

If Ishmael and Isaac Can Come Together

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In all my years as a rabbi, I don't believe I have had a Bar Mitzvah student choose the section of this week's Torah portion that Devan picked and chanted so beautifully for us this morning. Devan made a very powerful connection between this reading and the importance of brothers overcoming their petty fights in the face of difficult times. It is a message we can take back home with us to our families as we put aside past grievances or fallings-out and talk again with those from whom we have been estranged.

Our rabbis have also favored this section in their commentaries as they notice that the description of Abraham's death is "laconic," that is there is hardly any information there. The Torah doesn't tell us how the sons came together. Was this the first time they had seen each other since Ishmael and his mother Hagar were sent off after Isaac's weaning party? Or was the estrangement really only between Sarah and Hagar, and did Isaac, once he was old enough to be independent, seek out his older brother and visit with him? Naomi Graetz, a Professor at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, suggests that Isaac had good memories of Ishmael and actually was angry at this mother for sending them away. She posits that his later fondness for his son Esau was related to Esau's reminding his father Isaac of his half-brother, Ishmael.

Rabbi Jack Cohen found this part of the portion so interesting that in 1987 he wrote a whole book called *The Reunion of Isaac and Ishmael*. Born in New York,

Rabbi Cohen made aliyah and lived in Jerusalem. He writes that this is “one of the most surprising and touching verses in the entire Bible.” He notes that in the end, Isaac decides to settle in Be’er LaChai Roi, the place where the angel helped Hagar to see the well that would save their lives. For Rabbi Cohen, the coming together of Isaac and Ishmael implies a future possible reconciliation between their descendants such that Abraham’s promise, “through you shall all the nations of the world be blessed,” can be fulfilled. Scholars note the importance of Abraham in both Jewish and Muslim tradition, though each of these religious faiths understands Abraham’s significance a bit differently. For Jews, the focus is on monotheism as a new understanding, in Islam it is on the movement away from polytheism, but both faiths see Abraham as a significant figure.

For me, this year, the promise of possible reconciliation can have a message much closer to home. It is not just Israelis and Palestinians who have two different narratives these days, making conversation between them challenging. Here in the United States, different groups of our citizens experience totally different realities depending on which television news they watch and what is running in their Facebook feed.

As tempting as it is to see the solution as having everyone see things our own way—and as much as the existence of purposeful disinformation makes our current circumstances complicated—what I learned in a decade of Arab–Jewish dialogue from 2000 to 2010 was that we could not come up with one narrative of the past that we could all accept. However, we did gain a great deal by spending time together and hearing each other’s stories. After we had built basic trust and respect for one another, after we had sat in each other’s homes and accepted

each other's hospitality, and even in the case of someone who became ill, visited them in the hospital, we were able to talk about difficult subjects. Our group only disbanded because in 2010 the internet was exploding, and a member of the group set up a group chat. Unfortunately emailing someone was not the same as talking face to face, and in light of intemperate remarks, the group disbanded.

Today a group called Braver Angels is bringing people together across the red/blue divide. Just as Isaac and Ishmael decided, in the face of their father's death, that whatever divided them was not as significant as what united them, I pray that in the face of the challenges facing our country right now, that we too will decide that it is time to work together. As we face a variety of life-threatening challenges, may our differences come to be less important than our need for one another, and may our respect for the basic structures of our democracy prevail.