

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #18—Parshat Ki Tavo (2) 5761

Act Three, Scene One

Yishmael is mentioned twice more in the Biblical narration of the Patriarchs. Both episodes have direct bearing on the topics to be discussed in light of the situation in the Holy Land today.

After his birth, the next time Yishmael is mentioned is after Yitzchak's birth when "Sarah saw the son of Hagar...scoffing." Yishmael's mockery refers to the "big three"—idolatry, immorality and murder (*Rashi, Genesis 21:9*; see entire chapter). Others explain "scoffing" as a battle between Yishmael and Yitzchak as to whom Avraham's estate would pass (*Tosefta, Sotah 6*). So Yishmael's "pure" life in Avraham's house didn't last more than a few years and his claim to being an heir of Avraham was immediately set aside by God Himself. Yishmael was then banished from Avraham's house and God decreed that it would be Yitzchak who would carry Avraham's banner of spirituality—"for in Yitzchak your seed will be called." Yishmael was sent away together with his mother, Hagar, and he fell very ill in the desert. His mother set him down under a bush and, going a bit of a distance in order to not see her son die, she began to cry for him. Yishmael also cried for his lot. An angel called to Hagar and told her to stop weeping, "for the boy will be healed." Yishmael was cured and became "an archer who dwelled in the desert," which our Sages teach is a euphemism for highwayman (see Rashi).

Act Three, (Ob)scene Two

About Yishmael's illness and recovery, Rashi comments:

The Heavenly hosts demanded of God to take Yishmael's life. They knew the Holy Temple was going to be destroyed and that the Arabs, Yishmael's descendants, would have a role in that catastrophe, as well as torment the Jews later on. When the Babylonians conquered Israel and led the Jews into exile, forcing them to march in hunger and thirst, they pleaded with their captives to lead them to Arabic territory, thinking that their Arab "cousins" would have compassion upon them and feed them. The Arabs brought them salty meat and fish [**not** corned beef and herring, certainly] and then, when the Jews were thirsty, would give them empty canteens to drink from, making mockery of their situation and tormenting them. Emaciated from hunger and parched with thirst, the Jews would die from their cousins' "hospitality." Thus, the angels demanded a death penalty for Yishmael, so that he would not produce such evil offspring. God answered, "I heard the boy's cries." God said that He judges a person by his present deeds, not by his future deeds. At that moment, Yishmael was considered righteous (though he played with idolatry, immorality and murder in Avraham's house) and was not considered wicked. There he was shown compassion and recovered (*Rashi, Genesis 21:17*).

The important thing to learn from Rashi is God's never-ending compassion and His sense of Justice. At

that moment, despite all the potential evil Yishmael represented and contained within himself, he was considered righteous and thus was his life spared. If the angels were aware of the future, certainly God was. Yet, as the Talmud states, "That which is concealed by God, what right does a mere mortal have to delve into" (*Berakhot* 10a)? It is the moment which counts, each and every moment, and at that moment Yishmael was deemed righteous. (More about "of the moment" in the next essay. Let's continue with Yishmael and finish with him already.)

Another interesting point is the payback for Hagar's suffering. True, Yishmael's unsettled and wild behavior is intended to pay back Avraham and Sarah's descendents that suffering in measure. However, was the extent of the suffering Hagar endured under Sarah so great that Sarah's descendents should willfully torture and murder thousands of Jews? For thousands of years? To answer this, we need to discuss the final episode of Yishmael's life as recorded in the Torah—his death (*Genesis* 25). Bear in mind that Avraham was 86 when Yishmael was born. Avraham was 175 when he passed away, so that Yishmael was 89 when Avraham died. Yishmael himself lived for 48 years after Avraham's passing and died when he was 137 years old.

Act Four, Scene One

Our Sages teach that Yishmael repented. At the time he was banished from Avraham's house he was "scoffing," dabbling in idolatry, immorality and murder. Later he became a thief, robbing and killing. Yet, he managed to repent and live his final 48 years in repentance. (He repented when Avraham, was still living; *Rashi, Genesis* 25:9). So Yishmael not only had the potential of evil which he learned to use all by himself (Avraham did not guide him!), but also the potential of good. And, he eventually used that potential.

