Can the Descendants of Isaac and Ishmael learn to live together?

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In recent weeks, in synagogue we have read the stories of the birth of Ishmael—a son of Abraham– who becomes the father of the Muslim people—and that of Isaac, another son of Abraham, who becomes one of the patriarchs of the Jewish People—in chapters 21 and 22 of Genesis, as part of the Torah portion known as "Vayeire".

As many Jews around the world will remember, we also read these chapters just a few weeks ago, on the first and second days of Rosh Hashanah, in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues around the world. I have always been mindful that on these very special days—our "High Holidays"—we read about Ishmael as well as Isaac. (I have preached about God's caring for Ishmael more than once on Rosh Hashanah!) Reading about the patriarch of the Muslim people is part of our Jewish Tradition!

Why are these foundational stories so essential to our identity as Jews?

Chapter 21—the story of the birth and banishment of Ishmael—establishes our connection to all of God's children. When God saw that Ishmael was suffering and about to die, the text tells us:

"Genesis 21: 17 And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her: 'What ails you, Hagar? fear not; for God has heard the voice of the young man where he is."

The God of the Hebrew Bible hears the voice of all children, including Ishmael, where they are at, in their existential situations, in their suffering and misery, as well as in their joyous and hopeful moments, anywhere in the world. This is a universal God, as we learned from earlier in Genesis, whereby every human being is created in the image of God.

After this story, we don't hear much about Ishmael in the Torah. But we do hear something about him a few chapters later, which I will discuss below.

Chapter 22 of Genesis relates the famous and very complicated story of the birth and binding of Isaac. It is a very difficult story, but one with a happy ending. In the end, Isaac is not sacrificed. He is saved by the ram's horn, the shofar, which is why we remember him on Rosh Hashanah. The moral of the story is: we Jews don't sacrifice children! We love our children. All of God's children—the children of Ishmael as well those of Isaac.

When do Isaac and Ishmael meet again in the unfolding story of the Jewish people and humanity in the book of Genesis?

In Genesis 25:9, they meet at the funeral of Abraham (we read about this last Shabbat in Parashat Hayei Sarah) :

"His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him (Abraham) in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, son of Zohar, the Hittite, facing Mamre."

Estranged brothers (or sisters) meeting at the funeral of a parent!! Who ever heard of that one? Has any one ever run across such a phenomenon in contemporary Jewish families?!?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the editor of the Conservative movements Etz Chaim commentary on the Torah, offers this poignant commentary on this verse:

"Isaac and Ishmael are reunited at their father's funeral, a sign that Ishmael has changed his ways and matured (according to the Babylonian Talmud). Although he could not have forgotten how his father treated him and how his brother supplanted him, he seems to have forgiven Abraham for having been a less-than-perfect father. Isaac too seems to have come to terms with his father's near killing him on Mount Moriah.

Might these reconciliations have occurred in Abraham's lifetime and be the reason for the Torah's describing him as 'contented' in his old age (according to a midrash)? Can we see this as a model for family reconciliations, forgiving old hurts? And can it not be a model for the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, contemporary Arabs and Israeli Jews, to find grounds for forgiveness and reconciliation?"

This is one of the key existential questions for our time.

Can the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael reconcile with each other, not only at funerals?

In other words, can Jews and Muslims in the contemporary world coexist with one another? In Israel? In America? Wherever Jews and Muslims are living in the same communities, countries and regions?

My answer, of course, is Yes. But it is not that simple.

We Jews and Muslims have to overcome deeply ingrained negative stereotypes of each other.

Some of this comes from our understanding –or often purposeful misunderstanding — of our sacred texts, which can be very problematic and often lead to negative stereotyping.

Some of it comes from our limited understanding of our histories, which are often inaccurate and incomplete.

Much of it comes these days from the mainstream media and from social media, which often spread disinformation about each other's religions and cultures viciously and virally in very destructive ways.

My message for you in this blog post is brief and clear: I believe that it is morally imperative for the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael to find ways to coexist and cooperate for the common good.

For 3 reasons:

- Our Torah and Jewish Tradition teaches us that this is the correct thing to do.
- Our understanding of history should help us understand why this is essential now
- And it is in our enlightened self-interest to do so.

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It is time to consider reconciliation rather than retribution between Jews and Muslims in this world. The time for enmity is over. It is time to find another path, one of coexistence and cooperation, for the benefit of all concerned.

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