



Rosh Hashanah 5780: Two Brothers

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Two brothers.

Two brothers, standing, at the foot of a mountain.

One of them will go up the mountain with their father, a journey fraught with fear and glory, which will transform the history of faith. The other will be left behind.

The Akeda, the binding of Isaac which we read on Rosh Hashanah, seems to come out of nowhere. But, like most family legends, there is a back story. What could possibly have happened, to lead to God calling Abraham to sacrifice his son?

Most explanations have to do with Abraham – what he did wrong, what he did right. But one zooms in on the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael, the brothers. They are fighting, as siblings do, about who is better, and who is more beloved. Ishmael says to Isaac: “I’m better than you, because I was circumcised when I was thirteen!” And Isaac shoots back: “No, I’m better than you, because I was circumcised when I was only eight days old!” (Note their mothers aren’t invited to give their perspective here; we can only imagine Hagar and Sarah comparing notes). Ishmael replies: “No way! I was thirteen! I could have argued, I could have run away, but I didn’t.” “Oh yeah?” Isaac says, “You think you’re so special? Even if God appeared to me now and told me to cut off one of my limbs, I would do it.”ⁱ

And it happened after those things, that God tested Abraham, and said, take your son...ⁱⁱ

In a world in which the greatest virtue was offering your whole self up to God, no wonder Jewish tradition maintains that Isaac was the son taken up to be sacrificed, and Ishmael was the one left at the foot of the mountain.ⁱⁱⁱ And no wonder Islamic tradition said that Ishmael, their ancestor, was the one that Abraham took.

I don’t know about other parents out there, but I am constantly amazed at the things my kids find to fight about. This, however, is a whole other level. Sometimes, I think the Torah is meant to comfort us that however horribly our children argue, the siblings in Genesis do worse. After all, the first siblings in the Bible are Cain and Abel, and look what happened to them.

In the book, *Siblings Without Rivalry*, we are asked to visualize this scenario:

Imagine that your spouse puts an arm around you and says, “Honey, I love you so much, and you’re so wonderful that I’ve decided to have another wife just like you.” ...When the new wife finally arrives you see that she’s very young and kind of cute. When the three of you are out together, people say “hello” to you politely, but exclaim ecstatically over the newcomer. “Isn’t she adorable? Hello sweetheart...You are precious!” Then they turn to you and ask, “How do you like the new wife?”^{iv}



No wonder Cain killed his younger brother.

Or, if we want an example from the animal world, here's a fun fact: "In the Galapagos Islands, young fur seals attack their newborn siblings, seizing them by the throat and tossing them in the air, killing them unless the mother seal intervenes." When I travelled to the Galapagos as a teenager and learned about the wildlife, I don't remember anyone telling me that... but I learned it from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who argues that fratricide is the primal act of violence.^v

Sacks looks at Genesis, at our people's family stories, and sees not just consolation for our everyday family conflicts, but a positive trajectory. At the beginning of the book, Cain kills Abel; by the end, Joseph reconciles with his brothers.^{vi} I would go even further and suggest that even the Joseph story alone is a microcosm of the worst, and the best, of sibling relationships. It starts off with a favoured brother, a dreamer in a fancy coat, so obnoxious in his brothers' eyes that they throw him in a pit, sell him into slavery and tell their father he is dead. They hate him so much that they are unable even to say "shalom" (*lo yachlu dabro l'shalom*). But it ends with a forgiving family reunion, replete with gifts and tears. At its climax, Joseph is so moved, he is unable to hold back (*lo yachol Yosef lehitapek*), and he cries out in a moment of great poignancy and drama, "I am Joseph your brother." From absolute estrangement to absolute vulnerability.^{vii}

I am Joseph your brother.

Those words were spoken again at another family reunion, over three thousand years later. In 1960, Pope John XXIII received a visiting delegation of American Jews. Before he had risen to Pope, Archbishop Giuseppe (or Joseph) Roncalli, as he was then known, was a representative of the Vatican in Turkey, and had helped save thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. The leader of the delegation expressed his thanks on behalf of the world Jewish community. And the Pope replied: "I am Joseph, your brother."

