



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 1, 2014

Lech Lecha

**Jewish Mother's Cure
for Jihad**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Jewish mothers are the ultimate stereotype. Can't you just hear it? "My son the doctor, my son the lawyer, my son always takes care of his Momma" ... "Don't run outside without a coat, its 96 degrees out there and you may catch a cold" ... "Why didn't you finish your dinner? Are you trying to starve yourself? Did you know that when I was growing up I could only dream of such a meal?"

Where did this stereotype come from? What are its origins? And how can the stereotype of the Jewish mother help combat the radicalism raging throughout the Middle East and the world?

That is our topic today – I kid you not – the Jewish mother's cure for whatever ails us, be it war, plague, Ebola or even radical Islam.

Radical Islam – the kind that snuffs out life and wages jihad against any so-called infidel, which seems to include pretty much anyone disagreeing with its murderous intentions – has been analyzed and dissected from here to Tora Bora. And I'd like to meet the person who understands it. Meanwhile, the subject is on our lips daily because every single day radical Islam makes horrifying news in one form or another, with the latest being the assassination attempt of Yehuda Glick by a member of Islamic Jihad, and the subsequent closing of the Temple Mount.

This sermon analyzes the origins of radical Islam in the birth of Ishmael, who unfortunately did not have a Jewish mother. And then it shows how the Jewish mother is the source of the cure for all that ails us.

JEWISH MOTHER'S CURE FOR JIHAD

1. Mother of all Breakfasts (Joke)

On a bright Monday morning, Levi rushes breathlessly in to his psychiatrist's office. "I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamt that you were my mother!" he tells his shrink. "Startled, I quickly awoke, jumped out of bed, grabbed a Coke and a donut, and hustled over here at first daylight."

The psychiatrist, all ashen-faced and worry-stricken, is incredulous: "What?! A Coke and a donut – you call that a breakfast?!"

2. Jewish Mothers

Jewish mothers are the ultimate stereotype. Can't you just hear it?

- "My son the doctor, my son the lawyer, my son always takes care of his Momma."
- "Don't run outside without a coat, its 96 degrees out there and you may catch a cold."
- "Why didn't you finish your dinner? Are you trying to starve yourself? Did you know that when I was growing up I could only dream of such a meal?"

Where did this stereotype come from? What are its origins? And how can the stereotype of the Jewish mother help combat the radicalism raging throughout the Middle East and the world?

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3. Radical Islam

Radical Islam – the kind that snuffs out life and wages jihad against any so-called infidel, which seems to include pretty much anyone disagreeing with its murderous intentions – has been analyzed and dissected from here to Tora Bora. And I'd like to meet the person who understands it.

Meanwhile, the subject is on our lips daily because every single day radical Islam makes horrifying news in one form or another:

Ten days ago, a three-month-old baby was murdered in Jerusalem, when an Arab terrorist rammed his car into a crowd of people waiting at a train station. This week, a woman who was wounded in that same attack succumbed to her wounds, another life snuffed out by terror. And the latest headline is the assassination attempt of Yehuda Glick by a member of Islamic Jihad, and the subsequent closing of the Temple Mount. Who knows what wild acts will come next?

Last Shabbat, the *New York Times* published (*nisht um Shabbat geredt...*) a lengthy report on the horrible beheadings of hostages in Syria. The article related that, according to former hostages who were freed, ransomed, or escaped, "a majority of the Western prisoners had converted to Islam during their difficult captivity." That clearly means "were forced to convert to Islam."

"Only a handful of the hostages stayed true to their own faiths, including Mr. Sotloff, then 30, a practicing Jew. On Yom Kippur, he told his guards he was not feeling well and refused his food so he could secretly observe the traditional fast, a witness said."

While one captive after another is being beheaded, America and its allies – in a token effort – are dropping weapons to arm the Kurds in their fight with the Islamists. But the coalition against ISIS has its own problems.

In Ottawa, an Islamist shot up the Parliament (killing one person), after the Canadians lawmakers voted to join the anti-ISIS team.

In Jerusalem, a powder keg is brewing centered on the Temple Mount. The media calls it the "Silent Intifada," and it is just waiting to explode.

