Who Invited Ishmael?--Thoughts for Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hayyei Sarah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite…”

Abraham was 175 years old when he died. He had eight sons: Ishmael, born to Hagar; Isaac, born to Sarah; and six sons born to Keturah. Ishmael was sent away when he and Isaac were still young children. The sons of Keturah were given gifts and sent away to the east. Isaac was Abraham’s sole chosen successor.

When Abraham died, the Torah informs us that “Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.” How did Ishmael learn about Abraham’s death? He had been banished many years earlier. Who invited him to the funeral?

A midrash speculates that Keturah was actually another name for Hagar. Thus, Hagar would have informed her son Ishmael about Abraham’s passing.

Rashi comments that Ishmael repented from his past ways. If so, he may have maintained ongoing communication with Abraham and family.

But perhaps there is another way of understanding the presence of Ishmael at Abraham’s funeral. His half-brother Isaac must have notified him and let him know he was welcome to attend. Isaac initiated a reconciliation with Ishmael! After years of separation and hard feelings, Isaac decided to heal the rift between brothers. They should come together for the burial of their father; they should realize that they were both Abraham’s sons, both beloved by him, both connected to each other by Abraham’s genes. Isaac and Ishmael had different destinies, but they need not be in unending conflict with each other.

According to this interpretation, Isaac displayed amazing strength of character. He knew he was Abraham’s sole spiritual and material heir; he didn’t have to reach out to Ishmael…but he did!

Isaac was a sensitive and thoughtful person. Abraham and Jacob are depicted more elaborately in the Torah, and Isaac's quiet greatness might easily be overlooked. Isaac is mainly remembered as the potential victim in the Akeidah story. Perhaps his near brush with death imbued him with an extra appreciation of the value of life and its transience. A few of the Torah's references to Isaac underscore his uniqueness.

The Torah describes Isaac as he went "lasuah basadeh"—to meditate/pray in the fields. He was a spiritual soul seeking communion with God. Neither Abraham nor Jacob is depicted in silent, lonely and peaceful meditation.

The Torah describes Isaac as praying for the benefit of his barren wife. Neither Abraham nor Jacob is seen praying for their barren wives. Jacob actually rebuked Rachel when she complained of her inability to have a child.

And now, at the time of Abraham's death, Isaac once again demonstrates inner strength, sensitivity, and composure. He reached out to his step-brother Ishmael in an unexpected gesture of goodwill and inclusiveness.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote about different kinds of greatness. Some people are like the Shabbat or Yom Tov—their holiness shines brightly and is obvious to all. Others are like Rosh Hodesh—their holiness is muted and easily missed.

By this model, Isaac was an Ish Rosh Hodesh whose greatness was quiet, thoughtful, and sensitive. In his own way, he earned his place as one of the forefathers of our People.