THE BEIT MIDRASH WAY - UNIT 1: Meet or Refuse to Meet?
From Korah and Moses to Political Adversaries Today

Ibayau Lehu (a question was asked in the Beit Midrash):
When do we agree to meet with our political adversaries, and when do we refuse?

Text Study 1

Witnessing the Shared “Facts” of the Biblical Story of Dathan and Abiram’s Refusal to Meet with Moses

Study the following verses in havruta. Note the differences in these translations. List all questions you have on these verses, in particular on verse 12.

Text 1

Numbers 16 (JPS)

1 Now Korah, son of Izhar, son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth — descendants of Reuben — 2 to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute....

12 Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, “We will not come! Is it not enough that you brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?

Bamidbar 16 (Artscroll/Stone Edition)

1 Korah son Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi separated himself, with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, the offspring of Reuben. 2 They stood before Moses with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown....

12 Moses sent forth to summon Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they said, “We shall not go up! Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the
Text Study 2

Understanding the 49vs49 Conflicting Interpretations of the Facts of the Biblical Story

How did the following commentators understand Jacob’s fears here? Is Esau really coming with ill intent?

Understanding the First 49

Text 2.1

Don Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary on Genesis 32, (Answer to Question 4)
(Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1437 – 1508, Portugal, Spain, Italy)

‘And he is coming toward you’: And it seems from the messengers, that they did not know Esau’s hatred toward Jacob, and so when they went to him and spoke to him regarding their mission, he replied to them, ‘behold he is coming toward you’. And they thought that he was coming to honor him, and because of this they went back to Jacob and said to him, ‘we came to your brother, to Esau’. Why should you call him: “my master” and none other than your loving brother, and behold he is also coming toward you, meaning it is not enough that he should receive your messengers, but he himself is going and coming toward you, to receive you, and four hundred men are with him to honor you. But Jacob, who knew the truth, and (knew about) his [Esau’s] wickedness, (See Genesis 27:41-45) he alone was not convinced of this matter, and was very afraid of his coming, “and concerned” about the four hundred men he was coming with, because he knew that he was coming for the purpose of war.
Text Study 3 – Implications for the Children of Isaac and Ishmael Today

What may be the possible implications of this Biblical story for the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians today?

Understanding the First 49

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Ishmael and Isaac in Jewish Tradition: Implications for Our Times

Dr. Yehezkel Landau,

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ISHMAEL AND ISAAC: LESSONS FOR ARABS AND JEWS TODAY

Judaism views both Ishmael and Isaac ambivalently, with strengths and weaknesses, merits and flaws. And we have noted that those mixed assessments, along with the ambivalent portraits of Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah, such as the decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael, D.R.I., are in line with the Jewish approach to Biblical personalities: none is flawless; each is presented as a figure combining light and shadow. Such honest portrayals of Biblical figures are humbling, for we can more easily identify with morally flawed heroes than with sinless ones. Examining the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac as the Bible presents it, through the variegated lens of Jewish tradition, we can glean some important lessons to help us address the present challenges facing their descendants, Jews and Arabs caught up in a territorial dispute over a shared holy land...Given the ongoing bitter and bloody conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over their common homeland...the future depends on us, on what we do, and on how we understand what is truly holy, based on our respective faith traditions. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all need to broaden their sense of the sacred to affirm that life is holier than land, that God’s love and blessing are bestowed upon all equally without hierarchical favoritism, and that inclusive justice and compassion are both the essential attributes of the Divine and the central imperatives to guide our behavior. Once we do this, we will have the capacity to change our “victim and vindication” scripts, using our scriptures as justification...With more pluralistic and compassionate faith orientations, we can come to see the Holy Land as a laboratory for collective consecration, not a battleground between peoples and theologies. If we choose this path of devotion, ready to sacrifice land rather than human lives, then the reconciliation which Ishmael and Isaac experienced in their lifetime can serve as an example for us, their faithful descendants—insha’Allah, im yirtzeh Hashem, if God wills it, and if we do, too.
Exercise 3 - Studying Today’s News the Beit Midrash Way

Where is this question coming up today? To what extent can this question be discussed constructively with each side seeking to understand the 49 vs 49?

Background:

At the core of the Beit Midrash Way is the interpretive skill of identifying key textual ambiguities in the Biblical verses, (i.e. the “shared facts” of the Biblical story), as well as understanding the conflicting interpretations of the commentaries of these textual ambiguities. These same interpretive skills are critical for reading current events in the news today.

Instructions:

1. Read in havruta the two articles brought below both reporting on the New York Times Op-Ed article, “I am part of the resistance inside the Trump administration”, from September 5, 2018.
2. What are the shared facts mentioned in both articles?
3. What facts and interpretation of facts are unique to each article?
4. With which article do you identify with more, why?
5. What did you learn to perceive each article and from reading the news in general this way?