

THE BEIT MIDRASH WAY - UNIT 4: Coexist or Separate?

From Isaac and Ishmael to Israelis and Palestinians Today

Ibayau Lehu (a question was asked in the beit midrash):

When can we coexist with “the other,” and when do we need to separate to protect our own?

Text Study 1

Witnessing the Shared “Facts” of the Biblical Story of the Separation of the Abrahamic Family

Study the following verses in *havruta* (study pairs). Note the differences in these translations. List all questions you have on these verses, focusing on verses 9 and 10.

Text 1

Genesis 21:8-13 (The New JPS)

8 The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. **9 Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing (mezachek).** 10 She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. 12 But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. 13 As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.”*

בראשית כא:ח-יג

(ח) וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מְשֻׁתָּה גָדוֹל בַּיּוֹם הַגְּמֹל אֶת יִצְחָק:
(ט) וַתִּרְאֶה שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הָעִרְבָּא הַמִּצְרַיִת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק: (י) וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בְּנֵי הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק: (יא) וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָיו אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדוֹת בְּנוֹ: (יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם אַל יִרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנְּעִר וְעַל אֲמִתְּךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמֶר אֵלַי וְשָׂרָה שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיִּצְחָק יִקְרָא לָהּ זֶרַע: (יג) וַיְגַם אֶת בְּנֵי הָאִמָּה לְגוֹי אֲשִׁימוֹנוּ: כִּי זֶרַעָהּ הוּא:

Bereishis 21:8-13 (Artscroll/Stone Edition)

8 The child grew and was weaned. Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. **9 Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking (mezachek).** 10 So she said to Abraham, “Drive out this slavewoman with her son, for the son of that slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac!” 11 The matter greatly distressed Abraham regarding his son. 12 So God said to Abraham, “Be not distressed over the youth or your slavewoman: Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice, since through Isaac will offspring be considered yours. 13 But the son of the slavewoman as well will I make into a nation for he is your offspring.”**

MAHLOKET MATTERS

HOW TO DISAGREE CONSTRUCTIVELY



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Exercise 1 - Writing My 'Intuitive Tweet'

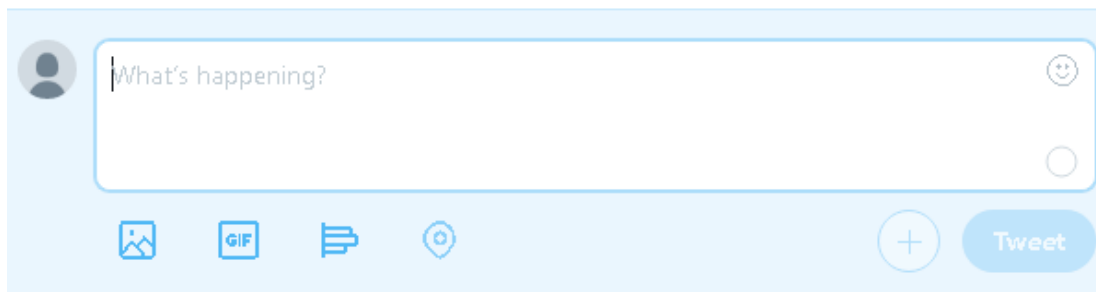
Background

One pillar of the Beit Midrash Way is the ability to be aware of our own bias, or our own '49' reasons that lead us to interpret a particular text or conflict the way we do. Today, very often people write these intuitive interpretations on social media thus contributing to the 'texts' of the conflict.

Instructions

If you had attended the party in Abraham and Sarah's house, what would you tweet about it? What kind of person was Sarah? How do you understand what was motivating her to say what she said and do what she did? How understandable were her fears and concerns?

Compose New Tweet



Reply Tweet

Consider exchanging your 'intuitive tweet' with your *havruta* or someone sitting near you and writing a positive or critical reply tweet. Then pass it back.

Personal Reflection

Would you define your tweet as more "anti-Sarah" or more "pro-Sarah". Explain why.



Text Study 2

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

How did the following commentators understand what was motivating her to say what she said and do what she did? How understandable were her fears and concerns?