The shot that was heard around the world might have been fired this past Wednesday night, when an Arab terrorist attempted to assassinate a prominent Israeli right-wing activist. The assassin was then killed by Israeli police when he resisted arrest and the country is bracing for a new wave of riots.

With all that, we haven't even mentioned Iran.

The only calamity that doesn't seem to be rooted in radical Islam is Ebola (the virus named after the Ebola River in Zaire where it first emerged in 1976).

In response, the pundits are wringing their hands. This week in the *New York Times* – the so-called “paper of record” – I read three opinion pieces (by Thomas Friedman, Roger Cohen, and Rula Jebreal, two Jews, and one Arab married to a Jew) plus the aforementioned lengthy report on the Syrian hostages and beheadings.

The thing with these articles is that they never really offer any solutions to the problem and they seem baffled by its origins. It's as if opinion writers, and even the alleged “objective” news reporters, are looking at a painting but their eyes only see three quarters of it. They never want to look at the artist who painted the painting and the origins of the painting itself. They only discuss some of the colors, some of the angles, some of the interplay, but they all miss the underlying picture and its framework.

The question essentially is: How did it ever come to this? Like a single rebellious cell that evolves into a cancerous, life-eating disease, from whence did an off-shoot of Islam snowball into the suicide-bombing, plane-hijacking, hostage-beheading monster that it is today?

Today, with blood flowing, everything must be done to make it stop, to put an end to the hate, the killing and the terror.

Parallel to that, we have to figure out how to ensure that this radicalism does not perpetuate into the future? What radically good message and radically positive actions can we as Jews project to the world to provide the alternative to this radical evil?

To guarantee that such radical darkness does not continue, and does not mutate and revive itself once it is eradicated, we must understand what ingredients gave rise to it in the first place.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. Nobody wakes up one day and says: "Yesterday I loved human beings; today I will behead them." It takes a progression, usually a long gradual one, to get to the reality that is the Middle East today.

So where did it begin?

4. Ishmael Is Born

To understand the origins of all things – and thus to understand how they play out in reality today – the place to look is the Torah.

Many think that the Islamic State was born over the past year or two, with ISIS growing out of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Many would be wrong.

The ingredients for ISIS were born some 3,700 years ago in the time of the Patriarch Abraham, known then as Abram. The characteristics that define radical Islamist behavior today may be traced to back then.

Yes, I know – Mohammad, the founder of Islam, came onto the scene only 1,400 years ago. But about 2,300 years *before* that, the forefather of the tribal peoples who would come to occupy the lands between Israel to the West and Pakistan to the East – the lands where Islam would eventually bud and sprout – was born to a man named Abram and a maidservant named Hagar.

In this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Lech Lecha*, we are told that Abram and his wife Sarai were childless for many years. Desperate to have an offspring, Sarai suggested to her husband that he take her maidservant Hagar as a wife, so as to produce an heir to Abram and thus perpetuate God's promise to him – to birth a nation that will transform the world into a home of light and divinity. Abram did so and Hagar became pregnant.

Hagar, carrying Abram's child, developed a smug arrogance toward Sarai and came to despise her. Sarai couldn't abide it, and she convinced her husband to send Hagar away. Traversing the deserted wilderness, feeling alone and abandoned, Hagar cried out to heaven. And then an angel appeared to her:

And the angel of the Lord said to her, "I will greatly multiply your seed, and it will not be counted for abundance." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your affliction."¹

With the birth of Ishmael – whose name literally means, "God will hear" – a multitude of peoples shall sprout, and they shall be so numerous that they will be beyond count. And what will this child Ishmael be like? What will be his traits and the traits of his descendants? The angel had this to say on that score:

"And he will be a wild beast of a man; his hand will be upon all, and everyone's hand upon him, and before all his brothers he will dwell."²

The angel described four unique characteristics of this boy Ishmael: 1) *pera adam*, a wild man; 2) *yado vakol*, his hand will be upon all; 3) *v'yad kol bo*, and everyone's hand upon him; 4) *v'al pnei kol echav yishkon*, and he will dwell before all of his brothers.

