



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

חיי שרה תשע"ט  
Chayei Sarah 5779

**On Judaism  
and Islam**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

*Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition* is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. Each element of the *Family Edition* is progressively more advanced; *The Core Idea* is appropriate for all ages and the final element, *From The Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, is the most advanced section. Each section includes *Questions to Ponder*, aimed at encouraging discussion between family members in a way most appropriate to them. We have also included a section called *Around the Shabbat Table* with a few further questions on the *parsha* to think about. The final section is an *Educational Companion* which includes suggested talking points in response to the questions found throughout the *Family Edition*.

To receive the *Family Edition* together with the main *Covenant & Conversation* essay each week in your inbox, please join Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH IN A NUTSHELL

Chayei Sarah contains three stories: the death of Sarah and Abraham's purchase of a burial plot for her, the Cave of Machpelah, which was the first part of the Holy Land to be

owned by the Jewish People; the search for a wife for Isaac, the first Jewish child; and the last period of Abraham's life, and his death.



### THE CORE IDEA

Last week we saw that after the birth of Isaac, Sarah was upset by the presence of Abraham's first wife Hagar, and their son Ishmael, in the house of Abraham. She demanded that Abraham send them away and God told Abraham to listen to his wife.

Yet in this week's *parsha* we see a strange detail in the description of Abraham's death:

*And Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the Cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased of the children of Het. There was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife. (Gen. 25:8-10)*

Ishmael's presence at the funeral is surprising. After all, he had been sent away into the desert years before, when Isaac was young. Until now, we have assumed that the two half-brothers have lived in total isolation from one another. Yet the Torah places them together at the funeral without a word of explanation.

There is a Midrash in *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, which may shed some light on this. It tells of how Abraham visited his son Ishmael twice after he had sent him away. On the first occasion, Ishmael was not at home. His wife, not knowing Abraham's identity, refused to give the stranger bread and water. Ishmael divorced her and married a woman named Fatimah. This time, when Abraham visited, again in disguise, the woman gave him food and drink. The Midrash then says "Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and Ishmael's house became filled with all good things. When Ishmael returned, his wife told him about it, and Ishmael knew that his father still loved him." Father and son were reconciled.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What reason do you think Sarah had to demand from Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away?
2. Why do you think this was hard for Abraham to do?
3. How do we know he did the right thing?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Long before the Beit HaMikdash was built, two brothers lived and farmed on that same site. One was married and had a large family, while the other was single. They lived in close proximity to each other, and each worked his land, growing wheat. When harvest time arrived, each was blessed with a bountiful crop and piled up his grain for long-term storage.

The unmarried brother, observing his good fortune, thought to himself that God had blessed him with more than he needed, whereas his brother, who was father to a large family, could surely use more. He arose in the middle of the night and secretly took from his grain and put it in his brother's pile.

Similarly, the married brother thought to himself that he was blessed to have children who would care for him in his old age, while his brother must depend on what he saved. He, too, arose in the middle of the night and quietly transferred grain from his pile to his brother's.

In the morning, each wondered why there was no noticeable decrease in his own pile, and so they repeated the transfer the next night. These nocturnal activities continued, until one night the brothers bumped into each other. In that instant, in the dark of night, the glow of brotherly love lit up the mountain sky; they each understood what the other had been doing and they fell into a warm embrace. According to the legend, when God saw that display of brotherly love, He selected the site for His Temple.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Is it natural to argue with your siblings? Do you argue with your siblings?
2. What is the message of this story? Do you think you can achieve this level of love for your siblings? What about for someone who is not your sibling?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Beneath the surface of Chayei Sarah is another story, with three important clues waiting in the text.

The first occurs when Abraham's servant is returning with the woman who is to become Isaac's wife. As Rebecca sees Isaac in the distance, we are told that he is "*coming from the way of Be'er-lahai-ro'i*" (Gen. 24:62) to meditate in the field. Where is Be'er-lahai-ro'i and what is its significance?

The second is the final stage of Abraham's life. For chapter after chapter we read of the love and faithfulness Abraham and Sarah had for one another. Then Sarah's life draws to a close. Abraham mourns and weeps for her and buys a cave in which she is buried. We might then expect to read that Abraham lived out the rest of his years alone before being placed beside "Sarah his wife" in the Cave of Machpelah.

Unexpectedly, however, once Isaac is married, Abraham marries a woman named Keturah and has six children with her. We are told nothing else about this woman, and the significance of the episode is unclear. But the Torah does not include mere incidental details. So what is the significance of Abraham's second marriage and how is it related to the rest of the story?