Understanding the First 49

Text 2.1

Iben Ezra, Genesis 21:9

(Rabbi Abraham Iben Ezra, 1089–1167, Spain)

9. *Playing. For such is the way of any youth. And she (Sarah) was jealous of him, for he was older than her son...*

אבן עזרא בראשית כא:ט

(ט) מצחק - כי כן מנהג כל נער. ותקנא בו בעבור היותו גדול מבנה.

Text 2.1.1

Elie Wiesel, *Wise Men and Their Tales* (Elie Wiesel, 1928-2016)

Later on, things become even more inflamed: Hagar comes back with her son, and then Sarah has a son of her own. But instead of making peace with the servant, instead of being grateful to fate—after all, her greatest wish has come true, she has become a mother—Sarah continues to torment Hagar and her child. The servant acts with restraint and watches her every step, every gesture, every word—that’s clear, since Sarah no longer complains. Then, suddenly, Abraham’s wife picks on little Ishmael! Now it is he whom she scrutinizes and suspects! This too is clearly indicated in the text: she sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and she gets upset! Why does that upset her? What could be more natural, more beautiful than to see two children—two brothers!—playing together? Sarah finds this neither beautiful nor touching. Had Ishmael done otherwise, had he avoided his little brother, had he chosen not to play with him, Sarah surely would have accused him of something else—of duplicity, of selfishness. Of childish cruelty. She seems to hate him. Nothing about him pleases her. She dislikes the way he dresses, eats, speaks, and sleeps... She resents his joy. Finally, she turns to her elderly husband and demands that he expel the servant and her son. She does not even refer to them by name. “Send them away,” she says, “for I refuse to let the son of the servant share my son Isaac’s inheritance.” Her son has a name, the other does not. The apparent reason for this request? Abraham’s wealth. The text says so, and most commentators emphasize the point. What? Sarah is concerned with earthly possessions? Sarah, a materialist who wants everything for her son alone? A mother for whom no one else exists in the world? No, her behavior toward Ishmael is not appealing. Our empathy—our sympathies—go instead to her victims: Hagar and Ishmael.



Image: https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A5:Elie_Wiesel.jpg

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MAHLOKET MATTERS

HOW TO DISAGREE CONSTRUCTIVELY

Understanding the Other 49

Text 2.2

Rashi, Genesis 21:9

(Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040 – 1105, France)

making merry: Heb. מְצַחֵק. An expression of idolatry, as it is said (Exod. 32:6): "and they rose up to make merry" (לְצַחֵק). Another explanation: An expression of illicit sexual relations, as it is said (below 39:17): "to mock (לְצַחֵק) me." Another explanation: An expression of murder, as it is said (II Sam. 2:14): "Let the boys get up now and sport (וַיִּשְׂחָקוּ) before us, etc." - [from Gen. Rabbah 53:11] with my son, etc.: From Sarah's reply, "For the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son," you learn that he would quarrel with Isaac regarding the inheritance and say, "I am the firstborn and should take two portions," and they would go out to the field, and he would take his bow and shoot arrows at him, as it is said (Prov. 26:18): "Like one who wearies himself shooting firebrands, etc. and says: Am I not joking?" - [from above source]

רש"י, בראשית כא:ט

(ט) מצחק - לשון עבודה זרה, כמו שנאמר (שמות לב ו) ויקומו לצחק. דבר אחר לשון גילוי עריות, כמה דתימא (להלן לט יז) לצחק ב. דבר אחר לשון רציחה כמו (ש"ב ב יד) יקומו נא הנערים וישחקו לפנינו וגו': (י) עם בני וגוי - מתשובת שרה כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני אתה למד שהיה מריב עם יצחק על הירושה ואומר אני בכור ונוטל פי שנים, ויוצאים בשדה ונוטל קשתו ויורה בו חצים, כדאת אמר (משלי כו יח) - (ט) כמתלהלה היורה זקים וגוי ואמר הלא משחק אני.



Image courtesy of Sinai Publishing.

Source: https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8216

Text 2.2.1

The Chumash, Stone Edition, ArtScroll Series, Bereishis, p. 97.

