

ISAAC AND ISHMAEL: TWO SONS AND TWO NATIONS DR. JULIA BLUM

I want to study the lives of Ishmael and Isaac from four perspectives:

Peshat means the literal interpretation; *Remez* is the non-literal or allegorical meaning; *Derash* represents the expanded life-application meaning; while *Sod* represents the hidden, secret meaning of the text.

AN AMAZING PROMISE

The story of Ishmael begins in Genesis 16, but we will begin our study from Genesis 15, since the conversation with God that opens this chapter is crucial for our understanding of Abram's decision in the following chapter.

In Genesis 15, we witness an amazing conversation: For the first time ever, Abram expresses his pain to the Lord. We don't know whether it was a decision consciously made in advance or if he just could not hold back his disappointment. What we do know is that, when God tells Abram: "*Your reward is exceedingly great,*" instead of humble, meek gratitude, we hear a resentful complaint: "*Lord God, what will you give me? I am going childless.*" This is how the English translation reads. In Hebrew, however, it is even worse: "*Anohi oleh ariri!*" Yes, the word *ariri* (when spelled with *ayin*) means "childless" – but it has also connotation of "lonely, abandoned, forsaken." Besides, this word sounds so close to the root "curse" (spelled with *alef*), that the bitterness of this statement is truly overwhelming: I am cursed by being childless and you are talking about reward! "*Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.*"

We can all understand Abram's pain: he has been waiting for so long. However, you have to read Hebrew in order to understand something else—he has been constantly reminded of this pain by the irony of his name: Av-Ram, "lofty father". He has been carrying this name for 85 years, and yet he is still childless. He really hurts, and that's why he even repeats this complaint twice, as if to make certain that his pain and disappointment are clearly conveyed to the Lord. The third verse of chapter 15 merely reiterates the second, with the same resentful and almost angry attitude: "*Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir.*"

And now the conversation becomes truly groundbreaking, because Abram learns, for the first time ever, that not only does his obedience matter to God, but his pain does as well. There is no greater revelation of God's love than to realize that when you cry, He cries also. I believe that this was just such a moment for Abram, because after this bitter speech, instead of expected rebuke and reproach, God takes him outside and says: "*Look towards heaven and count the stars.*" In Hebrew, this phrase (*hebet-nah hashamaymah*) includes a very interesting word – (*na*)—the

Hebrew particle of entreaty: Please, I beseech you! This particle is typically used to mark a polite speech or emotional request, and normally, it is the people who say “na” to God, not the other way around. (a famous example is the word *(hoshi'a na)* in [Psalm 118:25](#), where Hosanna comes from). Here, however, we witness something very unique: God Himself says “na” to Abram – and through this little word, completely lost in the translation, we can see how carefully, lovingly and tenderly God speaks to Abram even now, after his painfully bitter complaint. And then Abram hears these wonderful words: *“One who will come from your own body shall be your heir...”*

Probably, at this point Abram starts to sob. He has been waiting for so long. He is 85 years old and still childless. But now he learns that he will have a child of his own after all. Not just a multitude of descendants in some nebulous future, but his own child, from his own body; his own child, whom he will be able to hold with his own hands. This is something that Abram of Genesis 13, though assured of God’s promise concerning his descendants and the dust of the earth, did not yet know – and it is this knowledge that made Abram incredibly happy!

But there is something that this man, overwhelmed by the Lord’s grace in the quiet splendor of the starry night, does not yet know: He was happy to learn that he was going to have a son at his not-so-young age, but he still has no idea that he is to have two sons, and that his overwhelming desire to be a father, his love for those two sons, and the inevitably ensuing family dynamic, all within the context of God’s plan, will shape the course of human history.

A “Perfect” Solution

By chapter 16, where the story of Hagar and Ishmael begins, we already know two main things about Abraham: his faith in God, and his desire to have a child. Not only do these two things define Abraham, but they are intertwined in his heart: yes, he himself desperately wants to become a father, but also as a token of faith and obedience, he knows he has to have a child.

That is why, when Sarah comes to him with her “Hagar plan”, he must have seen it as a perfect solution to what seemed to be an insoluble problem. Sarah was well past child-bearing age, so evidently she would not be able to bear his child. On the other hand, the Lord did promise him a descendant *“from his body,”* so obviously, there has to be another woman to bear this child. However, if this woman were Sarah’s maidservant, her child would still legally be considered Sarah’s son. Brilliant! Can you imagine the feelings of an 86-year old man who has been childless his whole life— who has been dreaming of a son not only for many years, but for many decades, and finally a son is born to him?!

