding – of our sacred texts, which can be very problematic and often lead to negative stereotyping. Fortunately, this can be overcome today through education and dialogue, when we can

learn some of the texts of our traditions which teach us that we have a lot in common as human beings.

Some of the problem comes from our limited understanding of our histories, which are often inaccurate and incomplete. This too can be overcome through serious and sustained learning about each other's narratives by sensitive and substantive teachers and professors. But there needs to be some genuine motivation to want to engage in this.

Much of the problem comes these days from the mainstream media and from social media, which often spread disinformation, sometimes intentionally, about each other's religions and cultures in very destructive ways. This is more problematic since it is very hard to control the use of social media, especially for young people.

And, of course, the Israel-Hamas war of the past 11 months has made all of this much more complicated. But we need to remember