– Mocking [or: playing; making sport]. This term expresses what Sarah saw that convinced her that Ishmael could not remain in the household. Scripture uses this verb to denote the three cardinal sins: idolatry [Exodus 32:6]; adultery [39:17]; and murder [II Samuel 2:14]. Thus Ishmael's behavior proved that he had become thoroughly corrupt and evil, and he had to be sent away (Rashi).

Exercise 2 – Writing the 49 vs 49 Faces of the Book

Background

Another pillar of the 'Beit Midrash Way' is the ability to understand contradictory interpretations of texts as well as ideological and political issues today. This has been referred to in short as the '49 vs 49' and more precisely in rabbinic literature as the 49 *panim* or faces (מ"ט פנים) why a matter may be understood in contradictory ways. In this exercise we will connect between these multi-dimensional contradictory 'faces' of the Book, with the too often singular-dimension, simplistic nature of Facebook.

MAHLOKET MATTERS

HOW TO DISAGREE CONSTRUCTIVELY



Instructions

Write two Facebook posts about the biblical story, one for Sarah and one for Ishmael, with each post telling over the story from a different perspective. Feel free to be creative, drawing upon both your own interpretations and the interpretations of the biblical commentaries.

| | |
|--|--|
| Sarah <input type="text"/> | Ishmael <input type="text"/> |
| <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 200px;"></div> | <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 200px;"></div> |

Personal Reflection

To what extent do you feel you portrayed each side's perspective in a manner that the conflicting biblical characters would "like" your post? Explain why. Which post do you identify with more? Explain why.



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



Photo: Eliyahu McLean

Dr. Yehezkel Landau <http://landau-interfaith.com/>

Dr. Yehezkel Landau, a dual Israeli-American citizen, is an interfaith educator, leadership trainer, author, and consultant working to improve Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations and promote Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding for more than 35 years. He earned a Bachelor of Arts from Harvard University, a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Hartford Seminary.

Text 3.1

Landau, Yehezkel, "Ishmael and Isaac in Jewish Tradition: Implications for our Time." *Ishmael & Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Faiths*. Jerusalem: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), 2019. pp. 37-44.

Judaism views both Ishmael and Isaac ambivalently, with strengths and weaknesses, merits and flaws. And we have noted that these mixed assessments, along with the ambivalent portraits of Abraham and Sarah, are in line with the overall 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 humanizing and reassuring, for we can more easily identify with morally flawed heroes than with holy and 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.*

* Such as the decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael.

http://www.passia.org/media/filer_public/de/73/de73e357-3062-4eb7-8bb3-4a0e4a2b4c4d/ismael_1.pdf

Understanding the Other 49



Rabbi Eliezer Melamed https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliezer_Melamed

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed (Hebrew: אליעזר מלמד, born 28 June 1961) is an Israeli Orthodox rabbi and the rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Bracha, rabbi of the community Har Bracha, and author of the book series *Peninei Halachah*.

Image: https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A5:Rabbi_Eliezer_Melamed.JPG

Text 3.2

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, The Implication of Ishmael's Banishment for Today, 26/11/16

Israel, like Abraham and Sarah, also believed in the sons of Ishmael, but they abused our trust. But deep in her heart, Hagar was no longer Sarah's apprentice. Ishmael subconsciously realized this, and after the birth of Isaac, began mocking him. Some commentators say that in contrast to young Isaac who grew up righteously, Ishmael began leaning towards idolatry and incest, while other commentators say he played games with Isaac that endangered his life, thereby revealing his inner desire to murder him, because he hated Isaac for usurping his place. People would say: Take a look at Abraham the Ivri – all his life he's been preaching about being careful of stealing, illicit relations, and murder, and here his son Ishmael is a man as wild as an ass! (Genesis Rabbah 53:11)...With all this taken into consideration, we find no denunciation of Sarah and Abraham. The proof is that on Rosh Hashannah, the day where we are careful not to mention anything negative about Israel, our Sages decreed that the story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion be read. In other words, the Heavenly decree to expel the maid servant and her son applies even when it is not pleasant. For the law is the law – Hagar, who denied Sarah's kindness, and Ishmael, who, while still in the house of Abraham, dared to worship idols, steal, and threaten to murder – must receive their punishment. Indeed, on Rosh Hashannah when Israel recognizes its uniqueness and specialness among all the nations, precisely then, they justifiably merit a good year.

