



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Chayei Sarah

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November 7, 2015
Chayei Sarah

The Land of Ishmael



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Nothing seems to be working for the Nation of Israel right now, so how about we try a novel approach?

In addition to doing all that is immediately necessary to protect our innocent brothers and sisters in Israel, what is truly needed is a revolutionary education campaign – not only for the world at large, but first and foremost for the Arab world.

Instead of temporary remedies, why don't we envision what perfection looks like? How did the Creator of the Universe envision the Middle East, the relationship between the descendants of Isaac (i.e. Jews) and the descendants of his brother Ishmael (i.e. Arabs)?

If the Creator of the Universe – known in modern parlance as God – was standing right here (and He is), and if we were to ask Him, “What is Your vision for the Middle East?” what would His answer be?

Of course, we already know His answer. It is written in the Torah, and is actually part of our Torah reading for this week.

Israel is the Promised Land, promised to the Jews.

But the descendants of Ishmael also have a Promised Land. What and where is it?

As there are Twelve Tribes of Israel, there are also Twelve Tribes of Ishmael. Perhaps if they understood their history, they wouldn't be so inclined to decimate ours.

THE LAND OF ISHMAEL

1. God's Vision for the Middle East

Nothing seems to be working for the Nation of Israel right now, so how about we try a novel approach?

In addition to doing all that is immediately necessary to protect our innocent brothers and sisters in Israel, what is truly needed is a revolutionary education campaign – not only for the world at large, but first and foremost for the Arab world.

Instead of temporary remedies, why don't we envision what perfection looks like? How did the Creator of the Universe envision the Middle East, the relationship between the descendants of Isaac (i.e. Jews) and the descendants of his brother Ishmael (i.e. Arabs)?

If the Creator of the Universe – known in modern parlance as God – was standing right here (and He is), and if we were to ask Him, *"What is Your vision for the Middle East?"* what would His answer be?

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But, perhaps the best way to broach such a serious topic is to begin with a little humor.

2. Hell of a Change (Joke)

Benny from Haifa passed away and was sent down below, to heaven's alter ego, hell. He was amazed, however, to discover that hell was flush with lush vegetation, running streams, misty waterfalls and placid lakes. Everyone seemed happy there. How could this be Gehenna?

"You look surprised," said a resident.

"Yes, I am," replied Benny, "I expected hell to be very dry and exceedingly hot, like a desert. But all I can see are trees full of all kinds of fruit, beautiful flowers, loads of vegetation, lush grass and water everywhere. This is not hell!"

"Well," said the resident, "it used to be like you describe, but then the Israelis started to arrive, and they irrigated the hell out of the place!"

3. Middle East – Heaven or Hell?

If someone were to promise you a land that was mostly desert but without the riches of oil wells, a land that was surrounded on all sides by hundreds of millions of people who desired to slaughter you, and on whose streets your children would be afraid to walk due to murderous knife attacks, would that promised land be desirable to you? Of course not. Who would want such a land? It would be more reminiscent of hell than heaven.

Yet, Israel is experiencing all of the above. So is Israel more heavenly or more hellish?

When the Jews came to Israel in the late 19th century, large swaths of it were a swamp or a desert, but now the Land of Israel is lush, both materially and spiritually. The Jews have irrigated the hell out of the land and turned it into heaven.

But what about the rest of the Middle East?

Hell might be too light a term for what's going on there. Indeed, its hellish bloodthirstiness spills over to the beautiful Israel as well, where venomous knives try to slash at the purity that is the Jewish people.

Blood is the currency of the Middle East and currently the blood banks are overflowing, so to speak, may God protect us all. So what can we do to change the narrative? Not just Israel's narrative, which is our primary focus, but also the narrative of all the Middle East –

from Syria to Turkey, Iraq to Iran, Saudi Arabia to the Emirates? After all, Israel does not exist in a vacuum.

What can we do to irrigate the wilderness (in all its interpretations and manifestations) and turn it into an oasis?

The answer lies in this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Chayei Sarah*.

4. Parshat Chayei Sarah

In any desirable place – say Jerusalem, or New York City – space is at a premium. No less so in the Torah. Indeed, every letter in the Torah is calculated and every word is exact. If something makes it into the Torah – and most things don't – it is of paramount importance to us, providing indispensable lessons for our everyday lives.

So why does the Torah dedicate so much space to Ishmael and his family?

The concluding verses of Parshat Chayei Sarah are all about Ishmael, his progeny and their lands:

Now these are the generations of Ishmael the son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, the maidservant of Sarah, bore to Abraham.

