

ROSH HASHANAH 5770 (FIRST DAY) SERMON BY RABBI ASHER LOPATIN

IT'S TEMPTING TO USE ANY STORY ABOUT YITZCHAK AND YISHMAEL AS A STORY ABOUT THE JEWS AND THE MUSLIMS, OR ISRAEL AND THE ARABS. THAT IS A TYPICAL FUNDAMENTALIST WAY OF VIEWING THINGS – WHETHER FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY OR JUDAISM. AND WHILE I HAVE STUDIED A LOT OF FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAM, I DON'T SEE MYSELF PERSONALLY AS FOLLOWING THEIR METHODOLOGY.

BUT IT'S ALSO HARD TO IGNORE A STORY LIKE OUR LEINING TODAY WHICH DEALS WITH TENSION BETWEEN YISHMAEL AND ISAAC , AND SARAH SAYING THAT YISHMAEL WILL NOT INHERIT WITH YITZCHAK, AND KICKING THEM OUT OF THE FAMILY. THAT STORY OF TENSION BETWEEN THE FATHERS OF GREAT NATIONS HAS TO MEAN SOMETHING TO EVERY GENERATION OF JEWS WHO READS IT. SO WHAT DO WE MAKE OF THAT STORY? ESPECIALLY SINCE ISLAM SEES ITSELF CONNECTED TO THE HERITAGE OF ISHMAEL, IT WOULD BE ALMOST IRRESPONSIBLE TO ANSWER “NO COMMENT” WHEN ASKED TO FIND THE RELEVANCE OF ISAAC AND ISHMAEL IN TODAY'S WORLD.

ONE WAY OF FINDING THE RELEVANCE OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC AND SARAH'S TENSION IS TO GO TO MUSLIM SOURCES. EVEN THOUGH THIS STORY OF OUR LEANING DOES NOT APPEAR IN THE QUR'AN, THE MAIN CHARACTERS DO, AND BETWEEN THE QUR'AN AND MUSLIM ORAL TRADITIONS WE GET A SIMILAR PICTURE AS WE DO IN THE TORAH. LET ME READ FROM THE GREAT FUNDAMENTALIST PAKISTANI COMMENTATOR, ABU A'LA'L MAWDUDI:

“THE PROPHET ABRAHAM (PEACE BE UPON HIM) WAS BORN IN UR... HE WENT TO PALESTINE (THE HOLY LAND) AND SET UP THE CENTRES OF DA'WAH (RELIGIOUS OUTREACH) AT BETHEL, HEBRON AND BAI'R SHEBA... HE MOVED TO THE HIJAZ – ARABIA – AND BUILT THE HOUSE OF ALLAH IN MAKKA. HE ENTRUSTED THE HOUSE TO HIS SON, THE PROPHET ISHMAEL... FINALLY [AVRAHAM] SETTLED IN [BACK] IN HEBRON. AFTER ABRAHAM'S DEATH, THE PROPHET ISAAC ... SUCCEEDED HIM IN THE WORK OF DA'WAH, OUTREACH, A LEGACY WHICH WAS AFTERWARDS INHERITED BY THE PROPHET JACOB...”

SO WE DO HAVE THE OUTLINES OF THE STORY: ABRAHAM IS LIVING IN THE HOLY LAND WITH HIS SONS, AND FOR SOME REASON, OUTLINED IN OUR TORAH BUT NOT IN THE QU'RAN, HE LEAVES AND GOES WITH ISHMAEL INTO THE DESERT TO ARABIA TO SET UP A CENTER OF OUTREACH – DA'WAH. IN OUR PARSHA ISHMAEL IS KICKED OUT OF THE HOME OF AVRAHAM, BUT IN BOTH TRADITIONS HE LEAVES, AND EVEN IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION, AVRAHAM DOES NOT STAY WITH ISHMAEL. RATHER, AVRAHAM CONTINUES THE LEGACY WITH YITZCHAK, AND EVENTUALLY THAT LEGACY IS PASSED DOWN FROM YITZCHAK TO YAAKOV – EXACTLY AS SARAH WANTED IT. ISHMAEL IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ARABIA, AND ABRAHAM, AND THEN ISAAC AND JACOB AND THEIR CHILDREN – BASICALLY THE LINE OF ISRAEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE – ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HOLY LAND.

THIS IS THE TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC VIEW. BUT BEFORE YOU SHOUT OUT HALLELUJAH – ISLAM HAS ACCEPTED THE RIGHT OF THE JEWS TO THE HOLY LAND!!! REMEMBER THAT

MOST OF ISLAM BELIEVES THAT THE JEWS EVENTUALLY SINNED SO MUCH THAT THEY LOST THEIR RIGHT TO THE HOLY LAND.

