Abraham, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael—A New Ending: Chayyey Sarah 5787

Rabbi Dr. Allan Kensky - Hebrew Seminary Professor of Rabbinic Literature

Chayyey Sarah is about endings—and beginnings. In this portion, Sarah's life comes to an end, and Rebecca is welcomed into the family. Abraham dies, and Isaac and Rebecca carry the faith forward. There is loss and grief, followed by a renewal of life.

While the Torah highlights many of Abraham's outstanding acts, he was far from perfect, and the Torah provides us with more than one example of troubling behavior on the part of our first patriarch. One troubling aspect I would like to examine is Abraham's relationship with Hagar and Ishmael. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, carried out in fulfillment of Sarah's wishes and Divine command, was clearly painful for Abraham. As modern readers of the story, we undoubtedly are seriously disturbed by Abraham's behavior towards his son and the mother of his first child. But I like to believe that the story does not end here. As I read it, the Torah hints at a reconciliation between Abraham and Ishmael when it tells us that Isaac and Ishmael joined in burying their father upon his death. This idea is developed more fully in Midrash.

These midrashim provide a *tikkun* (תִּקּוּן), a "correction" or "repair" to the earlier story of Abraham banishing Hagar and Ishmael from his household. These midrashim may reflect the rabbis' own discomfort with Abraham's separation from Hagar and Ishmael. The midrashim may also reflect a desire on the part of some biblical commentators

for better relations between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael, namely the Arab peoples.

According to a midrash cited in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eli'ezer*, chapter 30, and in the medieval collection *Yalkut Shim'oni*, chapter 95, Abraham reached out to Ishmael after he had expelled him from his home. As the midrash relates, three years after Ishmael and Hagar were expelled, Abraham told Sarah that he wished to visit Ishmael. Sarah makes Abraham promise that if he does so, he should make it a short visit and not alight from the camel. Abraham travels to the desert camp where he believes Ishmael is living. Ishmael is not there, but his wife is present. She tells Abraham that Ishmael is not home, and she sends Abraham away without offering him any food or drink. Abraham turns to Ishmael's wife and says, "Tell you husband that he needs a new threshold for his home." Ishmael returns, hears and understands the message. He divorces his wife and remarries. Several years later, Abraham makes the trip to the desert again and arrives at Ishmael's camp. Again, Ishmael is away, but his wife is there. She offers Abraham food and drink. Abraham prays to God that God will bless Ishmael's home. Ishmael returns and hears about their visitor. He realizes that the visitor was his father, and, moreover, that his father still had feelings of compassion towards him. To me, this midrash is a great teaching of the power of the parent-child bond. This midrash may be the backstory of why Ishmael joined Isaac in burying their father (Genesis 25:9).

Another midrash offers some *tikkun* to Abraham's treatment of Hagar. It comes as a comment on Abraham's marriage to Keturah after Sarah's death. Genesis Rabbah 61:4 suggests that Keturah is really Hagar, and that after Sarah died, Abraham reconciled with Hagar.

Why then is she called Keturah (קְטוּרָה)? Because she was "*mekutteret* (מְקֻטֶּרֶת), 'perfumed') with good deeds." (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, chapter 30.) This midrash presents a tikkun not only to Abraham's earlier banishment of Hagar, but to some of the negative vibes that earlier texts may have conveyed about Hagar.

Finally, I wish to suggest that there are hints in the biblical text that Isaac too reconciled with Ishmael. I read this in the interesting statement that after his marriage with Rebecca, Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi (Genesis 25:11). There is one prior reference to Beer-lahai-roi in the Torah. It occurs when Hagar, who has become pregnant, flees the abuse she experiences at the hands of Sarah. After an angel speaks to her, she calls God "El-roi" and the nearby well is called Beer-lahai-roi. Isaac's settling in a place clearly associated with the story of Hagar and Ishmael may be a hint that Isaac sought out a reconciliation with his brother. If so, this would be another reason why Isaac and Ishmael joined in burying their father.

These midrashim lead us to a more positive conclusion to the Abraham/Ishmael/Isaac story. Earlier hostility is overcome and at the end there is reconciliation. This reading of the story presents us with a message of hope for the future. The descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael can come together in reconciliation and peace. These midrashim about our ancestors help sustain me in these difficult times. May we see the day that the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael will live in peace.

All commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year have been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.