How blessed and how fulfilled he must have felt holding in his hands this living proof of God’s faithfulness to His promises. Remember: even though we know that

Ishmael was not a son of promise, Abraham did not know it. For thirteen years, from the moment he was born, Abraham saw Ishmael as his spiritual and physical heir. He loved his son dearly, his heart was full of Ishmael, and during those joyful years, somehow a “small” fact skipped past his attention: God wasn’t speaking to him anymore! We witnessed Abraham’s encounter with God in chapter 15, when he was 85 or 86 years old. The very next time the Lord appeared to Abraham was in chapter 17, when he was 99. For at least 13 years we have no record of God speaking with Abraham.

The New Encounter

Did Abraham realize that God had stopped speaking to him? The Scriptures don’t tell us anything about those 13 years that Ishmael was Abraham’s only son. Yet, when the Lord appears to Abraham in chapter 17, remarkably, the only thing that we (and God) hear from Abraham in this chapter is his plea for his son: *“Oh, that Ishmael might live before You.”*

Pay close attention: Abraham said these words when God had actually told him about another son! As we read Chapter 17, where God appears to Abraham after 13 years of silence, we see that the promise that shook Abraham’s world—that he would have another son—came only in verse 16. This was preceded by a long discourse, however, in which God told Abraham about the covenant with him and his descendants forever. Within the first fourteen verses of chapter 17, the word “**covenant**” occurs ten times; the word “**descendant**” five times, and all these occurrences happen **before verse 16—before Abraham hears for the first time that he is to have a son by Sarah**. This means that all this time, while listening to the Lord speaking about the covenant and the descendants, Abraham obviously thinks of Ishmael, because at this point he has no other descendants! Then the breaking news of [Genesis 17:16](#) came: *Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife... I will bless her and also give you a son by her—personally, I don’t think Abraham was especially thrilled to hear that. He was an old man, he already had a son, his heart and his life were filled with Ishmael, and he wasn’t even sure he wanted another son. So unexpected, so inconceivable, and probably so unwelcome also, was this news that Abraham was not in a hurry to tell Sarah about it: when Sarah hears of it in chapter 18, she laughs with that famous laughter “within herself,” that clearly shows that this is the very first time she has heard about it.*

Guest or Guests?

According to Jewish commentaries, just a few days had passed between God’s appearance to Abraham in chapter 17 and His appearance by the trees of Mamre in chapter 18. Abraham was not even completely well after his circumcision at the end of chapter 17. The Torah doesn’t mention it. Instead, we are shown something amazing, that in my opinion reflects the struggle in Abraham’s heart after his encounter with God in chapter 17. The famous beginning of chapter 18: *“the Lord appeared to Abraham”* is followed by the conversation of Abraham with his guests, and it is here, in this conversation that we discover signs of Abraham’s uncertainty

that are completely lost in the translation. Look at the Hebrew text below, and even if you don't know Hebrew at all, you can see by the different colors that the Hebrew here switches from the singular (underlined> to plural (bold) – clearly reflecting Abraham's uncertainty over whether the visitors were human or Divine. For instance, there is a controversy whether Adonai here is to be read here as a sacred word, "Lord", or as a regular plural "lords". I believe that right here, right after chapter 17 with its breaking news, this interplay between singular and plural comes as an expression of Abraham's hesitation and inner struggle between natural and supernatural: whether he believed – or even wanted to believe – this supernatural *promise!*

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that Abraham wasn't happy about the birth of Isaac or that he didn't love his youngest son. Of course, he loved Isaac; there is absolutely no doubt about that. However, he had loved Ishmael for thirteen years before he even heard of Isaac, and in all those thirteen years, he hadn't expected anyone else to take his place. Thirteen years is a long time, and for all this time, Ishmael had been his only son and heir. Of course after Isaac's supernatural birth, Abraham knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, which son was to be the son of promise; but we need to remember that he still loved Ishmael dearly, and it is this knot—tied from his enormous love for both sons and from God's plan—which we are trying to unravel here.

A painful decision

We continue with our dramatic story and move on to Sarah's part now. Remarkably, the first thing we learn about Sarah is the fact of her barrenness (repeated twice): *But Sarai was barren; she had no child.* This short note occurs even before Abraham is told to go out of Haran, and speaks volumes: for a married woman, being barren was about the worst thing that could happen. It means that the pain of inadequacy, shame, and guilt was something that Sarah had lived with—and had struggled with—for many years. And probably, it explains why we don't hear much from Sarah during their first years in the Land: humiliated by her barrenness, she was silent and obedient!

The very first words we hear from her, open our story: *So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her."* In Hebrew, she is saying: "Perhaps I will be built up from her." The same word "build" is used here that we find, for instance, in the story of Babel: *And they said, "Come, let us **build** ourselves a city..."*

Everybody knows the end of Babel story – and the story of Sarah's plan is also a sad lesson and a stern warning to everyone who wants to build himself up by his own means: Only pain and devastation come from such plans. *"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." Psalm 127:1*

Difficult years

I don't understand how Jewish sources can claim that Sarah was "completely free from sin," when chapter 16 so clearly describes Sarah's misdeeds toward Hagar. Perhaps, Hagar's behavior wasn't easy to begin with, but the whole scenario was Sarah's doing, and she should have been ready for the consequences. She wasn't ready, however. The truth is that none of us are ever ready to face the consequences of our own plans or scenarios.