BUT JUST AS MANY CHRISTIANS ARE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE LOVE GOD HAD FOR THE JEWS, AND THE JEWISH CONNECTION WITH ISRAEL IS UNENDING, MAYBE, ONE DAY, HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF MUSLIMS WILL POINT TO THEIR TRADITIONS AFFIRMING THE JEWISH RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO BE AN OR LAGOYIM – A LIGHT ONTO THE NATIONS – IN THE HOLY LAND – THE LAND OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, JACOB, DAVID AND SOLOMON, IN THE JEWISH LAND OF ISRAEL, ALONGSIDE ISHMAEL AND HIS DESCENDENTS WHO BRING THE LIGHT OF GOD FROM ARABIA.

“IN SHA’ALLAH! IM YIRTZEH HASHEM”

BUT IN BOTH THE MUSLIM ACCOUNT, AND IN OUR OWN ACCOUNT IN THE TORAH, THE WORLD WORKS BY DIVIDING PEOPLE UP, BY SPLITTING ISHMAEL FROM YITZCHAK, AND SEPARATING HAGAR FROM SARAH AND MOVING DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES AWAY FROM EACH OTHER – AVRAHAM AND YITZCHAK AND SARAH IN THE HOLY LAND AND HAGAR AND YISHMAEL IN THE WILDERNESS, OR, PERHAPS ALL THE WAY TO ARABIA.

SO THE JEWS AND THE MUSLIMS AGREE ON THE STORYLINE – AND AGREE TO THIS HISTORIC, EPOCHAL SPLIT;

AND YET, THERE IS ONE VOICE IN OUR STORY AGAINST THIS SPLIT: AVRAHAM. HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO STANDS UP AND CHALLENGES THIS IDEA AND SAYS NO! YOU CAN INDEED LIVE WITH SOMEONE DIFFERENT, AND EVEN WHEN YOU DISAGREE WITH SOMEONE YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SEPARATE.

SARAH IS FRUSTRATED WITH HAGAR AND YISHMAEL. HER ANSWER: GARESH HA’AMA HAZOT VE’ET B’NAH – CHASE OUT THIS SERVANT AND HER SON. SARAH HAS HAD ENOUGH, AND RATHER THAN ENGAGING WITH HAGAR AND ISHMAEL, AND TELLING THEM THAT SHE DOESN’T LIKE WHAT THEY ARE DOING, SHE JUST WANTS TO GET RID OF THEM.

YISHMAEL AND HAGAR AGREE WITH SARAH’S APPROACH. YISHMAEL NEVER RETURNS HOME. UNLIKE ESAV, HE NEVER MAKES AN ATTEMPT TO COME BACK AND TAKE WHAT HE MAY THINK IS RIGHTFULLY HIS AS THE FIRST BORN. WHETHER THE “WILDERNESS” IS ARABIA OR MIDIAN, ISHMAEL IS “OUT OF THERE”, JUST AS SARAH WANTED. “HAKOL SONIN OTO UMITGARIN BO” – EVERYONE HATES HIM AND WANTS TO FIGHT WITH HIM – AND HE FIGHTS BACK.

THE SADDEST PART OF OUR PARSHA TODAY IS THAT YISHMAEL’S OWN MOTHER, HAGAR, THROWS HIM AWAY “VATASHLECH ET HAYELED” UNDER ONE OF THE BUSHES, AND SHE GOES FAR AWAY “HARCHEK” – FAR, FAR AWAY – MINEGED – AGAINST HIM – BECAUSE SHE CANNOT BEAR TO SEE HIM DIE. SHE REJECTS HIM BECAUSE HIS LIFE IS TOO SAD FOR HER. AS YISHMAEL IS NEAR DEATH, INSTEAD OF BEING LOVINGLY CARESSSED IN HIS MOTHER’S ARMS, LOVED TO THE LAST MINUTE, HE COMES NEAR DEATH, ALONE AND ABANDONED. NO SURPRISE THAT HE FEELS BETTER IN THE DESERT SHOOTING ANIMALS AND PEOPLE, AND HAS NO DESIRE TO COME TOGETHER WITH PEOPLE AND MAKE A GO OF IT.

THE APPROACH OF AVRAHAM IS DIFFERENT. HE IS WELL AWARE THAT YISHMAEL AND YITZCHAK ARE NOT ALIKE, BUT HE STRUGGLES TO KEEP THEM TOGETHER. VAYEIRA

B'EINAV – NOT ONLY WAS IT “RA” BAD IN AVRAHAM’S EYES, BUT “RE’A BE’EINAV” – AVRAHAM FELT THAT YITZCHAK AND YISHMAEL SHOULD BE FRIENDS. ACTUALLY, AFTER SARAH DIES IN THE NEXT PARSHA, CHAYEI SARAH, THE MIDRASH DOES TALK ABOUT HOW YITZCHAK AND YISHMAEL DEVELOP A RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP. BUT WITH YISHMAEL, SARAH AND SEPARATION WIN THE DAY AGAINST AVRAHAM AND TOGETHERNESS. SH’MA B’KOLA – SOMETIMES SEPARATION IS NECESSARY.