And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, according to their births: the firstborn of Ishmael was Nebaioth, and [then came] Kedar and Adbe'el and Mibsam, and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedmah.

These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names in their open cities and in their walled cities, twelve princes to their nations. And these are the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred thirty seven years. [When] he expired and died, he was gathered to his people. And [his descendants] dwelt from Havilah to Shur, which borders on Egypt, going towards Ashur...¹

¹ Genesis 25:12-18.

That is some pretty detailed information – filled with precise names and lands. There is nothing vague here; it is all clearly spelled out. So why does the Torah, God’s holy book, document these facts? Why it is important for us to know these details?²

The Torah documents these facts in order to describe to us God’s vision for the Middle East, and to empower us as human beings to implement this vision, using our unique and special talents and skills.

All of which will be better understood when we examine a controversial passage in the Talmud and Midrash.

5. Ishmael’s Repentance

The Talmud³ and Midrash⁴ both tell us that Ishmael repented before he passed away, returning to the ways and teachings of his father, Abraham.

From where does the Talmud deduce this fascinating – some may feel, controversial – fact? From an earlier verse in our Torah portion, which states:

And Isaac and Ishmael, his [Avraham’s] sons, buried him in the Cave of Machpelah.⁵

Ishmael was older than Isaac by 13 years. And Ishmael certainly maintained his supremacy over Isaac. So why does the verse mention Isaac before Ishmael?⁶

² See Megilah 17a, which states that Ishmael’s age is given as a compass by which to chronicle Jacob’s years. Nevertheless, why the details?

³ Bava Batra 16b.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 30:4; 38:12.

⁵ Genesis 25:9. Rashi quoting Midrash: *From here we may deduce that Ishmael repented and let Isaac go before him, and that is the meaning of “a good old age” (Genesis 15:15), which is stated regarding Abraham.*

⁶ The Talmud (ibid) pre-empts any discussion of righteousness by referencing Esau and Jacob; Esau is mentioned first, even though he was less righteous than Jacob.

Because Ishmael allowed Isaac to take first place at the funeral.

Imagine the funeral of Abraham, “the father of a multitude of nations.” Surely, a lot of people were there, paying respects to the father of monotheism, paying tribute to a king among men.

In front of that huge assemblage, Ishmael, thirteen years older than his half-brother Isaac, humbly motions for Isaac to walk before him. They are both burying their father – Abraham is Ishmael’s biological father as much as he is Isaac’s – yet Ishmael, the elder, motions for Isaac to go before him.

This is indicative of Ishmael’s conscious and purposeful testament to the world that Isaac is the inheritor of Abraham’s legacy. He understands that Isaac’s children were meant to perpetuate that legacy. Therefore, he allows Isaac to lead the way to their father’s resting place, knowing that the children of Isaac will lead the way so that the world fulfills its potential.

This is how the Talmud knows that Ishmael repented – that is, became a *baal teshuvah*. He understood the divine vision for the world.

And this now sheds light on why the Torah dedicates so much space to Ishmael and his family tree.

6. Two Promised Lands

The Land of Israel is the land promised to the Children of Israel (the other name for Jacob, Isaac’s son). So we say, *Eretz Yisrael*, “Land of Israel” – not the Land of Abraham, for that would include not just Isaac but his brother Ishmael. And we do not say the Land of Isaac, for that would include not just Jacob but his brother Esau. Instead, we say the Land of Israel, indicating that it is for Jacob’s children alone.

This land was gifted to the Jews so they would show the world what it means to turn hell into heaven, desert into oasis, material earth into a spiritual home for the Divine.

Just as Isaac led Ishmael at their father's funeral, so must Isaac's descendants lead Ishmael's and show them what true holiness looks like.

But our portion says that there is another Promised Land, the lands promised to Ishmael's offspring.

And these are the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred thirty seven years. [When] he expired and died, he was gathered to his people. And [his descendants] dwelt from Havilah to Shur, which borders on Egypt, going towards Ashur...⁷

Torah commentators debate where exactly Havilah and Shur are⁸ but, generally speaking, we believe that the Torah is referring to lands north of Israel, from Syria to modern day Turkey, and to lands south-east of Israel, from Eilat all the way east, either to the end of the Fertile Crescent, where the Emirates meet up with Iran and Iraq, or even further, all the way past Afghanistan and Pakistan to India.

This is a massive chunk of real estate that God gifted to Ishmael and his children. And these vast lands are many times the size of the one small parcel of land given to the Jews.

The Torah clearly states that the Nation of Ishmael has specific lands that it is meant to cultivate and elevate.⁹

So you see? Muslims desiring Israel is like Jews desiring Iraq – unnatural and counterintuitive.