This description is 3,700 years old, but it is as if it was written today, describing Ishmael's progeny.

5. Wild Characteristics

Rashi, the great 11th century Torah commentator, explains Ishmael's characteristics:

1. *Pera adam* – This describes someone who loves to hunt, as it is written elsewhere in the Torah: "And he was an archer;

¹ Genesis 16:10-11.

² Genesis 16:12.

and he dwelt in the desert of Paran.”³ Ishmael was a wild man, who defied order and structure and preferred upheaval. He would rather hunt in the desert than turn it into a paradise. He would rather live in a lawless wilderness than in an established metropolis.⁴

2. *Yado vakol* – This refers to bandits, robbers and pirates. The Ishmaelites became bandits, stealing souls and trading human lives. As we see later on in the Torah⁵ and in the Midrash,⁶ the business of Family Ishmael was to trade in human life. Here banditry doesn't just mean stealing money, but also means kidnapping and stealing lives.

3. *V'yad kol bo* – This suggests that everyone will hate Ishmael and his descendants and attack them, and that the Ishmaelites will perpetually be at war and at odds with the world. Just as their hand will be in everybody's business, everybody's hand will be in their business.

4. *V'al pnei kol echav yishkon* – This implies that the Ishmaelites shall dwell in everyone else's neighborhoods, for they will be numerous and will spread throughout the world.

These are the four traits of Ishmael and his descendants, and all four are characteristic of today's radical Islam.

1. While most of humanity desires structure, law and order, radical Islam revels in upheaval, terror and destruction. Instead of the infrastructure of a beautiful metropolis, radical Islam desires the desert wilderness.

2. While most sanctify life (and, if they do plunder, it is usually money), radical Islam disregards life, plunders souls, and glorifies death. Indeed, a suicide bomber is called a *shahid*, a holy martyr.

³ Genesis 21:20.

⁴ Genesis Rabba 45.

⁵ In the episode of the selling of Joseph by his brothers, it was the Ishmaelites who were in the business of buying and selling human beings (Genesis 37:27-28).

⁶ Bereishit Rabba 45.

3. The Western world, and a good deal of the Arab world as well, sees radical Islamists as the enemy. So the world struggles with them, tries to figure them out and temper their bloodlust. Their hand is in everybody's business and everybody's hand is in their business.

4. Radical Islam, as we see from the various nationalities of its recruits, has spread throughout the world – it is not just in Iraq or Syria, it is also in Israel, Canada, Asia, the US and the UK.

Ages ago, the Torah⁷ laid out the (roots of the) dark reality of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Islamic State, and any other version of radical Islam. The description of Ishmael and his descendants was penned thousands of years before Osama Bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ever tied a turban around their evil heads.

It's important to qualify this and make very clear that we are addressing here not general Islam and not all Muslims, many of who follow a peaceful and refined life. Rather, we are discussing the radical elements of fundamentalist Islam which calls for violence and terror against anyone it perceives as infidels.

6. God Will Hear

It is interesting to note that the name Ishmael is composed of two Hebrew words – *yishma* and *E-l*. *Yishma* means “will hear” and *E-l* is one of God's names. Therefore, Ishmael means “God will hear.” Hagar had named him Ishmael because she was directed to by the angel who told her: *and you shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your affliction.*”

⁷ The Midrash adds that, when ready to give the Torah to humanity, God went searching for a suitable nation to give it to. God shopped around to all the nations of the world and when God offered it to the children of Ishmael, before accepting they inquired as to what was written in this book. God replied: “Thou shall not steal [i.e. kidnap people]” The Ishmaelites told God, “But this was the blessing bestowed upon our father, that he shall be ‘a wild beats of a man,’ a bandit, a pirate, a kidnapper; and indeed the Torah teaches that Joseph was stolen and sold into slavery by the nomadic Ishmaelites. Thus, say the Ishmaelites, it is our attribute and nature and blessing to be bandits, how then can we accept your Torah that says, counterintuitive to our nature, “thou shall not steal”?