AVRAHAM REJECTS BEING A SEPARATIST: IF GOD TELLS HIM TO KICK OUT YISHMAEL, HE WILL DO IT, BUT THAT IS NOT THE WAY HE WILL LEAD HIS LIFE.

AVRAHAM BELIEVED IN CONNECTING WITH THOSE AROUND HIM. WITH AFFIRMING RELATIONSHIPS AND FINDING A WAY TO LIVE TOGETHER. THAT DOESN’T MEAN HE IS A PUSH OVER: IN OUR FINAL STORY OF THE LEINING TODAY, THE TORAH DESCRIBES AVRAHAM’S WAY OF LIFE AS RESPECTFUL, BUT HONEST, NEIGHBORLINESS. HE ACCEPTS A VISIT FROM AVIMELECH AND HIS GENERAL, AND HE AGREES TO SWEAR AN OATH OF FRIENDSHIP, BUT AFTER AVRAHAM AGREES TO DO SO, HE REBUKES AVIMELECH FOR LETTING HIS PEOPLE STEAL A WELL. “VEHOCHIACH AVRAHAM ET AVIMELECH AL ODOT B’ER HAMAYIM...” AVRAHAM DEMANDS, POLITELY BY FIRMLY, THAT AVIMELECH TAKE SEVEN SHEEP FROM HIM TO AFFIRM THAT IT IS AVRAHAM’S WELL. IN FACT EVEN THOUGH THE TORAH TELLS US THE REASON FOR THE NAME OF BEER SHEVA IS BECAUSE OF THE OATH “SH’VUAH” “KI SHAM NISHBE’U SH’NEIHEM” WE KNOW THAT THE NAME MEANS THE “WELL OF SEVEN” – THAT WOULD SEEM TO BE THE “THE WELL THAT WAS RE-AFFIRMED AS AVRAHAM’S VIA THE “SHEVA” THE SEVEN SHEEP THAT AVRAHAM MADE AVIMELECH TAKE FROM HIM TO ADMIT THAT IT WAS AVRAHAM’S WELL.” BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR IS NOT LYING DOWN IN SUBMISSION. IT MEANS THAT YOU ARE COMMITTED TO MAKING THE RELATIONSHIP WORK –IN THE FRAMEWORK OF JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS AND YOUR ABILITY TO BE A GOOD JEW AND TO BE TREATED HONORABLY. THIS IS THE LEGACY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE – TO BE GOOD NEIGHBORS – TO LIVE WITH OTHERS, TO BE PART OF THE SOCIETY AROUND US – THE AVIMELECHS AND THE PICHOLS WHO COME TO US WHO MIGHT NOT BE THE MOST SAVORY CHARACTERS, BUT WHO ARE OUR NEIGHBORS. AND RATHER THAN RUNNING AWAY, WE STRIVE TO MAKE IT WORK. THERE MAY COME A POINT WHERE WE HAVE TO PART WAYS: WE ARE NEVER TO LET OURSELVES BE MASSACRED AND OBLITERATED. BUT WHEN WE HAVE TO CUT OURSELVES OFF FROM THOSE AROUND US, IT IS NOT INITIATED BY US. LOT MOVED AWAY FROM AVRAHAM; SARAH MADE ISHMAEL AND HAGAR LEAVE. BUT AVRAHAM MADE IT WORK WITH AVIMELECH.

MIDRASH: VOHOCHIACH AVRAHAM UCHTIV “VAYICHRETU SHNEIHEM B’RIT” – M’LAMEID SHEHATOCHACHA MEVIH LIDAI SHALOM.

THAT IS AVRAHAM’S BALANCE: NOT BEING A PATSY, NOT HOLDING BACK WHAT HE BELIEVES IS RIGHT, BUT ASSURING THOSE AROUND HIM THAT HE WANTS TO LIVE WITH THEM.

