

# This Land is My Land

## A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

### Essay #16—Parshat Ki Teitze (3) 5761

A short recap of the last three essays will bring us into focus for this next piece. Man was created with the purpose of serving God. However, as a short poem I read many eons ago puts it:

God's plan made a perfect beginning  
 Man spoiled his chances by sinning  
 We know that the story  
 Will end in God's Glory  
 But at present the Other Side's winning.

So the generations became distanced from God and the Flood put an end to them. It was time to rebuild—which Avraham did so well. From the midst of idolatry he arose to discover that there is a God, Who, due to Avraham's searching, revealed Himself to him. God told Avraham to "go to the Land that I will show you." He did, and took along all those that he converted to serve God, all those within whom he was successful in planting Daat of God. Due to Avraham's love and devotion to God, God promised him that the Holy Land would forever belong to his descendents, and made the circumcision treaty with him. We now return to find out what Yishmael's part is in all this.

#### Act One, Scene One

Almost immediately upon arriving in the Holy Land, a famine broke out. Avram was forced to descend to Egypt. While there, the immoral Pharaoh set his sights upon Sarai. Only when he found himself afflicted, did Pharaoh return Sarai, untouched, to Avram. As wicked and immoral as Pharaoh was, he recognized that this couple was holy. When he sent them off he gave his daughter, the princess Hagar, to them as a maidservant. He said to her, "Better you should be a maidservant in their household than a princess in another's home." So Hagar, princess of Egypt, became a maid to Sarai. Some ten years after their return to the Land, when they saw that they could not have children, Sarai offered Avram her maid Hagar as a concubine. "Perhaps she will bear a child" and they will be able to continue their legacy. But what is so special about their legacy?

As we have seen in the previous essay, the important thing in life is to recognize God. Once one attains this Daat, he must transmit it to future generations. Through this he "procreates," he fills the world with thinking, knowledgeable human beings who are capable of raising more human beings, etc. Realizing that she and Avram were barren (Sarai did not even have a womb; *Yevamot* 64a), Sarai hoped that perhaps Avram could father a child, who would be able to transmit the Daat of God further. Sarai handpicked her maidservant Hagar, perhaps hoping that she had learned enough about God, gained sufficient Daat, during her ten year stay in their home, to bear Avram's child.

As it was, when Hagar became pregnant she also became arrogant. Sarai, seeing that this was not what she bargained for, worked her harder and caused Hagar to miscarry. Hagar fled from and began

wandering in the desert. Angels were sent to her with a message. “You will become pregnant [again] and bear a child. You shall call him Yishmael, because God listened to your prayers and your suffering (see Targum). He will be a wild man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him... When the child was born, Avram named him Yishmael” (despite his not hearing the command of the angel to give him that name)...Avram was 86 at the time (*Genesis* 16). (See the passage with Rashi and other commentaries.)

Our Sages have quite a bit of commentary about the whole incident which has direct bearing on us today. Briefly, Hagar, once pregnant, was guilty of denigrating Sarai. Nonetheless, according to Ramban (Nachmanides), Sarai sinned by oppressing Hagar. Avram was guilty of being an accessory because he did not intervene on Hagar’s behalf. Because of this, God “listened to her suffering.” Hagar was rewarded with a son, Yishmael, who “will be a wild man” and cause suffering to the descendents of Avram and Sarai!

In English, the adjective precedes the noun, e.g., “wild man.” In Hebrew, however, the adjective *follows* the noun, e.g., *chakham* (sage) *gadol* (great). Thus, *pere adam* translates as “manlike wilding.” Yishmael, the child promised to Hagar, is a wild, untamed creature, in human form. This is what will be used to cause suffering to the Jews, the descendents of Avram and Sarai.