He was not just referring to his name.

This encounter was pivotal to a dramatic change in Jewish Catholic relations, leading to the Second Vatican Council. All this is of great interest to historians of religion; to the Jew in the pews, maybe not so much. But the reverberations went far and deep, and resulted in the Catholic renunciation of, and repentance for, millennia of anti-Semitism. The Catholic in the pews would no longer be taught to hate their Jewish neighbours. In our oral history project, one of our own congregants recalls how, when he and a young Catholic woman met and fell in love, her priest told him that unless he converted he would go to hell, and her father, after resigning himself to their betrothal, offered him thousands of dollars to elope and spare him the embarrassment of his daughter marrying a Jew.^{viii}

How much has changed.

There is, of course, a back story.

This transformation would not have happened were it not for a man named Jules Isaac.^{ix}



Born in 1877 to an assimilated French Jewish family, Jules Isaac witnessed the Dreyfus Affair, but still served France loyally in World War One. He was wounded in the line of duty, and awarded the Legion of Honour. He became an historian, writing history textbooks for French schools – but another author’s names were added to the books, because “Isaac” was just too Jewish. His name became an even greater liability when the Vichy government took power. « Il n'était pas admissible, » déclare le ministre de l'éducation en 1942, « que l'histoire de France soit enseignée aux jeunes Français par un Isaac. » "It was not acceptable," said the Minister of Education in 1942, “for the history of France to be taught to French youth by an Isaac.” A year later, his wife, daughter and son-in-law, and youngest son were arrested by the Gestapo while Jules was out for a walk. All except his son were killed in Auschwitz. In the midst of this maelstrom, Jules Isaac was desperately trying to understand the anti-Semitism that surrounded him. He was writing the work that would be his legacy: a book on the roots of Christian anti-Semitism and what he called its “teaching of contempt.” In the last message he received from his wife when she was in Drancy, before being sent to Auschwitz, she wrote: “My beloved friend, we're leaving tomorrow. It is very hard, and the greatest suffering is to know nothing of you since the dreadful day of separation. My friend, guard yourself for us, have confidence and finish your work that the world expects.”

So he did. And when he published his magnum opus, *Jésus et Israël*, he did so with the following dedication: “IN MEMORIAM/To my wife and my daughter/ Martyrs/ Killed by Hitler’s Nazis/ Killed/ Simply because their name was/ ISAAC.”^x

Jules Isaac met with Pope John XXIII on June 13, 1960. In September 1960, the pope instructed one of his cardinals to prepare a draft on the relationship of the church to the Jewish people, which would ultimately result in the revolution of Vatican Two. And in October 1960, the Pope greeted the Jewish delegation with those earth-shattering words of reconciliation: “I am Joseph, your brother.”

Those words began the dialogue required for that time. But my question for us this year is: What is the dialogue required in ours? To answer, let me take you back from Jules Isaac, to Isaac and Ishmael.

The Torah tells us nothing more about them until Abraham dies, and the brothers come together to bury him.

Can it really be, our sages ask, that this family had no reconciliation, no healing, until the brothers stood together at that grave? It seems to me it is entirely possible. Too many families arrive at that moment when, consumed by loss, relatives come together to bury a loved one and cannot speak a word of peace. I want to say clearly and without condemnation that there are moments when that estrangement is justified, when relationships are too toxic, when there has been too much hurt. Tara Westover, author of the memoir *Educated*, says, there are times when “loyalty to your family [is] in conflict with loyalty to yourself.^{xi} But too many times, we sleepwalk our way into estrangement; distance makes the heart grow harder, not fonder, and



offences are magnified with time. As one psychologist writes, “estrangement is one of the tools we have in our toolbox as a family member, but it’s played too often and too quickly.”^{xii}

So it is entirely possible that Isaac and Ishmael only came together at their father’s grave, and then continued their separate ways. But our ancestors filled in the blanks of the story with other stories, writing midrash, and reading relationships between the lines.