But, *Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer*, a Talmudic-era text, interprets this name in a somewhat different manner:

And why was he called by the name Ishmael? For there will come a time when the Holy One will listen to the distressed cries of the nation caused by what the sons of Ishmael will come to do. That is why he is called Ishmael, as it is written [in Psalms⁸] "Yishma E-l v'yanem – God will hear and answer them."⁹

Instead of interpreting Ishmael as "God will hear the cries of Hagar," *Pirkei d'Rab Eleizer* interprets it as "God will hear the cries of the people" due to the heinous darkness that will be perpetuated by Ishmael's descendants.

There will come a time when the nation will cry out to God because of all the evil and pain that has been caused them by the descendents of Ishmael. There will come a time when descendants of this wild man, who plunder human life, who are attacked by the world, and who live everywhere, will cause the world to cry out to God because of the suffering that they perpetuate.

It seems to me, my dear brothers and sisters, that this time is now – the time has come for us to cry out to God over all the evil orchestrated by radical Islam, rooted in the attributes of Ishmael.

And, as the Psalm promises, "God will hear and answer [us]." What will be God's answer?

God's answer has already been delivered – back 3,700 years ago when Ishmael's half-brother, Isaac, was born.

7. Isaac

In describing the birth of Isaac, thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, the language of the Torah is completely different – hopeful and holy.

⁸ Tehillim 55:20.

⁹ *Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer* ch. 32.

Specifically, the Torah describes the eternal bond between Abram, now called Abraham, and God. And it describes the promise to Sarai, now called Sarah, that the son she will give birth to will not have any of the attributes of his half-brother, and his descendants will one day receive the Torah and spread its Godly light to the entire world.

Isaac's birth was meant to be an antidote to Ishmael's wild behavior.

But both Isaac and Ishmael were the sons of Abraham – what then differentiated the two so dramatically?

The difference between Ishmael and Isaac was one very basic thing: Isaac had a neurotic-yet-loving, overbearing-yet-caring Jewish mother and Ishmael did not.

8. The Jewish Mother (Joke)

Young man Shlomo tells his Jewish mother that he has got engaged at last. His mother is happy but a little bit worried as well.

She just has to ask him, “Is she Jewish?”

“Of course she is, mother. I'll bring her to dinner this evening so you can meet her.”

That night Shlomo arrives with three beautiful women – a blonde, a brunette and a redhead.

“Mother, I want you to guess which one is my fiancé,” says Shlomo smiling.

But his mother is not pleased at all. All she wanted to do was to speak to her son's fiancé one-on-one without playing silly games. She doesn't know where to start. She waits patiently and gives it some thought. When the meal is over, she calls Shlomo into the kitchen.

“I know which one she is.” She says.

“Which one, then, Mom?” asks Shlomo.

"The blonde."

"Yes, you're right. How on earth did you guess?"

"I knew immediately. As soon as I saw her, I couldn't stand the sight of her!"

9. Traits of a Jewish Mother

The Jewish mother is obsessed, compulsively so, with her children. Overprotective, overbearing, over-the-top domineering. But it is only because the Jewish mother wants the best for her children, and she doesn't care what anyone thinks.

This attribute so perfect by the Jewish mother is called *bittul*¹⁰ – complete giving over and suspension of the self for the sake of a higher cause. There is no ego involved, no thinking about the self, but only about what's best for the cause.

My child, says the Jewish mother, is the most fantastic, most accomplished, most outstanding person in the world, and must be treated as the precious gem he or she is.

Therefore, the Jewish mother makes sure her child is bundled in a thick winter coat as soon as Labor Day is past. This is why a Jewish mother will make sure that her child becomes a doctor and/or marries one. This is why a Jewish mother will make sure her child will eat every last drop on his or her heaping plate – even if it's already the third portion. This is why the Jewish mother is never satisfied.

A story is told that Yankel's mother once gave him two sweaters for his birthday. The next time Yankel visited his mother, he made sure he was wearing one of them. As he entered her house, instead of the expected smile, Yankel's mother demanded, "What's the matter, Yankel? You didn't like the other one?"

¹⁰ See Likkutei Torah, Shir Hashirim 5d; Ohr Hatorah Bereishit 12b-13a.

