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TEXT: Genesis 25:7–13

TITLE: Bridging The Chasm—With Blessings

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Just yesterday, we in the Jewish world read of the last years of Abraham's life. According to the counting of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, Abraham lived to be 175 years old. In Genesis 24 we are told that Abraham, though old and advanced in years, had been blessed by God in all things (Gen 24.1). Later we are told that Abraham died in good old age, contented and was gathered to his kin (Gen 25.7–8)

Yet even the casual student of Bible or Torah knows that Abraham did not lead a life without sadness and even tragedy. He left home at God's command in middle age, not knowing where he would end up. He faced dangers on the road that required him to pass off Sarah, his beautiful wife, as his sister—twice! He had to go to war to free Lot, his kidnapped nephew. He barely saved Lot and his family from the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham, though he tried to be patient with God's promise that he would sire innumerable offspring, was forced to conceive his first son, Ishmael, by lying with Hagar, Sarah's maid. He endured circumcision at age 90, performed with a blade of bamboo grass (I'll pause for the groans). He was forced to evict Hagar, whom he loved, from his home twice. When throwing out Hagar the second time, he had to sever ties with his first born son, Ishmael.

Beyond that, God orders him to offer up as a sacrifice his son, Isaac, born in late age to Sarah and, according to the Torah, Abraham's heir. He comes within a knife's breadth of ending Isaac's life before the angel of God tells him to set down the knife. Even though Isaac lives, Abraham never speaks to Isaac again, much less Ishmael his first born. Immediately after Isaac is saved, Abraham's wife Sarah dies and he has to procure a burial place for her among locals who make him pay a king's ransom for the land he wants.

Having to lie to save his life, going to war, a broken family, dead wife, estrangement from his sons... You might say, if this is what it means to be blessed in all things by God, maybe God could bless someone else instead of us?

But no, our rabbinic tradition declares that Abraham was blessed precisely as the Torah describes, *ba-kol*, "in all things," according to the Hebrew text. The 11th century Spanish medieval commentator, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, interprets "in all things" to mean that Abraham was blessed with ripe, old age, with material wealth, with honor and respect and with children.

A digression, if you'll permit me. A note about the Jewish rabbinic tradition and its authority for how we understand the Torah:

When we Jews read our Torah, we do not simply read the verses for their literal meaning. We are not fundamentalist, even those of us who are Orthodox. We have a sacred, time-honored oral tradition that interprets every verse, what is called a “hermeneutic” that goes back over 2,200 years. Our twin disciplines called Midrash and Mishna fill in the details that the Torah may have not specifically mentioned. They also render operational the commandments we find in the Five Books of Moses.

And if you don’t know, there are actually 613 laws or commandments in the Torah, not just ten. Three hundred-sixty-five of them teach what we are not supposed to do, such as do not worship idols, do not murder or steal or do work on the Sabbath. Two hundred-forty-eight of them are positive, including honor your father and mother, leave the corners of your harvested fields for the poor, rise before the aged, have honest weights and measures in the market place and seek justice.

We Jews revere the Torah above all the other books of the Hebrew Bible. They frame our understanding of our relationship with God, with other Jews and with the rest of the world. This is because, unlike the other books of the Hebrew Bible which were written by gifted seekers of God, our tradition teaches that God is the author of the Genesis through Deuteronomy, having given them directly to Moses and the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai as described in the revelation of Exodus, chapter 19. This gives the Torah a unique standing and authority for Jews. So when the Torah declares that Abraham was blessed “in all things,” our rabbis are all over this, trying to elucidate its fuller meaning.

How do they resolve the contradiction between the strife in Abraham’s life and having been blessed in all things? Well, they don’t. Unlike in philosophy, almost all “either/or” questions in Judaism are answered the same way: Yes. Yes, Abraham had strife and yes, he was incredibly blessed.

This is illustrated by the old Jewish tale of two men who go to their local rabbi with a legal dispute. The rabbi listens to the claims of one and declared that he is in the right. The other one gives his side of the argument and the rabbi declares that he is in the right. A bystander intervenes and challenges the rabbi, saying they can’t both be right. The rabbi looks him in the eye and says, “You are also right!”

In Judaism we look for ways to resolve conflicting verses by finding a third verse that adds a new dimension or meaning to argument. And I think that we may very well have just such a verse to resolve our conundrum of Abraham’s being blessed or not.

After Abraham dies, the text remarks something almost in passing: “His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre.” (Gen. 25.9)

Remember, the last time we saw Ishmael was back in Genesis 21, God saving him and his mother Hagar from certain death from thirst and starvation after having been banished from Abraham’s house by Sarah. And Isaac? There is no reference to him being with his father, Abraham, after the near fatal encounter on Mount Moriah in

Genesis 22. Even as Abraham gets Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, he and his son never exchange another word. They are not even mentioned together ever again.