In one story, Abraham, after sending away his wife Hagar and their son Ishmael, at his wife Sarah’s insistence – because she didn’t like how Ishmael played with Isaac, her son – he can’t bear staying away. He learns that Ishmael has married, and he goes to visit him in the desert, after promising Sarah that it will only be a drive-by visit – he won’t even descend from his camel. Ishmael is out, so Abraham asks his son’s wife for a little bread and water. She refuses him. Abraham leaves a coded message for his son about what happened, and Ishmael, when he receives it, divorces his wife. He then remarries a woman named Fatimah. This time, Abraham comes through on his camel, and once again, Ishmael is out. But when Abraham asks for bread and water, Fatimah receives him with hospitality; Abraham blesses Ishmael’s house, and when Ishmael returns, he understands that his father still loves him. This story is especially significant when we realize that Fatimah is a Muslim name, and the story is written after the initial encounter between Judaism and Islam. It shows a rare recognition of the shared values of hospitality; of how, despite our deep divisions, we come from the same family.^{xiii}

So Abraham and Ishmael are reconciled. Even Isaac and Abraham reconnect; another midrash tells us that when Abraham goes to find a wife for Isaac, Isaac has the sensitivity to think of his father’s loneliness since Sarah – Abraham’s wife and Isaac’s mother – has died, so he encourages him to find Hagar, Ishmael’s mother, and remarry her. How can I enter into marriage, Isaac asks himself, when my father is alone?^{xiv} It’s not always easy for an adult child to accept, much less facilitate, a widowed or divorced parent’s love life.^{xv} And yet Isaac does.

Ishmael and Isaac both find ways to reconcile with their father. But what about the brothers? Can their estrangement be overcome?

To meet at the funeral is too late. And so, when Muslims, the descendants of Ishmael, came to the Jewish community vigil after the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre; when Jews, the descendants of Isaac, came to make a ring of peace around a Montreal mosque after the mosque massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, we said to one another with sadness: we have to stop meeting this way. And so we have been growing the relationships between us, sharing meals and religious celebrations, advocating together against Bill 21. We found a way for the mourning to be a beginning. Each step of the way, I have found familiarity – the ways in which we are family – whether it is in the shared linguistic roots of Hebrew and Arabic or the ways we talk to God; how we welcome others to our tables, and how we take part in our shared society alongside practicing our faith.

As with family, our dialogue has not always been easy. As with family, interfaith relationships have their red lines, and you find them only when they are crossed. Israel and Palestine is an obvious flashpoint. Here, I share wisdom from my colleague Rabbi Michael Latz, a master of



coalition-building and dialogue. In his words: “If you criticize the Israeli government, I can [still] be in conversation with you; if you believe Jews should be wiped off the planet, I’m out.”^{xvi} The Muslims we are working with know this; and many of them have taken the significant step of participating in the Muslim Leadership Initiative at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, to learn about Judaism and Zionism.

Mohammed, a Muslim leader in Toronto, told me how he connected with Jewish leaders for the first time when they expressed solidarity after the massacre at the Quebec City mosque. Speaking of a representative from CIJA, he said:

...he was so sincere that I felt ashamed of myself... here I was, thinking the worst of him, and there he was, listening to the best of me... so I thought maybe I need to show some courage as well. If I’m going to be in conversation with him, I need to understand where he is, and why he’s there. That’s why I came to the Shalom Hartman Institute, to learn what it meant to be connected to Jewish people...^{xvii}

We won’t agree on everything; our stories are not the same. But, as Mohammed said to me, “If Canadians can’t have a more civil dialogue amongst ourselves about the hardest issues in the world, how do we expect others to do so?”

“Peace will not come,” the late Dr. Victor Goldbloom, Temple’s beloved interfaith bridge-builder, wrote, “until we can talk to each other... Peace requires trust; and dialogue is a means of building that trust. It also requires leadership; we cannot wait for everyone to be ready for it.”^{xviii}

I have emerged from this year more convinced than ever that spiritually, morally, and even strategically, the dialogue between Isaac and Ishmael, between Jews and Muslims, is crucial for our time. In my own life, the times I most regret are the times when I wrote others off. But that is not the way I would want to be treated. It is not the way I want to live.