WHETHER TO US THAT MEANS WEARING A KIPPA OR TZITZIT IN THE STREET OR AT WORK OR IN SCHOOL, OR WHETHER IT MEANS BEING ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS AND DEFENDING ISRAEL, OR WHETHER THAT MEANS MAKING SURE OUR WORKPLACE ALLOWS US TO

CELEBRATE SHABBAT – AND LEAVE EARLY – OR OBSERVE THE HOLIDAYS, OR KEEP KOSHER, OR NOT HAVE TO BE PART OF THE CHRISTMAS PARTY. I AM INSPIRED BY HOW MANY OF OUR MEMBERS ARE ABLE TO FIND WAYS OF CONNECTING WITH THEIR FAMILIES WHO DO NOT OBSERVE RITUALS IN THE SAME WAY, OR THE SAME STRICTNESS; PEOPLE WHO ARE CONVERTING OR WHO HAVE CONVERTED WHO ARE ABLE TO CONNECT WITH THEIR FAMILIES OF OTHER RELIGIONS. AIPAC IS CONNECTING WITH THE AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO COMMUNITY ON SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL. MY GOOD FRIEND RABBI KAPERS FUNNIE IS LEADING AN AIPAC MISSION OF BLACK LEADERS TO ISRAEL IN A FEW MONTHS THAT WILL CONTINUE THE WORK OF AVRAHAM AVINU, ABRAHAM OUR FOREFATHER, IN CONNECTING US TO THOSE OUTSIDE, WITHOUT COMPROMISE, ACTUALLY THE REVERSE: BEING ABLE TO CONNECT BECAUSE OF OUR CONFIDENCE IN JUDAISM AND OUR LOVE FOR ISRAEL.

JOE LIEBERMAN SPEAKING TO US ON OUR ORTHODOX UNION MISSION TO WASHINGTON: ORTHODOX JEWS ARE BECOMING A MORE IMPORTANT VOICE WITHIN JUDAISM, BUT THAT GIVES US A RESPONSIBILITY TO BE MORE COMPREHENSIVE IN OUR ACTIVISM. WE HAVE TO THINK OF TAKING A STAND ON HEALTH CARE REFORM – WHATEVER IT IS, AND EVEN AS VAGUE AS IT IS – AND NOT TO SHIRK OUR RESPONSIBILITIES. I’M PROUD OF AGUDATH ISRAEL, THE CHAREIDI, ULTRA ORTHODOX ORGANIZATION THAT CAME OUT WITH A STATEMENT ABOUT HEALTH CARE REFORM. I’M LESS PROUD OF OUR CENTRIST ORTHODOX ORGANIZATIONS WHO HAVE AVOIDED EVEN TALKING ABOUT THE NEED FOR ANY KIND OF HEALTH CARE REFORM – ON THE LEFT OR ON THE RIGHT.

WE CANNOT AFFORD TO BE ISOLATED AND SEPARATIST – PROUD JEWS HAVE TO BECOME A GREATER VOICE IN SOCIETY: PROUD JEWS HAVE TO STAND UP AS AVRAHAM DID, AND WHEN A WELL IS STOLEN – FROM US OR FROM ANYONE ELSE – WE HAVE TO ADMONISH THE AUTHORITIES. IN THIS WAY AVRAHAM WAS ABLE TO DWELL IN THE LAND OF PLISHTIM FOR “YAMIM RABIM” – A LONG TIME. WE DON’T KNOW HOW LONG THAT WAS, AND PERHAPS IT REALLY WASN’T LONG IN TERMS OF YEARS. BUT IT WAS THE IDEA THAT THE JEW IN A FOREIGN LAND SHOULD NOT HAVE TO HIDE OR CUT HIMSELF OFF, AND WHEN WE FINALLY ALL GET HOME TO ISRAEL, AS MANY OF OUR PEOPLE HAVE ALREADY DONE, WE SHOULD BE PROUD TO BE A LIGHT ONTO THE NATIONS, PROUD OF THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES WHICH IS THE MOST MORAL ARMY IN THE WORLD – AND TELL THE WORLD HOW THEY TRY TO DEFEND ISRAEL ON THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF MORALITY. YES, WE SHOULD ADMONISH THE WORLD JUST AS AVRAHAM ADMONISHED THE PHILISTINES, AND THEN, FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH, CONFIDENCE AND JEWISH PRIDE, WE SHOULD WORK ON SHALOM – ON TREATIES AND PEACE.

MAY THIS YEAR, 5770, BE A YEAR WHERE WE CONNECT WITH THOSE AROUND US – THOSE WE LIKE AND EVEN THOSE WE DISLIKE; THOSE WE AGREE WITH AND THOSE WE DON’T. MAY IT BE A YEAR WHERE WE FEEL FREE TO SPEAK UP AND TELL THOSE AROUND US WHAT IS BOTHERING US. A YEAR FILLED WITH AVRAHAM’S MESSAGE OF FIRM, CONFIDENT CONNECTIVITY, WITHOUT COMPROMISING WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE STAND FOR, WHICH WILL, GOD WILLING, LEAD US TO YAMIM RABIM – DAYS OF PLENTY AND BLESSING FOR US,

FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE, FOR OUR BELOVED STATE OF ISRAEL AND ULTIMATELY FOR ALL OF MANKIND WHO DWELL WITH US ON GOD'S EARTH.