

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #17—Parshat Ki Tavo 5761

Act Two, Scene One

"Avram was 99 years old; God appeared to him and said, 'I am God, go before Me and be perfect. I will make a covenant between Me and you... You shall be the father of nations... you shall be called Avraham... I will sustain My covenant between Me and you and your descendents after you... to you and your offspring I will give you the Land where you are living... The whole land of Kanaan shall be your eternal heritage... My covenant is the circumcision... Sarai will be called Sarah... she will bear you a son... Avraham rejoiced, but said, 'Can he who is nearly 100 years bear a child? Can Sarah who is 90 bear a child?' Avraham pleaded before God, 'Let Yishmael live before You!' God replied, 'Nonetheless Sarah will bear you a son, name him Yitzchak (Isaac)... and I heard you with regard to Yishmael, I will bless him, make him fruitful, increasing his numbers very much... But I will keep My covenant with Yitzchak....'"

After the Torah records the birth of Yishmael, God appears to Avram, adds the letter *heh* to his name changing it to Avraham, and gives him the mitzvah of the circumcision. At the same time, God promises Avraham the Holy Land as an eternal heritage for his descendents who will be born from him. The Torah then records Avraham's performance of the *brit milah* (circumcision) and adds that the entire male staff of his household, as well as his son Yishmael, went through the ceremony of *milah*. In praise of Yishmael, Rashi points out that though Yishmael was a young man (thirteen years of age) and would endure terrible pain, he acquiesced and submitted himself to performing the *milah* in order to fulfill the mitzvah. Here we have the reason for Yishmael's claim to the Holy Land, which, we have seen, is bound to *milah*. The Zohar (II, 32a), elaborates.

"Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Chiya were discussing Torah. Rabbi Chiya said, "Sarai was barren, she had no child" (*Genesis* 11:30). Woe to this! Woe to the fact that Sarai was barren for it brought about the birth of Yishmael to Hagar." Asked Rabbi Yosi, "But why are you so sorry about it? After all, eventually Sarah had a child, Yitzchak, a holy child." R. Chiya answered, "You are seeing the greatness of Yitzchak, while I see Yishmael's wickedness and the suffering he will inflict upon the Jews. I heard the following directly from Rabbi Shimon [bar Yochai] which is why I am crying.

"Woe to that time. Because Sarah did not have a child she offered Hagar to Avraham and begat Yishmael. It became a propitious moment for her to supplant Sarah, for when God promised the Land to Avraham he prayed, 'Let Yishmael live before You.' Though at that time God was telling Avraham about his child, Yitzchak, nevertheless, Avraham was [already] attached to Yishmael and prayed on his behalf. God [in order to answer the prayers of Avraham], replied, 'I heard your prayers for Yishmael. I will bless him and multiply him manifold...' Yishmael then entered into the Covenant of Avraham before Yitzchak was

born....

"Now come and see! For 400 years the guardian angel of Yishmael stood before God and pleaded on his behalf: 'Does one who is circumcised deserve a portion in Your Name?' 'Yes,' replied God. 'Isn't Yishmael circumcised? Why doesn't he have a portion in Your Name equal to Yitzchak's?' God replied, 'Because Yitzchak performs the *milah* at the proper time and in the proper way' (the *milah* is on the eighth day and is done by cutting off the foreskin and opening the membrane which covers the glans). Yishmael (i.e., the Arabs, even today) perform the *milah* when they are older (at thirteen years) and do not open the membrane (see *Nitzutzei Orot, Zohar* II, 32a, #2).' 'Still,' argued Yishmael's guardian angel, 'because he is circumcised, doesn't he deserve a reward for this?'

"Rabbi Chiya was again sighing and bemoaning that moment when Yishmael was born and became circumcised. What did God do to appease the guardian angel? [Because of their incompleteness in performing the mitzvah] God distanced Yishmael from any attachment to His Supernal Holiness. Instead, God gave Yishmael's descendants a portion of an earthly sanctity, the Holy Land, because of their observance of the *milah*. Thus, they will rule over the Holy Land for a long time. But their rule is limited to the time when the Holy Land will be void of its inhabitants, much as their performance of the *milah* is void of any serious meaning [because of its being incorrectly performed]. Thus their payment matches their performance of the deed. And their presence in the Holy Land [due to their *milah*] will be THE reason why the Jews cannot fully return to their Land — until the merit of the circumcision is completely rewarded.

"Furthermore, the Arabs will evoke many battles around the world invoking Edom [the descendents of Esav—another great bargain!] into fierce battles at sea, on land and near Jerusalem. They will attack and conquer each other...and additional armies will join the battle...Until God 'will grab the corners of the Land [and the wicked will be shaken from it]' (Job 38:13). He will remove the children of Yishmael from the Land...Then, I will transform all the nations into a pure tongue, that all shall call in God's Name and serve Him in unity (*Zephania* 3:9)."

All this is stated in the Zohar, written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai some 1800 years ago.

So there we have it. Yishmael and his descendants have a claim to the Land, not because they have lived there, for it was never their property to possess. Consider it as having been "rented" to them during the past centuries. This is borne out historically. Only a minor portion of the last 1000 years has the Land been under direct possession of the Arabs. The claim of Yishmael and the Arabs to the Holy Land has nothing at all to do with their having lived here. Nor has it anything to do with the Jews and Israel. It has to do with rewarding for Yishmael performing the *milah* way back, 3714 years ago and for the partial performance of this mitzvah by his descendents throughout the generations.

We are staring at a startling observation. A single mitzvah performed by Yishmael and partially performed by his descendents over a period of time, merits a reward for several thousand years! And, as the Zohar teaches, "Their presence in the Holy Land will be the reason why the Jews cannot fully return to their Land — until the merit of their circumcision is completely rewarded." The *milah* is what gives Yishmael a claim to the Land, for the Land and the *milah* go hand in hand. Until the merit of the mitzvah has been depleted, Yishmael will constantly clamor for his piece of the action, of the Land.

It may be due him, at least for the interim, until Mashiach comes. Peace Now will certainly agree (and might also offer the Land to them even after Mashiach comes). Then again, maybe it is no longer due him and he should be expelled immediately (right wingers will certainly agree to this). But who knows the answer, except for He Who Knows the score and value of each mitzvah and the perfect reward for each mitzvah?! Adding to the impossibility of our knowing is the Ramban's teaching that Yishmael is acting his role as the "wild man" because of the several months of suffering Hagar endured at the hand of Sarah ([Essay #16](#)).

The next essay will begin to address these issues, of reward and punishment, as well as the meaning of the eternal covenant (i.e., *milah*) with God. We will then first begin to glimpse what is happening now in the Holy Land, why there is so much shooting and killing. This is especially so when we examine the murders of innocent civilians who eat pizza or drink coffee, acts which are easily identified as unjustified murders — while at the same time the world media screams "Unjustified!" whenever an Arab is killed for taking part in the murder of an Israeli.

For the moment, we have just learned an important lesson in performing good deeds, especially with good intentions and as best as one can. Now imagine the reward for performing a mitzvah as it should be! However, we ought to complete the portrait of Yishmael, which is rounded out in the Bible in two more places. The first is after Yitzchak's birth, when Yishmael caused himself to be banished from Avraham's household (Genesis 21). The second is the death of Yishmael, recorded in Genesis 25.

(To be continued)

Copyright © 2001, Breslov Research Institute

- [Home](#)
- [This Land is My Land Table of Contents](#)
- [Essay #16](#)
- [Essay #18](#)