The third clue is revealed in the Torah's description of Abraham's death – the surprising presence of Ishmael at Abraham's funeral. The sages pieced together these three puzzling details to form an enthralling story.

First, they point out that Be'er-lahai-ro'i, the place from which Isaac was coming, is mentioned once before, in Genesis (16:14): It is the spot where Hagar, pregnant and fleeing from Sarah, encountered an angel who told her to return. It is indeed she who gives the place its name, meaning "*the well of the Living One who sees me*". The Midrash says that Isaac was there looking for Hagar, because he said, "Shall I be married while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him."

This also explains the second question: who was Keturah? The sages tell us she was Hagar. Hagar was also called Keturah because "*her acts gave forth fragrance like incense (ketoret)*." This together with the Midrash we saw, also answers the third question, and helps complete the challenging narrative of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar did not end her days as an outcast and Ishmael and Abraham did not remain estranged. Hagar returned, at Isaac's prompting and with Abraham's consent, to become the wife of her former master, and Ishmael and Abraham were ultimately reconciled.

In that Midrash in *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, the name of Ishmael's second wife, Fatimah, is highly significant. In the Koran, Fatimah is the daughter of Mohammad. *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* is making an explicit, and positive, reference to Islam. The hidden story of Chayei Sarah has immense consequence for our time. Jews and Muslims

both trace their descent from Abraham – Jews through Isaac, Muslims through Ishmael.

The fact that both sons stood together at their father's funeral tells us that they too were reunited.

Beneath the surface of the narrative in Chayei Sarah, the sages read the clues and pieced together a moving story

of reconciliation between Abraham and Hagar on the one hand, Isaac and Ishmael on the other.

Yes, there was conflict and separation; but that was the beginning, not the end. Between Judaism and Islam there can be friendship and mutual respect. Abraham loved both his sons, and was laid to rest by both. There is hope for the future in this story of the past.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

At the heart of all three faiths is the idea that within humanity there is one privileged position – favoured son, chosen people, guardian of the truth, gatekeeper of salvation – for which more than one candidate competes. The result is conflict of the most existential kind, for what is at stake is the most precious gift of all: God's paternal love. One group's victory means another's defeat, and since this is a humiliation, a dethronement, it leads to revenge. So the strife is perpetuated...

On the surface, the story of Isaac and Ishmael is about sibling rivalry and the displacement of the elder by the younger. Beneath the surface, however, the sages heard a counter-narrative telling the opposite story: *the birth of Isaac does not displace Ishmael*. To be sure, he will have a different destiny. But he too is a beloved son of Abraham, blessed by his father and by God. He becomes a great nation. God stays with him to ensure that his children flourish and become 'twelve rulers'. Abraham and Isaac both make a journey of reconciliation. The two half-brothers stand together at their father's grave. There is no hostility between them. Their futures diverge, but they do not compete for God's affection, which encompasses them both. This reading becomes all the more powerful when, in the Midrash, it is extended to the relationship between Judaism and Islam.

This is the first indication of what will, in the next few chapters, emerge as a systemic feature of the biblical text.

In each narrative of apparent choice-and-rejection, there is a counter-narrative that subverts the surface story and presents a more nuanced, generous picture of divine (and, by implication, human) sympathy. It is never blatant. It never unequivocally announces itself. But it is unmistakably there in the text...

The surface narrative is itself revolutionary. It asserts that the hierarchy of the ancient world – where the elder is destined to rule, the younger to serve – was about to be overthrown. The counter-narrative is more radical still, because it hints at the most radical of monotheism's truths: that God may choose, but *God does not reject*. The logic of scarcity – of alpha males and chosen sons – has no place in a world made by a God whose 'tender mercies are on *all His works*' (Psalm 145:9).

***Not in God's Name, pp. 98-99 & pp.123-124***

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do Ishmael and Esau have in common? Why do you think their stories in the Torah can be described as "revolutionary"?
2. The "counter-narrative" that is hidden in the text below the surface, is even more radical. Why do you think Rabbi Sacks describes it in this way and what is the ultimate message of his point? How can this idea help us solve religious violence in our world today?