Back in 1961, just a year after that encounter between the Jewish delegation and Pope John XXIII, Rabbi Harry Joshua Stern, the leader of this congregation and a leader in interfaith dialogue, wrote:

Sometimes, as we read the reports in the daily press, concerning racial discrimination, religious bigotry, and evidence of brotherlessness throughout the world between nations and peoples we say to ourselves, “what a crazy world this is!” Now the word “crazy,” etymologically speaking, is derived from a French word, “ecrasé” – which means shattered – crushed and broken. Indeed, in this hour, when we witness a broken humanity there is the urgency for great religion and the purpose of religion is to heal the wounds and mend the broken humanity.^{xix}

Now more than ever, we witness a broken humanity. Now more than ever, our purpose is healing and mending.



Two brothers stand at the base of a mountain. Some stories leave them there, and the mountain itself becomes an epicentre of violence as two peoples vie for sacred space. The Temple. The Dome of the Rock. And the struggle goes on, and on.

But another story, one with both Jewish and Arab origins, suggests that on that mountain, two brothers overcome their differences to embrace – and that is what makes it a holy place.^{xx}

Two brothers.

Two brothers, embracing, on top of a mountain.

ⁱ Genesis Rabbah 55.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 22 :1.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the tradition that Ishmael was one of the young men that Abraham took with him on the journey to the Akeda, see Leviticus Rabbah 26:7 (the other one is Eliezer).

^{iv} Adele Faber and Elaine Mazish, *Siblings Without Rivalry*, pp.36-37.

^v Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken, 2015), pp.89-90.

^{vi} Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interviewed by Raymond J. De Souza, *Convivium*, March 18, 2016.

<https://mail.convivium.ca/articles/not-in-gods-name-rabbi-jonathan-sacks-for-cardus>.

^{vii} The two verses cited are Genesis 37:4 and 45:1, which linguistically echo each other.

^{viii} Temple oral history interview with Robert Asch, 2019.

^{ix} Dr. Edouard Robberechts, "Introduction to the life and work of Jules Isaac," at *La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions? En France et dans le monde*, June 30, 2013.

http://www.iccj.org/redaktion/upload_pdf/201307121332010.Sunday-Opening-Edouard-Robberechts.pdf.

^x Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, trans. Sally Gran, 2nd ed, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), xxiii.

^{xi} Interview with Tara Westover, *Deseret News*, March 20, 2018.

<https://www.deseret.com/2018/3/20/20642049/q-a-byu-grad-and-educated-author-tara-westover-talks-difference-between-forgiveness-and-reconciliati#tara-westover-is-the-author-of-educated>.

See Tara Westover, *Educated: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2018), on being raised in, and leaving an extremist religious home, and her relationship with her family. For Jewish perspectives on enduring estrangements, see Rabbi Elliot Kukla, "No Hollywood Ending: How Do I Grieve When I am Estranged From My Family?" *The Body Is Not An Apology*, Sept. 7, 2018 (<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/when-theres-no-hollywood-ending-how-do-i-grieve-the-dying-when-i-am-estranged-from-family/>), and Ilana Kramer, "Not on Speaking Terms: Estrangement Inside Jewish Families," *Lilith Magazine*, Winter 2018-19 (<https://www.lilith.org/articles/not-on-speaking-terms-estrangement-inside-jewish-families/>). For examples of, and reflection on, reconciliation, see Laura Davis (author of *The Courage to Heal*), *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road from Estrangement to Reconciliation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

^{xii} Dr. Joshua Coleman, cited in "When Siblings Fall Out," *Psychologies*, Jan. 14, 2016.

<https://www.psychologies.co.uk/when-siblings-fall-out>.

^{xiii} Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 30:6-7. I first encountered this midrash in <http://rabbisacks.org/judaism-islam-chayei-sarah-5779/>. On the relationship between Judaism and Islam through these stories, see Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

^{xiv} Genesis Rabbah 60:14, as cited and interpreted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, <http://rabbisacks.org/judaism-islam-chayei-sarah-5779/>.