So here we have our introduction to “reward and punishment,” our first look into God’s System of Justice. It was only a very short period that Sarai oppressed Hagar, not more than several months, perhaps much less, maybe even only a few days. Yet Sarai should have known better. Avram, too, should have stopped Sarai’s oppression of Hagar. It was unbecoming of two such eminent people, those who were to reveal God’s presence in this world, to allow another to suffer at their hand, despite the other’s deserving it.

Every act, every thought, every word, has its “price,” whether reward or punishment. (We will try to discuss in the following essays how the “price” is determined.) But come, see, look at, and delve into how God seeks Justice for everyone, for every single creature, even wild ones who cause damage and destruction! For just a very short amount of oppression, a price is being paid out for nearly two millennia. (Of course we’ve added to the original sentence by our deeds, but look how the “wild man” is reaping his extensive reward!) And if two millennia of suffering is punishment for oppressing a rebellious servant, try to imagine the reward for a single good deed! As our Sages teach, “The measure for reward is 500 times greater than the measure of punishment” (*Rashi, Exodus* 20:6)!

In Act One, Scene One, we learned that Yishmael’s justification for causing suffering to the Jews began because of unwarranted oppression of his mother by our ancestors, what today would be called an abuse of human rights. This is in line with the teaching, “In the Future, God will demand an accounting even for the humiliation of a horse from its owner” (*Sefer Chassidim* #44). Thus, there’s a payback for everything. This is a frightening thought. However, the idea is not to become scared and crippled (“caught in the headlights”), but to look forward to the reward. We look forward simply by doing good deeds. This doesn’t exempt a person from suffering for sins committed, and most certainly doing good deeds does not excuse future wrongful acts, especially intentionally wrongful or malicious acts. But each deed has its payback or reward and the more good we do, even if we have a “criminal past,” the more we will merit reward in the Future. The Eternal Future. Back to the birth of Yishmael.

Act One, Scene Two.

“Avram was 86 years old when Hagar gave birth to Yishmael” (*Genesis* 16:16). But wasn’t Avram barren? Didn’t Rashi explain that *Avram* can’t have children, but Avraham could? And, wasn’t Avraham 99 years old when the letter *heh* was added to his name? For this we have to draw upon Rebbe Nachman’s interpretation of “giving birth” or remaining “barren.” As explained (in the previous essay) “giving birth” means to transmit the knowledge of God to future generations. The birth of a child who will accept God and follow the ways He has set up for us is considered a “birth.” If someone chooses to reject God, he is a humanoid animal (see *Likutey Moharan* II, 7). Of Yishmael it is written, “He will be a wild man, his hand will be against everyone....” Of Avraham it is written, “For he will leave a legacy for his children and for his household members to guard the ways of the Almighty, to perform acts of charity and justice” (*Genesis* 18:19).

Yishmael cannot be considered a child of Avram, because he rejected God’s ways. He was a “wild man,” one who would harm others and reject the ways taught him by his father Avram. Since he is not considered a worthy offspring, Avram was still considered to be barren.

As we have seen, the Torah’s description of Yishmael is actually as that of a wild creature, one whose hand is always raised to harm another. Even just a cursory glance at the bloody history of Arabia is sufficient testimony to the accuracy of the Torah’s “wild man” prophecy. For the skeptics among (or within) us who question the Torah’s view of their historical record, there is the modern “bible”—those world-infamous CNN reports about Algeria, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and of course the Palestinians. Read how the “wild men” of any country that has raised the flag of Arabia or Islam treat one another. “His hand will be against everyone....”

And, of course, after proclaiming war against the Jews in 1948—and losing—who but a “wild man” would leave his brethren in refugee camps for 30-40 years to live in total squalor, just so that he could use them as political pawns? Talk about oppressing a “poor servant girl.” This was not an act of charity or justice; it does not behoove the seed of Avraham to behave in this manner. And so, despite Avram actually having conceived Yishmael together with Hagar, Yishmael is not considered Avram’s son.

So Yishmael has “merited” to make other people’s lives miserable because of the suffering of his mother. But what does this have to do with the Holy Land?

(To be continued)

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