

The *Teshuvah* of Yishmael

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And Avraham said to God: If only Yishmael would live before You!

Bereishit 17:18

ויאמר אברהם אל האלקים לו
ישמעאל יהיה לפניך
בראשית יז:יח

Only on Rosh haShanah's second day do we read of Avraham and Yitzchak's superhuman sacrifice at the Akeidah. For the first twenty-four hours of the Day of Judgment, our biblical source for edification and inspiration is that story's prequel: HaShem's merciful response to Sarah, the birth of Yitzchak, and the epilogic eviction of her dissolute, violent stepson, Yishmael.

Certainly, we choose this latter Torah reading because an instance of the Creator of the Universe recalling human merit on Rosh haShanah¹³⁴ suits the day on which we seek to move HaShem from the throne of justice to the throne of mercy.¹³⁵ But why do we append Yishmael's story on a day when we identify HaShem as our Father? At best the account is irrelevant; at worst, it tells a tale which denies paternal love, as a sinner is heartlessly evicted from his father's home!

One could argue that this is precisely the Rosh haShanah point – Yishmael is denied the mercy of “father figures” HaShem and Avraham, but we are זרעו של אברהם, protected by a covenant.¹³⁶ However, the story of Yishmael's eviction might also provide a more positive message: This event is understood by some as the turning-point in a life previously characterized by unbridled sin.¹³⁷ Beginning immediately after Yishmael's eviction from the home of Avraham and Sarah, our sages see signs that the villain took his exile to heart and committed himself to a path of repentance.

Yishmael's Path of *Teshuvah*

The Torah offers us the first sign of Yishmael's repentance as he lies beneath a bush, dehydrated and, apparently, near death:

And God heard the voice of the youth, and a

וישמע אלקים את קול הנער ויקרא מלאך אלקים אל

¹³⁴ Rosh haShanah 10b-11a

¹³⁵ Vayyikra Rabbah 29:3

¹³⁶ Indeed, the same theme exists in Yom Kippur's rites. The שׁעִיר לַעֲזָאוֹל, which is interpreted in Bereishit Rabbah 65:15 to represent Esav, dies in the wilderness; we, on the other hand, receive forgiveness in the Beit haMikdash.

¹³⁷ Bereishit 16:12; Bereishit Rabbah 56:11

messenger of God called to Hagar from the heavens and said, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; God has heard the voice of the youth, as he is there.'

Bereishit 21:17

הגר מן השמים ויאמר לה מה לך הגר אל תיראי כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם:
בראשית כא:יז

The sages were troubled by the last few words of HaShem's emissary; what is the meaning of, "as he is there?" Rabbi Yitzchak explained:

A person is judged only based on his deeds of that moment, as it is written, 'God has heard the voice of the youth, as he is there.'

Rosh Hashana 16b

אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם
ראש השנה טז:

Another midrash amplified Rabbi Yitzchak's account:

The angels leapt to argue against his survival, saying, 'Master of the Universe! You would provide a well for this man who is going to murder Your children with thirst?' God replied: What is he now – righteous or wicked? They said: Righteous. He told them: I only judge a man based upon his moment. Rise, and take the youth...

Bereishit Rabbah 53:14

קפצו מלאכי השרת לקטרגו, אמרו לפניו רבון העולמים אדם שהוא עתיד להמית את בניך בצמא אתה מעלה לו באר? אמר להם: עכשיו מה הוא, צדיק או רשע? אמרו לו: צדיק. אמר להם: איני דן את האדם אלא בשעתו! קומי שאי את הנער.
בראשית רבה נג:יד

This passage is remarkable not only as a lesson in Divine justice and omniscience, but also as a lesson regarding Yishmael himself. Just that morning, the teen had been evicted for idolatry, murder and sexual immorality¹³⁸ - and now he was righteous, deserving of Divine intervention? This is the first sign that the post-exile Yishmael executes an about-face, righting his wrongs.

Further evidence of repentance comes from the Torah's mention of two anonymous "youths" who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the Akeidah.¹³⁹ A midrash unmasked these youths for us:¹⁴⁰

R' Eivo said: The Torah teaches you proper conduct, that one should not travel with fewer than two escorts, lest he ultimately become his servant's servant. Two people conducted themselves properly, Avraham and Shaul. Regarding Avraham it says, 'And he woke early in the morning and took his two youths with him' – Who were they? Yishmael and Eliezer. Regarding Shaul...