The Bible doesn't provide any details as to what specifically Sarah did to Hagar, but there is no doubt that what she did was bad enough, if fleeing into the wilderness seemed like a better option to Hagar.

Then, the day came when Ishmael was born. We don't know much about the 13 years that passed between the last verse of chapter 16 and the first verse of chapter 17,- but we do know that all those years, Abraham had been absolutely confident that Ishmael was the son of the covenant and that all the promises and plans of God would rest on him. Sarah should have felt excluded not only from motherhood, not only from the joy of parenting—the joy that her husband was experiencing every single moment now! –but from the everlasting covenant as well, from everything that God had promised to Abraham, his family, and his descendants. This feeling must have been absolutely devastating.

And yet, Sarai would not be able to become Sarah, would not be able to become the mother and the Matriarch if her heart wasn't healed, if she did not eventually reach peace, if she didn't become reconciled to her circumstances and her life. Yes, those thirteen years were years of continuous humbling and pain for Sarah; but obviously, through this pain, God had been dealing with her. And healing her. And only then – when Sarah had been completely changed and healed inwardly—does chapter 18 come, bringing into her life an amazing, incredible, inconceivable outward change: she will have a son! Much has been said and written about Sarah's famous laughter "*within herself.*" Naturally, it was a laughter of disbelief: "*After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?*"

However, there was much more to that laughter than just disbelief and doubt. Once again, God didn't fail her; once again, He didn't let her down; once again, He Himself saved and protected her from her shame and pain; once again, He completely justified and restored her. After long years of feeling humiliated, ashamed, and excluded from God's covenant and God's plan altogether—and after long years of learning to be reconciled to this feeling—now, Sarah was celebrating her vindication! She was not excluded anymore; she belonged! *He grants the barren woman a home, like a joyful mother of children.* It was a laughter of victorious faith!

What did Sarah see?

And now we come to the dramatic scene, to the "family dynamics" of Genesis 21. Isaac is about two or three years old at this time and he's just been weaned. A big party is thrown on this occasion. Probably, during the party, or around this time,

Sarah sees Ishmael, now a teenager 16 or 17 years old, *metzahek*—“laughing” or “playing” or “scoffing”: *And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham: Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely Isaac.* In order to understand verse 10, when Sarah asks Abraham to cast out Ishmael and his mother, we have to understand what happened in verse 9. What did Sarah see?

The Hebrew word *metzahek* has different meanings, and no one knows for sure what it means here. Some commentaries suggest a sexual connotation. After all, this is the same word that we find in Genesis 26, where it refers to Isaac and Rebecca, undoubtedly with a sexual meaning: *Isaac was sporting (metzahek) with Rebecca his wife.* Does it have the same meaning here? Was Ishmael sexually molesting Isaac? And was it because of this sexual abuse that Sarah was so infuriated?

However, in Genesis 26, Rebecca is clearly in the sentence, Isaac *metzahek* with Rebecca; while in our case, based on the text itself, it isn't even clear that Ishmael was interacting with Isaac at the moment Sarah saw him: Isaac is not in this sentence at all.

So, what did Sarah see and why was her reaction so turbulent? And even more important: why did God support Sarah? Why did God completely back up what seemed to be a very exaggerated reaction of an overprotective mother? Let us turn to Hebrew for the answer. If you know Hebrew letters, you can recognize that the word *metzahek*, מצחק, has the same root as Itzhak : יצחק .

Therefore, it can be read as a verb formed from the root Isaac. Sarah saw that Ishmael was “Isaacing”, whatever that might mean! Probably, Ishmael was trying to take Isaac's place – maybe, in Abraham's family, maybe in God's plan, maybe in both! Ishmael was a natural, man-made son. He had been conceived and born naturally, unlike Isaac, who was the child of a miracle, conceived and born in a totally supernatural way. There is only one thing that can make me understand God supporting the banishment of a teenage boy from his family: God doesn't want God-made reality to be replaced with a man-made one; *man-made* and *God-made* are not to be confused or mixed. In my opinion, this unexpected – and only in Hebrew visible – explanation can account not only for Sarah's stormy reaction, but for God's command to banish Ishmael as well!

Sarah's Plan

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

From this opening sentence, one can already guess that since Hagar first appears within the context of Sarah's barrenness, the girl will have something to do with childbearing. We don't know anything about Hagar's life before Sarah's famous

suggestion to her husband – but we do know that this girl, Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant, not only gave birth to Abraham’s firstborn son, but was so special in the Lord’s eyes that she became the only woman in the Torah whom He addressed twice.