Implications for Our Times Our situation today is very similar to that of the past. We thought if we acted justly with our Arab neighbors the sons of Ishmael – if we made the land which under their hands was desolate, blossom; if we developed the economy, and their standard of living rose; if we awarded them rights that no Arab has in any Arab country – they would be appreciative. However, the more we contributed to their prosperity – their war against us grew. And even if we defeat them in wars they cause, they accuse us, and unite with our enemies. The only option of remedying the situation is to strengthen the Jewish character of the State, to make clear to all that this land is ours, and no other nation has a part or inheritance in it. Anyone who accepts this lovingly – can live with us here in great dignity, as a 'ger toshav' (resident alien). However, towards anyone who does not accept this, and attempts to oust us from our land, we must act with all ethical means at our disposal in order to expel him. Only then, when sitting in another place, will he be able to reflect on all the good we have brought to the sons of Ishmael, and the world. Then the sons of Ishmael will recognize our virtue – that we are the sons of Israel, the receivers of the Torah and inheritors of the land promised to Abraham, and they too will join us in perfecting the world in the Kingdom of God.

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/19826>

What is similar and different between Landau and Melamed's read of the implications of the biblical narrative of Ishmael and Isaac for today?

Exercise 3 - Studying Today's News 'The Beit Midrash Way'

Can you think of examples of where this unit's question comes up in current events today? To what extent do you feel you understand the 49 vs 49 of this issue?

Background

The final pillar of the Beit Midrash Way is the interpretive skill of identifying key textual ambiguities, as well as understanding the conflicting interpretations of the commentaries of these textual ambiguities. These same interpretive skills are critical for reading both biblical verses and the news today. Below is an example of where this unit's question comes up in the news today according to previous Mahloket Matters participants. Feel free to use other examples of current events for the following exercise.

Instructions

1. Read in *havruta* two articles brought below reporting on a stabbing and shooting in Hebron between a Palestinian and an Israeli soldier on October 22, 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 from reading each article and from reading the news in general this way?



Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palestinians_demonstrate_in_the_20th_anniversary_of_the_Massacre_of_Hebron.jpg

Stabbing and Shooting in Hebron, October 22, 2018

Israeli forces kill Palestinian in Hebron after alleged stabbing

Palestinian shot dead near Ibrahimi Mosque in the centre of Hebron, after allegedly trying to stab an Israeli soldier.

See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/israeli-forces-kill-palestinian-hebron-alleged-stabbing-181022090106194.html>.

IDF soldier wounded in Hevron stabbing attack

Soldier wounded in terror attack near Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hevron. Terrorist shot and killed.

See <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/253588>

| Stabbing and Shooting in Hebron, October 22, 2018 | | |
|---|--------------|---|
| Article 1 | Article 2 | |
| Additional Facts/ Interpretation of Facts | Shared Facts | Additional Facts/ Interpretation of Facts |
| | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I identify more with this article because: <input type="checkbox"/> I identify less with this article, but still learned: | | <input type="checkbox"/> I identify more with this article because: <input type="checkbox"/> I identify less with this article, but still learned: |



To continue reading today's news 'The Beit Midrash Way', check out AllSides at www.AllSides.com.



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Supplementary Sources

Supplementary Sources for Text Study 2

How may the following sources support the interpretation of Iben Ezra and Elie Wiesel, Text 2.1.?

Text 2.1.2

Book of Jubilees, Chapter 17 (200 BCE)

4. And Sarah saw Ishmael playing and dancing and Abraham rejoicing very greatly. And she was jealous of Ishmael and she said to Abraham, "Drive out this girl and her son because the son of this girl will not inherit with my son, Isaac." 5. And the matter was grievous in the sight of Abraham...

Translated by James Charlesworth, The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol. 2, Hendrickson Publishing, 1983.

Text 2.1.3

John A. Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, 1910. Genesis 21:9, "Expulsion of Hagar", p. 322.