Vayikra Rabbah 26:7

א"ר איבו, למדתך תורה דרך ארץ שלא יהא אדם יוצא לדרך בפחות משנים שאם יצא סופו נעשה עבד לעבדו, דא"ר איבו שני בני אדם נהגו בדרך ארץ, אברהם ושאול. באברהם מהו אומר? וישכם אברהם בבקר ויקח את שני נעריו עמו. ומי היו? ישמעאל ואליעזר. בשאול מהו אומר...
ויקרא רבה כו:ז

How did Yishmael end up in this picture, accompanying his father and half-brother – and in the role of a servant no less - to the Akeidah? According to the traditional chronology, he had been

¹³⁸ Bereishit Rabbah 56:11

¹³⁹ Bereishit 22:3

¹⁴⁰ Rashi to Bereishit 22:3 cites this as well. See also Kohelet Rabbah 9. Ritva to Kiddushin 68b is unique in rejecting this midrashic explanation, on the grounds that Yishmael is normally identified as Avraham's בן, rather than his נער.

evicted some thirty-five years prior! Perhaps this may be taken as further evidence that Yishmael repented upon his eviction, and ultimately returned to his father's home.

Finally, the gemara saw evidence of Yishmael's *teshuvah* in the biblical account of Avraham's burial. After noting that the Torah uses specific language to describe the passing of the righteous, and that the Torah employs this language regarding Yishmael's death,¹⁴¹ Rava explained:

Yishmael repented during his father's lifetime, as it is written, 'And Yitzchak and Yishmael, his sons, buried him.' [Placing Yitzchak first indicates that Yishmael showed respect to his righteous younger brother.] But perhaps the Torah simply listed them based upon their wisdom [and, in fact, Yishmael showed no such respect to Yitzchak]? If that were true, then [at Yitzchak's burial] why did the Torah say, 'And Esav and Yaakov, his sons, buried him?' Why did it not list them based upon their wisdom? Rather, from the fact that the text put Yitzchak first, Yishmael must have placed him first. We learn from here that he repented during his father's lifetime.

Bava Batra 16b

ישמעאל עשה תשובה בחיי אביו, שנאמר ויקברו אותו יצחק וישמעאל בניו. ודילמא דרך חכמתן קא חשיב להו? אלא מעתה, ויקברו אותו עשו ויעקב בניו מאי טעמא לא חשיב להו דרך חכמתן? אלא מדאקדמיה אדבורי אדבריה, ומדאדבריה שמע מינה תשובה עבד בימיו.
בבא בתרא טז:

This combination of sources – HaShem's declaration that Yishmael was righteous, Yishmael's pre-Akeidah return and his display of respect for Yitzchak at Avraham's funeral – presents a tantalizing idea: That Yishmael learned from his eviction. Perhaps, what seemed like a hard-hearted case of justice was actually an example of successful tough love.¹⁴²

Or Perhaps Yishmael Did Not Repent?

Admittedly, some sources indicate that Yishmael did not repent. In the context of a discussion about a list of historical figures who were excluded from *olam haba*, the gemara stated:

A father cannot assign merit to his son, for it is written, 'None can rescue from My hand.' Avraham cannot rescue Yishmael and Yitzchak cannot rescue Esav.

Sanhedrin 104a

אבא לא מזכי ברא, דכתיב ואין מידי מציל, אין אברהם מציל את ישמעאל, אין יצחק מציל את עשו.
סנהדרין קד.

In itself, this talmudic passage need not be taken as evidence that Yishmael lived out his life in wickedness. Nonetheless, a Tosafist, Rabbeinu Elchanan,¹⁴³ understood it in this way.

Rashi also saw evidence of Yishmael's lifelong delinquency in the following passage of gemara:

Why were the years of Yishmael's life enumerated in the Torah? In order to calculate the years of Yaakov.

Megilah 17a

למה נמנו שנותיו של ישמעאל? כדי ליחס בהן שנותיו של יעקב.
מגילה יז.

¹⁴¹ Bereishit 25:17

¹⁴² I am indebted to Rabbi Meir Lipschitz for pointing out that Kli Yakar (Bereishit 25:1) identified the repentance of Hagar, and inter alia her son Yishmael, in her re-marriage to Avraham.

¹⁴³ Tosafot Yeshanim, Yoma 38b מ'עשה ב'רואג

Rashi there explained that the gemara was asking, “מה לנו למנות שנות הרשעים?”¹⁴⁴ Why would we count the years of the wicked?”

