

Abraham's Struggles and What We Can Learn from It

Today's Torah portion is about one of the many trials and tests that Abraham had to go through. After being without progeny well into old age, finally seeing living proof of God's promise, things seem to get worse... Abraham's household does not witness the harmony that he himself stood for. Something intolerable is going on between Abraham's two sons, both of whom he loves so dearly. Domestic violence... perhaps even (as some commentators believe) domestic abuse.

In a world of tribal warfare in which each tribe and nation champions their own god, Abraham was proclaiming monotheism, thus potentially showing a path towards unification and peace under one God and one God alone. Abraham who had dedicated his entire life towards that dream, came to the painful realization that even a unification of individuals within one belief system, one higher, spiritually inspired ideology..., is no guarantee for a more peaceful world. While Abraham imagined, yes dreamed, longed, to provide a role model for a better world, his own household was torn apart by strife, bullying, intimidation, violence.

Then, what Sara had already realized, but what our father Abraham couldn't see until God told him so, was a second dagger in his loving heart. In modern-day terminology: Ishmael had to be placed out-of-home. Like when a family has a child that falls into addiction beyond help. The only way to save what's left of the family, is to send that child into the street, or in this case into the desert. We can only imagine the shame and the pain that befalls Abraham. There is a sense of failure; his dream of providing a role model shatters, and in an honor-based society, the whole world sees that Abraham could not control his own son, and that his model for a peaceful world, based on one, unifying God does not even work in the first monotheistic family.

After a long life of dedication and sacrifices, having reached a high age, it seems as if all had been for nothing. No leaving a model for a better world, no lasting inspiration for a better society. It reminds us perhaps of Moses' last days, when

after 40 years of toil and hardship, right before he dies, God tells him that soon after... the People of Israel will ignore his great mission and turn their backs on God.

No doubt, more than Abraham's humiliation and crushed hope, he is worried about Ishmael. The story continues, and we are informed of the boy's suffering, nearly to the point of death..., and of his rescue through Divine intervention. And, that there is a future for Ishmael too. But Abraham doesn't know that. Why not? Why is Hagar informed of this promise for Ishmael, but not our father Abraham, who so needs to be consoled? It must be part of his test. Abraham is torn and worried and focuses his last hope on Isaac. That last piece of hope, we will read tomorrow, will be taken away also, until nothing is left of his expectations. Bit by bit he is stripped away of his aspirations.

So why do we read this portion today? Is it only a prelude to the reading of tomorrow, that of the central theme of Rosh haShana; the Binding of Isaac? I think there is more to it.

Firstly, it seems relevant that we first look at the struggle and fate of the other son, Ishmael, the forefather of the Arabic people. Before we focus on our own genesis, and on the hardship of our own forefather, it is good to also realize the struggles of our cousins and read about their destiny. Especially in these terrible times (think only of what is happening in Syria), for us to internalize the message of today's Torah reading, *implies* that we also empathize when sons and daughters of Ishmael are suffering as their forefather once did.

But there is another message. Right after this episode of devastation, when we can only imagine how depressed Abraham must have felt, he encounters the pagan king Abimelech. And what does Abimelech say to him? **אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה** "God is with you in all that you do!" Right when Abraham felt that he had failed in his mission, this once hostile king now acknowledges the work that God does through Abraham.

Even though today we pray for God's blessings and we hope to succeed in all our endeavors and ideals, we need to realize that **even** when things seem to go awfully wrong, it doesn't mean that we should despair, that our efforts are in vain and that they don't have an impact. They do. Moses did not enter the Promised Land and he knew that his followers would soon enough turn their backs on his message. But his work was **not** in vain. When Abraham passed away, only very little of his ideals were materialized. But even in our days, his mission is still having its effects.

Sometimes it is far beyond our scope of perception, to see the impact that our actions and our prayers have.