9. Playing [with Isaac her son] The last words (i.e. "with Isaac her son") are essential to the sense, and must be restored with Septuagint (Greek version of the Bible)... It is the spectacle of the two young children playing together, innocent of social distinctions that excites Sarah's maternal jealousy and prompts her cruel demand.

<https://archive.org/stream/acriticalandexeg00skinuoft#page/322/mode/2up>

Text 2.1.4

Anchor Bible, Genesis 21:9 (Speiser, 1964)

Was playing....Traditional "mocking" would require the preposition *b-* to designate the object. To judge, however, from some of the ancient versions, the original text appears to have included "with her son Isaac," which is lacking in Masoretic Text.... Ishmael would now be at least fifteen years old. But his "playing" with Isaac need mean no more than that the older

boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger.

How may the following sources support the interpretation of Rashi (Text 2.2)?

Text 2.2.2

Genesis Rabbah 53:11

[6th Century CE, Land of Israel]

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, etc. (21:9). R. Shimon b. Yohai said: R. Akiva used to interpret this to his [Ishmael's] shame. Thus Rabbi Akiva interpreted: And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, mezachek [מצחק]. Now mezachek refers to none else but sexual immorality. As in the verse, 'The Hebrew servant, who you have brought unto us, came unto me to make sport of me [Genesis 39:17]. Thus this teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonor them. R. Ishmael taught: This term mezachek [מצחק] refers to idolatry, as in the verse, "And rose up to make sport" [Exodus 32:6]. This teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them. R. Eleazar said: The term mezachek [מצחק] refers to bloodshed, as in the verse, "Let the young men I pray thee, arise and sport before us [II Samuel, 2:14]. R. 'Azariah said in R. Levi's name: Ishmael said to Isaac, 'Let us go and see our portions in the field; then Ishmael would take a bow and arrows and shoot them in Isaac's direction, whilst pretending to be playing. Thus it is written, "Like a madman scattering deadly firebrands, arrows, Is one who cheats his fellow and says, I was only joking [מצחק]." [Proverbs 26:18-19]. "And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight" (21:11). Thus it is written, And shutteth his eyes from looking upon evil [Isaiah 33:15] (meaning, he shut his eyes from Ishmael's evil ways, and was reluctant to send him away).

בראשית רבה פרשה נג

(ט י) ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית וגוי אמר ר' שמעון ר' עקיבה היה אומר בו דבר לגנידרש ר' עקיבא ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית אשר ילדה לאברהם מצחק אין מצחק אלא גילוי עריות היך דאת אמר לצחק בי (בראשית לט יז) מלמד שהיתה שרה רואה את ישמעאל מכבש גנות וצד נשי אנשים ומענה אותן, תני ר' ישמעאל אין צחק אלא עבודה זרה שני ויקומו לצחק (שמות לב ו) מלמד שהיתה שרה רואה את ישמעאל בונה בימסיות וצד חגבים ומקריב עליהם, ר' אלעזר אומר אין צחק אלא שפיכות דמים יקומו נא הנערים וישחקו לפנינו וגוי (שמואל ב', ב:יד), והיה ישמעאל נוטל קשת וחיצים ומורה כלפי יצחק ועושה עצמו מצחק הה"ד כמתלהלה היורה זיקים חצים ומות כן איש רימה את רעהו ואמר הלא מצחק אני (משלי כו יח-ט), (יא) וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם הה"ד ועוצם עיניו מראות ברע (ישעיה לג טו).

Midrash Rabbah, Genesis Vo. I, Soncino Press, 1951, pp. 469-470.

How did the following commentators interpret the biblical story differently from the above commentators?

Text 2.3

Genesis Rabbah 53:11

(6th century CE, Land of Israel)

But I (R. Shimon b. Yohai) say: This term mezachek refers to inheritance. For when our father Isaac was born all rejoiced, whereupon Ishmael said to them, "You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion." You may infer this from Sarah's protest to Abraham: For the son of this bondwoman shall not be Heir with my son, with Isaac (21:10).

Midrash Rabbah Genesis II, Soncino Press, London, 1951, p.470.