We all know the story. *Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abraham heeded the voice of Sarai.* Thus, Hagar became the first woman in this family to conceive a child. She became a precious vessel who carried the treasure for which Abraham had been waiting for so many years! It’s no wonder that the positions were redefined at that point; it’s no wonder that Sarah, her mistress, though free and powerful and rich, no longer seemed so elevated, because none of her power, freedom or wealth had helped her to do what Hagar did: conceive Abraham’s child! It’s no wonder that her mistress became “lighter” in her eyes (the literal expression in Hebrew). And as the distance between the women’s statuses began to shrink, the relationship between them grew increasingly tense. Hagar decided to flee...

The Angel in the Wilderness

She ran away and found herself in the wilderness—completely alone at first—then suddenly somebody was walking and talking with her. Meeting someone in the desert was unusual enough, but the stranger’s very first words proved to her that this wasn’t an occasional meeting, and that he was not a random sojourner.

And He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

When we read the Bible in English, capital letters make it very easy; they show clearly when and where the Lord speaks. But there are no capital letters in Hebrew, so we need to recognize and distinguish God’s voice by what He is saying, not by capital letters. Our actual lives are much closer to the Hebrew text: There are no capital letters here; we need to recognize God’s voice or God’s actions without additional hints and tips. Hagar *did* recognize the speaker and therefore, told Him the plain truth: *“I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.”*

Then *The Angel of the Lord said to her, “return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hand.”* Please take a moment to think of this response. Imagine yourself in the midst of very trying circumstances and then all of a sudden, you receive an epiphany: You meet the One who can actually do anything, can change everything. Wouldn’t you expect Him to help you to *change* your circumstances? Hagar didn’t ask for this meeting and didn’t seek it, but since it did happen, couldn’t He at least have helped her a bit? Why does He send her back to the same very affliction she is fleeing from? He didn’t promise any good changes; He didn’t say that Sarah would change her attitude and would be more merciful and compassionate, or that Hagar’s

life would become much easier now. He didn't say any of that. He just said: *"Return to your mistress and **submit** yourself under her hand."*

Moreover, there is some amazing wordplay here that is completely lost in translation. In Hebrew, the verb that is translated as "submit" comes from the same root as the word "afflicted" in verse 6: *Sarai afflicted her*. In English, it is impossible to form both of these words from one root, but in Hebrew, it is the same root, though in different forms: active and passive. This makes the original meaning even stronger, as if the Lord is saying to Hagar: "Return to your mistress and be afflicted."

When we study the use of this root (‘*anah* – אָנָה) in Scripture, the first impression is that the word is always used in a negative sense, designating bad actions only: *And when Shechem the son of Hamor . . . saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and **defiled** her.*^L

*"Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to **afflict** them^L
Ye shall not **afflict** any widow, or fatherless child."*

And yet it goes without saying that if the Angel of the Lord used this very word in His command to Hagar, it cannot be completely negative.

Indeed, we find very different occurrences of the same word referring to God's deeds:

*"And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, **to humble you and test you**, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He **humbled** you... that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord."*^L

From this Scripture we see that if and when God is the One who is causing the affliction, the purpose of His action is *"to humble and test"*. Thus, it was not about Hagar and Sarah, or what Sarah was doing to Hagar—it was about God and Hagar and what God was doing to Hagar through Sarah. God commanded Hagar to return to her mistress and submit under her hand because He wanted to humble and test her! Together with Hagar, we are now starting to understand: it is not under Sarah's hand that she must submit; it is under the Lord's hand!

The Girl Names the Lord

However, before Hagar turns back, she does something absolutely unique, something no one else in the Bible does: She names the Lord! We do have several examples in Scripture where a place was named according to what God did there:

*So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. **And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide***^L

*And Moses built an altar and **called its name, The-Lord-Is-My-Banner.***

Hagar, however, doesn't just name a place. She does something altogether different from what Abraham or Moses did: She gives the name, not only to the place (the place gets the name as well: *Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi*), but to the Lord Himself, and this is something very unusual. In fact, it is absolutely unique in all Scripture:

Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?"

Of course, nobody can adequately describe what is happening in a heart during an encounter with God. It is different for each person, because only God knows what is in the heart—only God knows the deepest secrets and wounds of that heart, and He is the only One who can touch and heal them. Although we, the readers, can also hear the message the Angel delivered to Hagar, the absolutely overwhelming presence of God that embraced her in the wilderness—the warmness of God's closeness that completely melted her heart, His love, His compassion, His tenderness—all of this remains hidden between the lines for us. Yet it was so real for her that the only thing she could utter was: *Ei Roi*. **The-God-Who-Sees-Me** – one of the most profound names of God in the whole Bible.