(By the way, the same is said about Esav. He had incredible potential for good—and for evil. But Esav was even more wicked and never developed his potential for good at all. The Arizal teaches that this potential good never ceases to exist. The good of Yishmael and Esav will always remain good. If it isn't fully developed within their descendants qua Gentile, then, as Rebbe Nachman teaches, the good will eventually develop and emerge as converts to Judaism. The repressed good contained thus returns to God through a roundabout manner (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 17). But Yishmael did repent, thus some of his repressed good did emerge in himself. Which, of course, extended his merit to a greater extent, allowing for him to receive a greater reward (discussed in [the next essay](#).)

Also, as Scripture enumerates, Yishmael bore twelve tribes, just as Yaakov did. This is because (*Ecclesiastes* 7:14), "For God made this one as well as the other one," and the balance between good and evil must always be maintained. Thus, just as the Twelve Tribes of Israel represent the Kingdom of Holiness and, when working together, reveal the Kingdom of God, there is a corresponding kingdom of evil, which conceals Godliness. This kingdom is represented by the "twelve tribes of Yishmael."

Our Sages teaches (*Berakhot* 26b), "Avraham instituted *ShaChaRYT* (the morning prayer)." Rebbe Nachman comments (*Likutey Moharan* I, 30:6):

We have see that Avraham's life-mission was to spread Godliness and establish the Kingdom of Holiness. Towards this goal, he taught others. But we have also seen that he wasn't successful with Yishmael, for though Yishmael himself did eventually repent, his righteousness was not transmitted to his succeeding generations. The Zohar comments that a hidden flaw was present in Avraham which had to be expelled. This manifested in

Yishmael. Yitzchak, too, had a hidden flaw which manifested as Esav. The Torah speaks of "four sons"—a wise son, a wicked son, a simple son and one who does not know how to ask (the four sons mentioned in the Passover Haggadah). Avraham, as the progenitor of the Kingdom of Holiness, begat these "four sons": Yitzchak is the wise son; Yaakov is the simple son (*Genesis 25:27*), Esav is the wicked son and Yishmael is the son who does not know how to ask. Yishmael is so called because one who knows he has sinned knows he must repent.

The main impediment to repentance is not knowing that one has sinned, or knowing, but not knowing how. As we have seen, Yishmael did repent. Thus Avraham, in his zeal to spread Godliness, attempted to instill Godliness in all his descendents, to spread the knowledge of God to all types of people, the righteous, the simple, and different types of wicked people. But not every attempt was successful.

This leads us to a final point to "dwell" upon which is the Bible's closing statement about Yishmael and his descendents. "His descendents lived...he *nafal* (dwelt) in the presence of his brethren" (*Genesis 25:18*). Interestingly, when Hagar was promised by the angel that she would conceive Yishmael, Scripture states, "And he shall *yishkon* (dwell) in the presence of his brethren" (*ibid.* 16:12). Now *yishkon* translates as "to live," while the literal translation of *nafal* is "to fall." The Midrash explains that as long as Avraham was alive, Yishmael "dwelt." Once Avraham passed away (when Yishmael was 89 years old), Yishmael "fell," i.e., he lost his standing among the nations (*Bereishis Rabbah 62:5*). The Midrash continues: As long as Yishmael did not set his hand against the Holy Temple, he "dwelt." But once he raised his hand against the Temple, Yishmael "fell." An additional teaching: In this world, Yishmael will "dwell," but in the Future, Yishmael "will fall."

In the next essays, we will begin to finalize these thoughts. After a little review of the morality connected to the *milah*, we can begin our discussion on reward and punishment, the Judgment Day of Rosh Hashanah, Yishmael and the Holy Land, and how they all fit together.

(To be continued.)

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- [Home](#)
 - [This Land is My Land Table of Contents](#)
 - [Essay #17](#)
 - [Essay #19](#)