בראשית רבה נג:יא

ואני אומר אין הלשון הזה צחוק אלא לשון ירושה, שכשנולד אבינו יצחק היו הכל שמחים, אמר להם ישמעאל שוטים אתם אני בכור ואני נוטל פי שנים, שמתשובה שאמרה שרה לאברהם את למד כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני עם יצחק. (כא:)

Text 2.4

Rashbam, Genesis 21:9

(Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, 1085–1158, France)

Mesaheq : Since he [Ishmael] was already full grown, she [Sarah] did not want him to stay around any more, lest he attempt to claim a share of his father's inheritance along with Isaac.

Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis an Annotated Translation, by Martin Lockshin, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989, pp.88–89.

רשב"ם, בראשית כא:ט

מצחק - שכבר גדל הרבה. ולא רצתה לשהותו עוד פן ירצה להחזיק בירושת אביו עם יצחק:

Text 2.5

Ramban, Genesis 21:9

(Rabbi Moses b. Nachman, 1194 Spain–1270 Land of Israel)

The correct interpretation appears to me to be that this event took place "on the day that Isaac was weaned (v. 8), and Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac or the great feast. It is for this reason that the verse says, "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian"- rather than Ishmael - mocking. Similarly, she said, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son", for she said: "The slave who mocks his master is deserving of death or stripes, but I want only that you cast him out from before me, and that he should in no way inherit your belongings together with my son, who is the son of the mistress." She also told Abraham to cast out his mother, as the boy was unable to leave her for he would die if he were to leave his mother.

רמב"ן, בראשית כא:ט

והנכון בעיני שהיה זה ביום הגמל את יצחק וראתה אותו מלעיג על יצחק או על המשחה הגדול, ולכך אמר הכתוב "את בן הגר המצרית" ולא אמר "את ישמעאל" מצחק, וכן אמרה גרש את האמה הזאת ואת בנה, כי אמרה העבד המלעיג על אדוניו חייב הוא למות או להלקותו, ואיני רוצה רק שתגרש אותו מאתי ולא יירש בנכסיך כלל עם בני שהוא בן גבירה. ואמרה שיגרש גם אמו, כי לא יוכל הנער לעזוב את אמו ועזב את אמו ומת.

Ramban Commentary on the Torah, Translated and Annotated, by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, 1971, p. 270–271.

Text 2.6

Gordon Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 2, Genesis 16-50, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1994, p.82.

Something like “mock,” “jest,” “make fun of” would seem an apt English translation. But what did Ishmael’s mocking consist of? The text leaves it open, so speculation has been rampant. The midrash suggested it might involve idolatry, sexual immorality, or even murder. But this seems unlikely, for elsewhere Ishmael appears in a quite positive light. More likely is the view that Ishmael was making fun of Isaac’s status or the circumstances of his birth, which were a source of joyous laughter to Sarah (v. 6).

Supplementary Text Study

The Separation of the Abrahamic Family in Islamic Tradition

What is the potential of the stories of the Abrahamic family for promoting coexistence or separation between Jews, Christians and Muslims, according to Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin?

Text S.1

Marc Gopin, Holy War, Holy Peace, Oxford, 2002, pp. 7–8.

The Abrahamic family myth lives and breathes an independent reality, nevertheless, in the lives of hundreds of millions of Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is a critical means of organizing the world and making sense of one’s history, one’s religion, one’s origins and even one’s future. However, it is a story mediated through different lenses, depending on the religious group, with innumerable variations, based on the subgroupings and individual predilections of millions of interpreters. Yet the potentially unifying power of the metaphor is unmistakable. Its persistence becomes a metaphor, in and of itself, of an abiding connectivity the monotheistic peoples feel toward each other, even though that connectivity has often expressed itself as jealousy, competition, disappointment, and brutalizing murder. In a word, monotheists often act as relatives in an intense but troubled and murderous family. Myth that is shared has a way of bringing infinitely complex problems into a manageable cognitive structure of reality, allowing problems of dizzying proportions to be understood by the human mind and absorbed by the human heart. This, in turn, is a perfect tool for motivating large groups of people to violence. However...myth also can allow communities to proceed by means of its own expansion and development, or extension, into modern constructs that often elude rationalistic methods of negotiation and diplomacy, especially those intended for masses of people. This creates possibilities in the prosocial development of human relations. And mythical possibility is the midwife of cultural conflict resolution and peacemaking. It provides the dramatic construct for thinking about and treating enemies in a fundamentally new way – which at the same time becomes embedded in familiar myth.

