

Rabbi David Lerner
Hayyei Sarah 5768
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Shabbat Shalom.

Last Friday was pretty typical in my Lerner-Levin household – a day filled with busy-ness. We got up early to go to Arlington to daven, to pray outdoors and watch the sun rise over the horizon, and to go to Boston with my daughter Talya’s school. My parents were visiting for my mother’s book party at Brandeis the previous evening, and my son Ari was going to be the Shabbat helper in our pre-school.

When I finally sat down at my desk, I kept fidgeting. As lunchtime came, I realized what was bothering me. I could not simply sit in my office, read email, and work with my old and new secretaries during their transition. Something else was calling me, and I needed to be there. Although there was much to do, and Fridays are always short, I left my office and zipped downtown to the corner of Boylston and Dartmouth Streets for a rally for Israel.

Somehow I was able to grab a felafal at Rami’s and get a parking spot right at the rally. And on top of that, I did not get lost getting there or back!

Why did I add one more activity to an already full plate?

Because Israel needs us.

Last weekend, a conference with anti-Israel themes was held at Boston’s Old South Church, sponsored by an organization called Sabeel. The group’s rhetoric perpetuates bias against Israel. As they did last weekend, they equate Israel with South Africa and unbelievably call Israel’s actions Apartheid. Not that there aren’t others who have said the same – see Jimmy Carter’s offensive and inaccurate book entitled “Peace Not Apartheid,” still available on Amazon and elsewhere. (Please do not buy it, but feel free to read CAMERA’s scathing critique instead – I have left a couple of copies around the shul.)

So, I joined with 300 hundred others, including many other rabbis and a few from our shul who passed up Shabbat preparations to make sure our voices were heard. While Israel surely has problems, it does not practice Apartheid – it is the ONLY democracy in the Middle East and one of the few places where Arab and Muslim women can participate freely in civic life. In addition, Israel has been working for decades on a peaceful solution to its disputes with her neighbors who deny her right to exist even while under terrorist attack. Israel is the only country that fights with its hands tied behind its back, careful to answer to a higher moral standard than her adversaries.

The rally was a reminder of what Israel really is. One of my favorite posters there was a large picture of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with a quote of his equating being anti-Israel with being anti-Semitic.

I'll share with you the larger context that King wrote 30 years ago:

". . . You declare, my friend, that you do not hate the Jews; you are merely 'anti-Zionist.' And I say, let the truth ring forth from the high mountain tops, let it echo through the valleys of God's green earth. When people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews--this is God's own truth.

"Anti-Semitism, the hatred of the Jewish people, has been and remains a blot on the soul of mankind. In this we are in full agreement. So know also this: anti-Zionist is inherently anti-Semitic, and ever will be so."

This week, I had a meeting with an Israel tour operator about our next Israel trip. I asked him how the *matzav* - the situation - is? He said "the same." While he hoped that the upcoming peace talks in Annapolis would be helpful, he had no illusions. I agreed and did not feel optimistic either.

But then I started thinking about Yishmael and Isaac through the lens of the rabbis. Yishmael often gets a bad rap in our tradition. Our rabbis see him as having started life on the wrong foot. Even a couple of weeks ago, we found him and his mother, Hagar, banished

to the desert, dying of thirst. Suddenly, an angel of God appeared to Hagar and revealed to her a nearby well of water. The angel blessed her and promised that her son's descendants would become a mighty nation. But then, he said something much less positive about this future son's character. "*V'hu yihye pere adam* – and he shall be a wild-donkey of a man; his hand shall be against everyone, and the hand of everyone shall be against him..."

As Yishmael grew older, he was still beset by problems. In last week's *parashah*, *Parashat Va'yera*, we read how an aged Sarah miraculously gave birth to Isaac. But then the Torah tells us that Sarah witnessed Yishmael, Hagar's son, "*metzahek* -- making sport" with Isaac. While we do not know exactly what, "*metzahek*" means, it clearly had a negative connotation for Sarah. Rashi, the 11th century commentator, who often utilizes older rabbinic traditions, explains that Yishmael engaged in idol worship, sexual immorality, and murder.

In fact, Rashi quotes the midrash that Yishmael even tried to murder his own brother, Isaac, in an argument over Abraham's inheritance.

If the story had ended there, then we could all say that there is little hope for the future. Isaac, after all, was one of the fathers of the Jewish people. Yishmael is understood to be the progenitor of the Arabs and even Muslims. If the hatred between the Jewish people and the Arabs goes that far back, then what hope is there for today?