⁷ Genesis 25:12-18.

⁸ See *The Living Torah* (Torah translation) by R' Aryeh Kaplan and the commentaries there, for a taste of the debate.

⁹ Though the Torah does not use the language of promise and purpose as it does to Israel, it certainly states that this land is given to the twelve princes of Ishmael.

7. The Mission of Israel and Ishmael

Israel's mission is to demonstrate how the Promised Land is a template for turning hell into heaven, irrigating arid soil into flourishing orchards, and turning mundane matter into a divine home – leading with vision as Isaac led Ishmael.

Meanwhile, Ishmael's mission is to do the same with the vast lands outside the Land of Israel – from Egypt up to Turkey, all the way out east to India (or at least Iran).

God gifted Israel to the Jews so that they can make that strip of land heaven, and He gifted everything north and east of Israel to the Ishmaelites. Why? So that they may irrigate that hell and turn it into a heavenly oasis, an illuminated home for God.

That's it.

Imagine that every Friday sermon in every Muslim mosque preached this idea, this divine vision.

Imagine that those preachers preached the concluding verses of our portion, describing God's gift to Ishmael's kids, and how it is their job to elevate their lands.

And imagine that these preachers – instead of spewing hate – taught that Ishmael allowed Isaac to walk before him at their father's funeral.

Can you imagine what the Middle East would look like then?

Then God's vision (as described in this week's Torah reading) would be fulfilled.

8. The Lesson to Us

We, as Jews, are ultimately born for one reason: not to make money, though that's nice; not to cook and eat good food, though that's delicious. As Jews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

it is our *raison d'être* – our purpose, our mission, our objective – to change the predicable material narrative into an inspiring and revolutionary spiritual narrative.

When the world talks of the Middle East, they talk of hell, of a wilderness, of a dry land of hate, death and slaughter. We are born into this world to teach it to be not what it is but what it could be.

It is our job to turn hell into heaven and, in the process, to inspire and show the rest of the world – our cousins included, our cousins more than anyone – how to turn their hells into heavens.

By living up to our purpose and potential in the Land of Israel – or wherever we may find ourselves – we will leave the world no choice but to do the same.

Wherever we may be, as Jews – as children of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel – we must share and teach from the light source which is the Torah.

Imagine that the next conversation you have about the Middle East in general and Israel in particular did not digress into political shenanigans, right wing, left-wing, all out war. Imagine that you shared the Torah's vision for the Middle East. Imagine that you interjected into the conversation the divine fact that each and every man, woman and child has been gifted with their own parcel of land, with the express written objective to transform that parcel of land into a heaven, never a hell.

If you – and we all – kept this in mind in all our interactions with the world, would not the world be inspired and transformed into a heavenly oasis?

This is what the Torah wants from us. This is why it dedicates so much space to the progeny and lands of Ishmael – and in the portion named *Chayei Sarah*, “the life of Sarah,” no less. The Torah is trying to teach us that when Sarah's descendants live up to their calling, the rest of the world, especially Ishmael and his descendants, will be compelled to follow suit.

After all, when one is faced with divine light, one can either be enlightened or blinded.

9. Short Cut (Joke)

Let me digress for a moment:

Imagine ... it's the Maccabi Games in Tel Aviv and just before the 100-meter race, an American sprinter asks an Israeli opponent, "So what's your best time?"

"Just over 8 seconds," replies the Israeli.

"But the world record is around 9 seconds," says the astonished American.

"Yes," says the Israeli, "but I know a short cut."

10. No Short Cuts (Conclusion)

There are no shortcuts in this race. In fact, this isn't a race at all. Instead of trying to come up with novel ideas to solve the current problem, why don't we simply offer the one perfect solution which the Torah describes?

Instead of running a race, pitting one side against another – one winning the other losing – why don't we simply state that Israel's descendants have a specific job and Ishmael's descendants have a specific job?

The Jews have to elevate the Land of Israel to its highest level through good deeds and divine actions, and the Muslims have to elevate the Land of Ishmael – that is, the vast swath of land gifted to them – to its highest level through their good deeds and divine actions.

We Jews have our work cut out for us, as do the more than a billion Muslims.

I know that some people may see these words as naïve, wishful thinking. Very idealistic and noble, but simply unrealistic. Yet, it is precisely such great dreams and visions that have changed the world –

beginning with Abraham's vision, and the vision carried by our grandparents throughout the generations of building a better world. Who was it that said: Only those crazy enough to change the world are the ones that do?

Enough talk – time to get to work.

Shabbat Shalom!

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