What are the similarities and differences between the Islamic version as found in the following Hadith which tells of the separation of the Abrahamic family and that of the Bible? What may be the ramifications of these differences?

Text S.2

Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 4, Book 55, Hadith 584

Narrated by Ibn Abbas: When Abraham had differences with his wife, (because of her jealousy of Hajar, Ishmael's mother), he took Ishmael and his mother and went away. They had a water-skin with them containing some water, Ishmael's mother used to drink water from the water-skin so that her milk would increase for her child. (The first lady to use a girdle was the mother of Ishmael. She used a girdle so that she might hide her tracks from Sarah [from version in Sahih Bukhari 4, 55, 583]). When Abraham reached Mecca, he made her sit under a tree and afterwards returned home. Ishmael's mother followed him, and when they reached Kada', she called him from behind, 'O Abraham! To whom are you leaving us?' He replied, '(I am leaving you) to Allah's (Care).' She said, 'I am satisfied to be with Allah.' She returned to her place and started drinking water from the water-skin, and her milk increased for her child. When the water had all been used up, she said to herself, 'I'd better go and look so that I may see somebody.' She ascended the Safa mountain and looked, hoping to see somebody, but in vain. When she came down to the valley, she ran till she reached the Marwa mountain. She ran to and fro (between the two mountains) many times. She said to herself, 'I'd better go and see the state of the child,' she went and found it in a state of one on the point of dying. She could not endure to watch it dying and said (to herself), 'If I go and look, I may find somebody.' She went and ascended the Safa mountain and looked for a long while but could not find anybody. Thus she completed seven rounds (of running) between Safa and Marwa. Again she said (to herself), 'I'd better go back and see the state of the child.' But suddenly she heard a voice, and she said to that strange voice, 'Help us if you can offer any help.' Lo! It was Gabriel (who had made the voice). Gabriel hit the earth with his heel like this (Ibn 'Abbas hit the earth with his heel to illustrate it), and so the water gushed out. Ishmael's mother was astonished and started digging. (Abu Al-Qasim) (i.e. the Prophet) said, "If she had left the water, (flow naturally without her intervention), it would have been flowing on the surface of the earth." Ishmael's mother started drinking from the water and her milk increased for her child Later on her boy reached the age of puberty and married a lady from them. Then an idea occurred to Abraham which he disclosed to his wife (Sarah), 'I want to call on my dependents I left (at Mecca).' Again Abraham thought of visiting his dependents whom he had left (at Mecca), and he told his wife (Sarah) of his intentions... Once more Abraham thought of visiting his family he had left (at Mecca), so he told his wife (Sarah) of his decision. He went and found Ishmael behind the Zam-zam well, mending his arrows. He said, "O Ishmael, Your Lord has ordered me to build a house for Him." Ishmael said, "Obey (the order of) your Lord." Abraham said, "Allah has also ordered me that you should help me therein." Ishmael said, "Then I will do." So, both of them rose and Abraham started building (the Ka'ba) while Ishmael went on handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, "O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing." (2.127). When the building became high and the old man (i.e. Abraham) could no longer lift the stones (to such a high position), he stood over the stone of Al-Maqam and Ishmael carried on handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, 'O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily You are All-Hearing, All-Knowing.'

<https://muflihun.com/bukhari/55/584>. See Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990, 63–71.

The following rabbinic midrash was compiled in the 8th century within Islamic lands. What are some of the similarities and differences between the Islamic version of the separation of the Abrahamic family and this midrash?

Text S.3

Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 30 (8th Cen.)