However, the story doesn't end there. In fact, the story ends where it all began. Hagar named the well that the angel pointed out to her, "*Be'er L'hai Ro*" - "the well of the Living One who sees me." It was at that well that Hagar received the prediction of the character of her future child. Interestingly, following Sarah's death, Isaac visited the same well.

Why would Isaac, Sarah's son, visit the well where Hagar (his father's second wife and the mother of Yishmael, whom Isaac's mother had banished) was visited by an angel? Rashi answers that Isaac went to bring Hagar back to Abraham so that he could remarry her. Indeed, a few verses later, the text tells us that Abraham remarried a woman named Keturah. Rashi remains consistent by

telling us that Keturah was none other than Hagar. The Torah now referred to her as Keturah, which means incense, since she had become as pleasant and fine as incense. She had changed.

The Torah reminds us that we can change. Abraham, who had banished Hagar, has reunited with her; she has changed and forgiven him. Both Abraham and Hagar have transformed themselves.

If Hagar's change demonstrates the power of *teshuvah*, of repentance, Isaac's behavior demonstrates the power of forgiveness. Think about it: Hagar was the mother of Yishmael, Isaac's bitter childhood rival. Yet, remarkably, after Sarah's death, the bereaved Isaac actually went searching for Hagar to bring her back to his father! Think about the transformation and the generosity of spirit that this act entailed. But there is something deeper going on here.

As children, Yishmael and Isaac may have fought bitterly, but they were still brothers. Certainly, Isaac must have missed his brother on some level following his banishment. And we can assume that he had not seen Yishmael from the moment of his banishment many years before. I suggest that Isaac returned to the well not so much to find Hagar but rather to find his brother, Yishmael. Bringing Hagar to Abraham was perhaps a tool that Isaac used to reach out to his long estranged brother, Yishmael.

In fact, the two brothers do finally reconcile. Toward the end of this morning's parashah, we read that Abraham died and that Isaac and Yishmael came together to bury him. The text then tells us that Isaac went to dwell at *Be'er L'hai ro'i*, the same well where Hagar had been visited by the angel and where Isaac had found her so many years later. We can only imagine that at this point, having lost his father, Isaac went to live with his brother, Yishmael. After the bitter estrangement that had occurred in their youth, Isaac and Ishmael finally made peace and lived together as brothers.

The rabbis praise Yishmael for his transformation. The midrash asks the question: why did the Torah include a description of the death of Yishmael? After all, the Torah occupies itself with the descendants of Isaac, not those of Yishmael. The answer is that Yishmael died as a righteous man who had changed. Rashi explains

that the term, “*geviah*,” or expiring, which the Torah uses to refer to Yishmael’s death, is reserved for the righteous alone.

Through this story of family reconciliation and repentance, the Torah is really teaching us the power of change. Human beings are capable of great change. What we were in the past is not who we are today. The story of Hagar and Ishmael, in which the villains transform themselves into heroes, demonstrates that you can never write off a person or a society. Like Isaac, we must seek out those with whom we want to make peace, to encourage that they too engage in repentance.

This message remains relevant to us today. We cannot let our despair derail our future. We must encourage Israel and hope that she is able to take courageous steps for peace. We must hope that Yishmael’s transformation and his reconciliation with his brother Isaac will serve as a model for the peace framework, allowing for openness, dialogue and peace – even moving away from extreme actions and positions.

That does not mean we do not stand up for our brothers and sisters in Israel. We should - even it means taking time out on a busy erev Shabbes, a Friday afternoon, to go to a rally. We should and we must. It does not mean that we should not call out against outrageous comparisons. We should and we must. It does not mean that we should not go on a trip to Israel. We should and we must. Join me for our next Israel adventure in February 2009!

But while our passion for Israel only grows, our hope for peace never abates.

Yishmael and Isaac remind us to hope and pray for peace and reconciliation always. That we have the power to bring about change in ourselves, our families and the world – that we can heal the broken-ness among us.

Like Martin Luther King, we too must dream and work towards peace among the children of Isaac and Yishmael, even as we rally for Israel. If we engage in both of these behaviors, then we, like Hagar, Yishmael, and Isaac before us, will truly be dwelling at *Be’er l’hai*

roi—we will truly be living at a place where God sees us and where we see God both in the world and in the faces of every human being.

Shabbat Shalom.