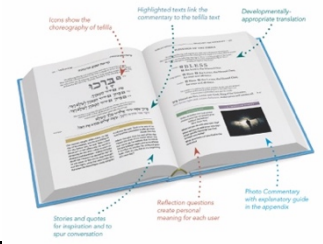
## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you think Abraham was right or wrong to send Hagar and Ishmael away?
2. From the way the rabbis in the Midrash have read the story, what do you think Isaac thinks of the episode of Hagar and Ishmael?
3. Does the hidden story of our *parsha* that has been identified by the rabbis help you read the story in the Torah?
4. Do you think sibling relationships are a good model to teach us other inter-human relationships?
5. Do you think the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* can help Jewish-Muslims relationships today?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. This is a difficult story in the Bible, and commentators through the ages, from midrashic to modern, have struggled to understand and justify why Sarah made this demand. Perhaps Sarah saw Hagar as a rival to her in the house, and saw Ishmael as a rival to Isaac (perhaps as a rival for the love and attention of their father Abraham, or even as a rival for the inheritance and legacy that was at stake). However, many commentators also suggest that Sarah was in fact worried about the negative influence that Ishmael would have on Isaac if he remained in the same house during Isaac's childhood and upbringing.
2. While there is a Midrash that suggests Abraham found it distressing that Ishmael was a bad influence on Isaac, rather than found Sarah's request distressing, Rashi admits that the simple reading of the text is that Abraham found it difficult, as a father, to send his son Ishmael, and Ishmael's mother, Hagar, away.
3. Many commentaries and midrashim note that Ishmael was a bad influence on Isaac, so we know from logic that Abraham's first responsibility was to protect the son that God had promised him would be his legacy, the fulfillment of the Brit between him and God. Furthermore, we know that Abraham did the right thing, because God told him listen to Sarah, so it must have been the correct thing to do, even if Abraham (and in fact, we) don't understand why.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. It is natural to argue with your siblings, while at the same time feeling a deep love for them. The Torah, and especially the Book of Genesis, is full of stories of sibling rivalry. However, almost without exception, all of these stories end in reconciliation and a renewal of sibling love.
2. This story exemplifies the deepest kinds of human love. We know from experience, and from the Torah, that this is special, even for family members. Because of the great kindness these brothers displayed, legend has it that God chose this location as His home on earth. This kind of love is the reason for the world's creation, and God's presence in it. Our ultimate goal in Judaism is to reach this level of love for all human beings, not just for our blood relatives.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Ishmael and Esau were both the first-born sons and yet were rejected from the spiritual inheritance of being forefathers of the Jewish people and the carriers of the Brit with God. Rabbi Sacks describes their two stories as revolutionary, because the stories were written at a time when the accepted norm of society in the ancient world was a hierarchy of power where the elder is destined to rule, and the younger to serve. The message of these stories is that age, or birth, or might and physical power, are not moral justifications for power and rule. This was a radical and new idea in that world.
2. The counter-narrative however, is even more novel and radical. It suggests that while God makes His decision, based on His own criteria, who will be the carrier of the covenant and the forefather of the Jewish people, this does not mean that the other has been rejected. God may choose, but *God does not reject*. God has enough love to care deeply and fully for all of His creations.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. While we can approach this question from a textual perspective (see "The Core Idea", Q1) this question is asking for your own opinion. Ishmael was a bad influence on Isaac, but ask the people around your Shabbat table to imagine Abraham's dilemma, and how difficult that must have been. And finally, remember that God compelled Abraham to fulfill Sarah's demand. But despite that, should Abraham have done it, in your opinion?
2. It would seem that Isaac also struggled with this decision, and the first chance he had, he arranged for the reconciliation of Abraham and Hagar. This is not to say that he felt his parents were wrong, but his behaviour demonstrates an empathy with the plight of Hagar, and perhaps Ishmael also.
3. The hidden story suggests that despite Isaac being chosen by God, this does not mean that Ishmael (and Hagar) have been rejected. And it would seem that there is room for a relationship between God and Ishmael (and every other one of His creations, despite the chosen nature of the Jewish people).
4. One can argue that sibling relationships are a more intense version of all human relationships. The love is deeper, but then so too is the rivalry. So when we examine the sibling rivalries and reconciliation in the Book of Genesis, we can use these relationships as a model for understanding all human relationships.
5. This is a deeply complex and controversial topic. Rabbi Sacks, in his book *Not in God's Name*, suggests that the relationship between the world's three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, follow the pattern of sibling rivalries. He believes the underlying message of Genesis is that the election and closeness of the Jewish people by God does not preclude a relationship of love between God and other nations and other religions. If this is the case, then there is no reason for a rivalry. God has infinite capacity for love, just as a parent can love all their children equally.