

# Chayei Sarah: On Judaism and Islam

- Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks.

Be'er Lahai Ro'i, where Isaac saw Rivka for the first time. What was he doing there? Why did Avraham remarry? Who is Ketura? Avraham is buried by Yitzchok and Yishmael. But wasn't there enmity? A story of reconciliation.

CHAYE SARAH:

COVENANT AND CONVERSATION: ON JUDAISM AND ISLAM

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Sometimes the Torah spells its message out; at others it gives us no more than clues. In this week's sedra, there are three.

The first occurs when Abraham's servant is returning with the woman, Rebekah, who is to become Isaac's wife. The Torah describes the scene when she first sees Isaac in the distance. He is coming, we are told, from "Beer Lahai Roi" to meditate in the field. What is this place, and why was Isaac there? Thus far we have situated the patriarchal family at Beersheva (to which Abraham returns after the binding of Isaac) and Hebron (where Sarah dies and is buried). What is this third location, and what is its significance?

Second is the extraordinary last chapter of Abraham's life. For chapter after chapter we read of the love and faithfulness Abraham and Sarah had for one another. Together they embarked on a long Journey to an unknown destination. They stood out against the idolatry of their time. Twice, Sarah saved Abraham's life by pretending to be his sister. They hoped and prayed for a child and endured the long years of childlessness until Isaac was born. Sarah's life draws to a close. She dies. Abraham mourns and weeps for her and buys a cave in which she is buried. We then expect to read that Abraham lived out the rest of his years alone.

Unexpectedly, however, once Isaac is married, Abraham marries a woman named Keturah and has six children by her. Who is this woman? What is this episode telling us? Is it a mere incidental detail? The Torah does not include mere incidental details. We have no idea, for example, what Abraham looked like. We do not even know the name of the servant he sent to find a wife for Isaac. Tradition tells us that it was Eliezer, but the Torah itself does not. If, then, Abraham's second marriage was consequential, in what way was it so? How is it integral to the narrative?

The third occurs in the Torah's description of Abraham's death. He was buried, we are told, by Isaac and Ishmael. What is Ishmael doing here? Did we not read that he was sent away into the desert when Isaac was young? Have the two stepbrothers not lived in total isolation from one another? How did they make contact? Was there not tension between them? Yet the Torah places them together at the funeral with not a word of explanation.

The sages read these three details not as mysteries but as clues. The story they pieced together is

enthraling.

First, the place from which Isaac was coming when Rebekah saw him: Beer Lahai Roi: only one previous reference has been made to this place (in Gen. 16: 14). It is the spot where Hagar, pregnant and fleeing from Sarah, encounters an angel who tells her to return. He adds, "You are now with child, and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael [God hears], for the Lord has heard your misery". Beer Lahai Roi is the place associated with Ishmael. Why did Isaac go there? To be reconciled with his stepbrother after his mother's death.

The second clue is Abraham's remarriage. Who was Keturah? The sages said: she was Hagar (it is not unusual for people in the Torah to have more than one name: Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had seven). She was called Keturah, said the sages, "because her acts gave forth fragrance like incense, ketoret".

Not only did Isaac feel guilty about the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. So did Abraham, according to this interpretation. We know that Abraham did not want to send Ishmael away. The text (Gen. 21: 11) is explicit on this point. But Sarah was insistent, and God told Abraham to listen to her. Throughout the lifetime of Sarah, reconciliation was impossible. After her lifetime, however, Abraham sought her out and brought her back. Hagar did not end her days as an outcast. She returned, in honor, as Abraham's wife. That is why, at Abraham's funeral (he died thirty-eight years after Sarah), Isaac and Ishmael were both present. The divided family was reunited.

There is an extraordinary midrash (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, 30) which tells the story of how Ishmael was twice visited by Abraham. On both occasions, Ishmael was not at home. On the first, his wife, not knowing Abraham's identity, refused the stranger bread and water. Ishmael divorced her and married a woman named Fatimah. This time, when Abraham visited, again not disclosing his identity, the woman gave him food and drink. The midrash then says "Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and Ishmael's house became filled with all good things. When Ishmael returned, his wife told him about it, and Ishmael knew that his father still loved him"

There is a story here of immense consequence for our time. Jews and Muslims both trace their descent from Abraham - Jews through Isaac, Muslims through Ishmael. Fatimah is an important figure in Islam. She is the daughter of the prophet. Beneath the surface of the narrative in Chayei Sarah, the sages read the clues and pieced together a moving story of reconciliation between Abraham and Isaac on the one hand, Hagar and Ishmael on the other. Yes, there was conflict and separation; but that was the beginning, not the end. Between Judaism and Islam there can be friendship and mutual respect.

Abraham loved both his sons, and was laid to rest by both. There is hope for the future in this story of the past.

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