10. If Ishmael Had A Jewish Mother

Now imagine if Ishmael had one such Jewish mother!

Ishmael was 1) a wild man, 2) a bandit whose hands were in all pockets, 3) attacked by all, and 4) dwelling among all people.

Let's take those traits one by one. If Ishmael had a Jewish mother she would have made sure that 1) he was well behaved, clean, fed, healthy and presentable. Wild? Beast? This is not acceptable. 2) She would have ensured that he had a good job and a respectable career. A bandit, a pirate, a stealer of souls? This is a shanda. 3) She would have guaranteed that he was popular, had many friends, and was well liked by his teachers. No one would have been attacking him. 4) She would have dictated that he live close to her, in a nice big house, with a large guestroom for her holy presence. Don't go living all over the place. Settle down. Focus. Make grandchildren.

The Jewish mother and her positive influence from time immemorial has countered the four negative traits of Ishmael. And we see today that the biggest problem with Ishmael's descendants and radical Islam is the lack of *bittul*. Sure, they are dedicated to a cause, but they are dedicated to a selfish, self-made cause; they aren't dedicated to God's cause.

The problem with radical Islam is that its adherents, unlike a Jewish mother, are more dedicated to themselves than they are to their children.

All of the feminine qualities – of caring, nurturing, protectiveness – are missing in Ishmael's descendants, and maybe this is why Islam is so intolerant of women today, so intolerant of softness and the intangibles of gentleness and caring.

What causes the wildness and the banditry? The lack of a Jewish mother. And this was the major difference between Ishmael and Isaac, between today's jihadists and Jews.

We generally think that our Jewish mothers send us into years of therapy, but the truth is that our Jewish mothers are the true remedy for Islam's bloodthirsty march across the world. They are the only thing between us and some godless entity trying to send us all into a hell called a caliphate.

11. My Son the Doctor (Joke)

Harry Goldberg has been elected the next president of the United States – the first Jewish boy to reach the White House. He is very proud and phones his mother in New York to invite her to the inauguration.

Harry: “Momma, guess what! I've just been elected president; won't you come to my inauguration?”

Mother: “Harry! You know I hate trains. I can't face the journey all the way to Washington. Maybe next time.”

Harry: “Momma! You will take no train. Air Force One will collect you. The journey will be over in 30 minutes. Come to my inauguration, please...”

Mother: “Harry, I hate hotels. The non-kosher food! Nah, maybe next time.”

Harry: “Momma!! You will stay in the White House, with a kosher chef to yourself. PLEASE come.”

Mother: “Harry! I have nothing to wear!”

Harry: “I will have someone take you to Saks or Bloomingdales to make you look perfect. You must come!!!”

Mother: “Okay, okay, I suppose I will come.”

Inauguration day comes. Mother is seated in the front row, next to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. As Harry is called up to be sworn in as the next president, mother digs the Chief Justice in the ribs and says, “Hey, you see that boy Harry? His brother is a doctor!”

12. Conclusion

Isaac and Ishmael had the same father, but they had different mothers.

The Jewish mother brings out the best in her children and ensures nothing less than excellence.

It is our job to combat the evils of the world with the spirit of the Jewish mother, to turn the wild beast into a gentle soul, to turn a bandit into a perpetrator of life.

There is very real evil in this world and it must be obliterated with force. But understanding the origins of this evil will help us preempt it from growing and taking over the world.

I guarantee that, if Hagar were Sarah, the desecration of God's name every time *Allah-u Akbar* is shouted by a suicide bomber would have been preempted 3,700 years ago.

Through our actions, by being faithful to the mission of Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, we shall do so instead.

And moreover, even Ishmael is transformed at the end to living up to his being the son of Abraham. What is the end story of Ishamel? He ends up doing teshuva.¹¹ And this too is due to the influence of Sarah.¹²

So too today, through our steadfast commitment to the Jewish mother's devotion, we can transform even the wild forces out there.

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹¹ Rashi Chayei Sarah, Genesis 25:9. Maskil L'Dovid explains that through his teshuvah he transformed all his sins into virtues, thus his entire life was ultimately redeemed

¹² See Klei Yakar at the end of Chayei Sarah.