[Abraham] took a water barrel and tied it around her waist so that it would drag behind her in order to demonstrate that she was a bondswoman. In addition, so when Avraham wanted to see Ishmael, his son, and to see the way they went on. Since he goes he sees where he went... He [Ishmael] lived in the desert of Paran (Genesis 21:21). Ishmael sent for and married a woman named Ayesha from the plains of Moab. Three years later Abraham went to see his son Ishmael. He arrived at midday and found his wife at home. "Where is Ishmael?" he asked. "He has gone to fetch dates from the desert", she replied. "Give me a little bread and water" he asked. "I have none", she replied. He said to her, "When Ishmael comes, tell him that an old man from the land of Canaan came to see him and said, "The threshold of the house is not good." When Ishmael returned his wife told him this, and he divorced her. His mother then sent to her father's house and took for him a wife named Fatimah. Three years later, Abraham again went to see his son, He arrived at midday and found Ishmael's wife at home. "Give me a little bread and a little water, for my soul is weary from the road", he asked. She took out [bread and water] and gave them to him. Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and Ishmael's house became filled with all good things. When Ishmael came, his wife told him about it, and Ishmael then knew that his father still loved him.

פרקי דרבי אליעזר ל

לקח רדיד אחד וקשר לה במתניה שיהא שוחק אחריה לידע שהיא שפחה ולא עוד אלא כשירצה אברהם לראות את ישמעאל בנו ולראות את הדרך שהלכו בה. כיון שהוא הולך הוא רואה היכן הוא הולך.... [שם כא] וישב במדבר פארן. שלח ישמעאל ולקח לו אשה מערבות מואב ועיפה שמה. לאחר שלש שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל בנו, ונשבע לשרה שלא ירד מעל הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרוי שם. והגיע לשם בחצי היום, ומצא שם את אשתו של ישמעאל, אמר לה היכן הוא ישמעאל, אמרה לו הלך הוא ואמו להביא פרות תמרים מן המדבר, אמר לה תני לי מעט לחם ומעט מים כי עיפה נפשי מדרך המדבר, אמרה לו אין לחם ואין מים, אמר לה כשיבא ישמעאל תגידי לו את הדברים האלה, ואמרי לו שבא זקן אחד מארץ כנען לראותך, ואמר שסף הבית אינה טובה. וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו אשתו את הדבר הזה, שלחה. ושלחה אמו ולקחה לו אשה מבית אביה ושמה פטומה. עוד לאחר שלש שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל בנו, ונשבע לשרה כפעם ראשונה שאינו יורד מן הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרוי שם, והגיע לשם בחצי היום, ומצא שם אשתו של ישמעאל, אמר לה היכן הוא ישמעאל, אמרה לו הלך הוא ואמו לרעות את הגמלים במדבר, אמר לה תני לי מעט לחם ומעט מים כי עיפה נפשי מדרך המדבר, הוציאה ונתנה לו. עמד אברהם והיה מתפלל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא על בנו, ונתמלא ביתו של ישמעאל מכל טוב ממין הברכות. וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו אשתו את הדבר הזה, וידע

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ישמעאל שעד עכשו רחמי אביו עליו, שנאמר
[תהלים קג, יג] כרחם אב על בנים. לאחר
מיתתה של שרה חזר אברהם ולקח את גר-
שתו, שנאמר [בראשית כה, א] ויסף אברהם
ויקח אשה ושמה קטורה.

See Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, 65 and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, chapter 6, the Half Brothers (Isaac and Ishmael).

What may be the ramifications of the differences between the Biblical and Islamic versions of the separation of the Abrahamic family on the Israeli Palestinian conflict today?

Text S.4

Urban, J. Kristen, Isaac and Ishmael, Opportunities for Peace within Religious Narratives, Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace, 2009.

The present conflict within Israel/Palestine between the Israeli state and Palestinian Arabs living in territories occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War is often pictured as mirroring a "sibling rivalry" that has been a part of biblical history for centuries. But while the Genesis story of Isaac and Ishmael is painful reading today for anyone sensitive to the emotional well-being of the other, the narratives that have grown up around this story in Judaism and in Islam are markedly different! What constitutes an expulsion within Jewish tradition, and thus evokes a concern for the trauma visited upon Hagar and Ishmael, actually marks the beginnings of the Islamic tradition and is accepted as the action of an unfathomable and all-knowing God/Allah.

See <http://www.religionconflictpeace.org/volume-2-issue-2-spring-2009/isaac-and-ishmael>