Chatam Sofer, too, took as given that Yishmael did not repent. As part of a legal discussion¹⁴⁵ regarding exempting a woman from performing *yibbum* if her husband was a *mumar*, Chatam Sofer identified Yishmael as a *mumar* and an exile from the family of Avraham.

Does Yishmael’s *Teshuvah* Matter for Me?

Yishmael’s religious fate has implications for our own lives in two limited practical areas and in a third, more broad area of philosophy.

Yishmael’s possible repentance affects the question of excluding sinful heirs from one’s estate. The Sages weighed in against altering the biblical order of inheritance,¹⁴⁶ but then how did Avraham assign all of his property to Yitzchak?¹⁴⁷ Some suggest that Avraham’s action was justified by Yishmael’s wickedness,¹⁴⁸ indicating that a modern parent could do likewise. If Yishmael actually repented, though, then this rationale for re-distributing one’s estate disappears.¹⁴⁹

Another application is in the matter of using a name which also belonged to a wicked biblical figure. Based upon Shlomo haMelech’s statement (Mishlei 10:7), “The name of the wicked should rot,” the Sages taught¹⁵⁰ that we are not to use the names of wicked people, and that people who bear such names may even meet dire ends. How, then, did a great *tanna* go by the name of Yishmael? Some suggest¹⁵¹ that this supports the view that Yishmael repented, and that the names of other biblical sinners ought not be used. However, within the view that Yishmael did not repent, Rabbi Yishmael’s use of his name may imply that names which are commonplace,¹⁵² or which preceded Shlomo haMelech,¹⁵³ may be used despite their wicked former bearers.

The broadest application of Yishmael’s *teshuvah*, though, is in the realm of our own growth and repentance. This adolescent was on a path of such corruption that the Creator who is identified by thirteen unique attributes of mercy ordered him evicted from his home and left to wander in the wilderness. The next stop in Yishmael’s life was Egypt, where he married an Egyptian

¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the Turei Even expressed shock at Rashi’s comment, asking, “איך הרשיע רש"י את הצדיק שעשה תשובה?” – How could Rashi have vilified this righteous man who repented? Just the opposite – We say, in many sources, that fully righteous people cannot stand in the place reserved for those who practice repentance!” He provided an alternative explanation of the talmudic question in question.

¹⁴⁵ Chatam Sofer Even haEzer 4:88

¹⁴⁶ Ketuvot 53a; Bava Batra 133b

¹⁴⁷ Bereishit 25:5; Sanhedrin 91a

¹⁴⁸ Machane Yehuda to Choshen Mishpat 256:3

¹⁴⁹ See Yabia Omer 8:Choshen Mishpat 9 and Mishneh Halachot 6:294 for other justifications of Avraham’s actions.

¹⁵⁰ Yoma 38b, and see Tosafot Megilah 10b רבה, Mabit I 276 and Yosif Ometz 11

¹⁵¹ Tosafot Yeshanim to Yoma 38b

¹⁵² Yosif Ometz 11

¹⁵³ Yehudah Yaaleh 1:Orach Chaim 99

woman.¹⁵⁴ How, then, did Yishmael, cast out of his own Eden and rejected by his family, find the wherewithal to repent?

Yishmael's repentance may have been stimulated by his father, Avraham, who pleaded with HaShem on behalf of Yishmael's future righteousness,¹⁵⁵ and who is described in a midrash¹⁵⁶ as seeking Yishmael's repentance in later years. However, we may also suggest that Yishmael is a human being who learned from his punishment and managed to correct his path and find his way to God. In this sense, Yishmael is a potent model for Rosh haShanah.

Many of us have difficulty relating to Yitzchak, who went willingly to be bound and slaughtered,¹⁵⁷ who needs not the privilege of repentance for he is an עולה תמימה, a perfect offering.¹⁵⁸ Yitzchak's death sentence was handed down in response to no sin of his own, and so he is a distant role model. Yishmael, on the other hand, evicted from his father's home with Divine approval, may resonate with the child of Avraham who arrives at Rosh HaShanah on the heels of a monthlong personal audit that has turned up more red ink than black.

The heart of our Torah reading on the first day of Rosh haShanah is still the story of Sarah, but on the Day of Judgment let us be edified and inspired by its epilogue, the exile of a young man into a harsh world, and his ultimate return.

¹⁵⁴ Bereishit 21:21

¹⁵⁵ Bereishit 17:18; Ramban to Bereishit 17:3

¹⁵⁶ Yalkut Shimoni Vayyera 95

¹⁵⁷ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 56:3

¹⁵⁸ Ramban, haEmunah v'haBitachon 15