

This week's parasha, Vayera, is a LOT. Sierra will be speaking tomorrow for her bat mitzvah about the major dramas that bookend the parasha, namely Avraham's bargaining for the fate of the city of Sodom in the beginning, and *akeidat Yitzhak*, the binding of Yitzhak at the end. I want to focus on a story that comes between but is in some ways deeply related: the banishment of Hagar and Yishmael, which we read about in chapter 21 of Genesis.

To recap, at the beginning of the chapter, Yitzhak is born, his birth bringing great joy and laughter. But in verse 9, Sarah sees Yishmael *קצח*- joking, making sport. It's the same Hebrew as the name of Yitzhak, laughter. But whatever Yishmael is doing, it alarms Sarah, and she insists that Hagar and Yishmael be sent away. After hearing an affirmation from God, Avraham reluctantly complies, sending Yishmael, his own son, and Hagar, his concubine, out into the wilderness, where they almost die of thirst. But just when Hagar is at the point of greatest despair, an angel appears to her, saying in verse 17, "fear not – God has heard the cry of the boy where he is" – and opens her eyes to a well. Yishmael lives to adulthood and becomes a hunter. We don't hear anything further about him until the end of next week's parashah, Chayei Sarah, when he and Yitzhak bury their father Avraham, together.

Obviously, my reading of this chapter this week, this year, is colored by the conflict currently playing out between the mythic descendants of Yitzhak and the mythic descendants of Yishmael in the land promised to our common father. It seems that the time when we might be able to come together to bury our dead is a very long way off yet. And in the meantime, I know that we are aching, grieving not only the attack on our people on October 7th, but the hostility towards Jews and the Jewish state rising around the world. We feel the absurdity of having to argue – again - again - for the right of Jews to exist, anywhere. At the same time, many of us also feel horror at the Israeli response in Gaza, wanting to defend the Jewish state's right to defend itself, but also deeply mistrustful of the current Israeli government's tactics and priorities in pursuing this war.

Personally, I feel that my head is daily on the verge of exploding from a multiplicity of hard truths: yesterday morning, reading about Jewish students locked down because of threats of violence at Cornell University, which no one in their right mind should justify, no matter how many feelings you have about Gaza or the occupation. Truth. Yesterday afternoon, reading a Ha'Aretz article about the Palestinian journalist Ahmed Alnaouq, who cofounded the Facebook group "Across the Wall" for Israelis and Gazans to share stories since 2019: his last post to the group last Saturday read: "The entire family of this page's founder in Gaza, who has written countless messages to Israelis for peace and a just future over the years, has been bombed to death this week by the air force. They were 23 people. All of his loved ones: His father, his little sisters, his brother, his nieces and nephews, even the babies that were in the house – they are all dead."¹ Try telling *him* that the deaths of his family are all Hamas's fault - I doubt he would find much comfort. Truth.

In the evening, reading about activists who tear down posters of the kidnapped Israelis in the name of some version of "justice;"² printing out and looking at those posters myself, seeing the faces of babies and toddlers, grandparents, still held captive in Gaza: truth. Reading about atrocities committed by Jews against Palestinians in the West Bank, who are in no way responsible for Hamas: truth. Reading an opinion piece about the hypocrisy of people who live in a country that dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki demanding "proportionality" in Gaza: truth.

Later yet, whatsapping with my close Israeli friend who at this moment is trying to decide whether to temporarily move his family to Eugene so that his 5 year old and 15 month old do not have to be traumatized by Hamas rockets every day. Truth. Truth. Truth.

¹ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-02/ty-article-magazine/.premium/ahmed-wanted-israelis-to-listen-to-gazans-then-23-of-his-family-members-were-killed/0000018b-8fb6-db7e-af9b-eff7d71f0000>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/nyregion/israel-gaza-kidnapped-poster-fight.html>

And I am lucky – as much as I feel that my head is exploding, there are not actual explosions disturbing my sleep. Truth.

I don't share all of this to vent. (Venting certainly helps.) I share all of this because I think the story of Yishmael speaks to this moment.

What was Yishmael doing, when he was “joking around,” that made Sarah so adamant that he needed to go?

Rashi, the famous medieval commentator, suggests first that Yishmael was worshipping idols, pointing to the connection between the very **קִצַּח** here and that when the people worshipped the Golden Calf in Exodus, it uses that same verb. He also suggests that Sarah saw Yishmael attempting to murder Yitzhak, writing, “you may infer that he was quarrelling with Isaac about the inheritance, saying, “I am the first-born and will, therefore, take a double portion”. They went into the field and he (Ishmael) took his bow and shot arrows at him.”

Rashi's commentary fully justifies Sarah's insistence on Yishmael's banishment – at the very least, because of his harmful influence, if not an actual mortal danger to her son.

But when looking a few verses later, at the moment when the angel tells Hagar, “God has heard the call of the boy “where he is”, Rashi comments, “According to the actions he is now doing shall he be judged and not according to what he may do in future. Because the ministering angels laid information against him, saying, “Master of the Universe, for him whose descendants will at one time kill your children with thirst will You provide a well?” He asked them, “What is he now, righteous or wicked?” They replied to him, “Righteous.” He said to them, “According to his present deeds will I judge him.”

How can it be that Yishmael is simultaneously murderous towards Yitzhak and currently innocent and full of potential?

I do not know. I do not understand how we can simultaneously read Yishmael as idolatrous, murderous and justifiably banished, while also reading him as innocent and worthy of a miraculous intervention from Hashem – if we read him as a single person.

But if we read him as an allegory for this moment, for a nation, I believe that the Torah's account of Yishmael is an instruction for us to hold a multiplicity of hard truths. There is Yishmael who throws weapons at us when we are defenseless. That requires intervention. Truth.

And there is also Yishmael who is innocent, who is a thirsty child, who may grow up to commit atrocities but who has not done so yet. That Yishmael is still full of potential and worthy of a miracle. *Truth*. And Torah demands that we look at him. It would have been easy for the text to have moved on once Yishmael and Hagar moved out. *But the Torah follows them to the desert and makes us look at them*. Makes us empathize with a mother's pain and a child's thirst.

Avraham agreed to send away Yishmael, and as we discussed in Torah study yesterday, his grief over that decision may be what made the sacrifice of his remaining son, Yitzhak a psychological possibility. The fates of Yishmael and Yitzhak remained entwined.

The hope that Torah offers is the hope of common grief. Perhaps the trauma of Yishmael's threat to Yitzhak, of Sarah's banishment of Yishmael is never healed. But to the extent that it might be, the healing begins when Yitzhak and Yishmael bury their father together. When they acknowledge that they have a claim to common grief.

I wish the world would look at the pictures of kidnapped Israelis without labelling them "occupiers". It seems like a simple enough decency to ask. I wish our own community would also look at the babies of Gaza without labelling them "future terrorists." It seems like a simple enough decency to ask.

But I understand that it is so hard, because it requires us to hold multiple truths and to feel complex griefs.

My head has not actually exploded yet. And my heart, broken as it is, is still intact. As a Jew, as a reader of Torah, I accept the responsibility of bearing witness to multiple difficult truths, of refusing the easy answers. May we see all of the children where they are, and may we someday find our way to burying our dead together.