Ishmael and Isaac came together to bury their father. To my mind, this is what completes Abraham's being blessed. It doesn't occur until after his death, but sometimes blessings are like that. Our own deaths can precipitate healing in relationships that seem nothing short of miraculous. How fully was Abraham blessed? He had long life, wealth, respect, children—and his estranged children came together despite a gulf of years and hatred. That is what being blessed fully looks like—a tikkun, a repair of a human rift that seemed beyond mending.

The echoes of this verse reverberate for us to this very day, especially on this day, when we celebrate all the Children of Abraham and Sarah. You see, according to common reckoning, Ishmael is the father of all the Arab peoples, while Isaac is the one of the Patriarchs of the Jewish people, along with his father, Abraham and his son, Jacob.

History has torn these two peoples apart. Since the rise of the prophet Muhammed, blessings upon him, in the 7th century, there has been only one period of genuine amity between the children of Ishmael and the children of Isaac. It was from the 9-11th centuries in Spain, under enlightened Muslim rule.

Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars wrestled with sacred text, argued and wrote philosophy together and lived in relative harmony. One Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides, was revered in all three religious traditions. Christians called him Maimonides, Jews called him the Rambam and Muslims called him Ibn Maimun.

But since the shattering of that world 1,000 years ago, the children of Ishmael and the children of Isaac have known oppression and strife that after centuries boiled over into hatred up to this moment.

Today there is such distrust between Ishmael and Isaac's descendants that we rarely talk, much less support each other. After the shooting of a Muslim cabdriver more than a year ago, I and other Jews came to the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh to see what we could do to support the Muslim community. In 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, I sat at Friday prayers several times that fall to show my support and respect.

Imam Abdu Se'mih Tadese and I co-wrote an article decrying the hatred being fomented in both of our communities against the other. Jews suspected me of collaborating with Muslims who might be terrorists. Muslims suspected me because of my ongoing support for Israel as a Jewish state.

I have tried to follow the wisdom of one of my closest friends since I came to Pittsburgh, Farooq Hussein. If you don't remember, Farooq was the interfaith spokesperson for the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh from the 90's well into the next decade. He always welcomed me with open arms when I came to the mosque.

When asked whether political arguments concerning Israel and the Palestinians would affect our friendship, he replied simply, and with his trademark smile, “Let’s not import the conflict here to Pittsburgh. They’re doing a very fine job of fighting about it over there.”

When he died, far too young, I came to his funeral and burial. I organized the public celebration of his life at the Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland. His life partner, Karen Hussaini, who runs the Syed Farooq Husseini Islamic Interfaith Network, is someone I love without reservation.

Things almost fell apart—once. Farooq and I, along with the Episcopalian Reverend Cynthia Bronson organized a series of talk about Jerusalem entitled, “Jerusalem—Holy City or Holy Strife?”

I gave my presentation about the Jewish attachment to Jerusalem. After all, the name of the city appears more than 600 times throughout the Hebrew Bible. I noticed that our Muslim friends in attendance were looking at me very sternly, arms folded, barely containing their anger.

I interrupted my talk to ask if there was anything the matter. After an awkward silence, one dignified man said, “I have only one question. Why do you want to blow up our mosque, the Dome of the Rock?”

I was stunned. I said that that was the farthest thing from my mind. But he wouldn’t let it go. “Well, why do so many Jews want to blow up my mosque? It says so right on the website of the Temple Mount Faithful!”

“Oh, them,” I sighed. He gave me a puzzled look. I said, “There is a group out there called the Temple Mount Faithful. And they do have a website. But there are only 400 or so Jews in the world who belong to it out of 13 million Jews in the world. I don’t want to blow up the mosque and the vast majority of Jews don’t want to, either.”

He said, “You mean you *don’t* want to blow up the mosque? You and the Jews?” I shook my head. He relaxed as did all of the other Muslim guests there. “Then we can be friends!” And we embraced.

I will not sugar-coat things, however. The closeness and trust of that time no longer undergirds the relationship between our communities. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how one views what is right and just affects how we feel about each other. Frankly, it affects how Jews and Christians feel about each other as well, especially when some Christians label the creation of a Jewish, democratic state in the region a form of original sin.

That said, we face a set of challenges that can only be confronted with by being united. I am desperately afraid for the safety and well-being of my Muslim friends, who are

being harassed simply for wearing a hijab or having a Muslim name. And for the first time since I was a child, I fear for my people, seeing how our President-elect is hailed by the Ku Klux Klan and crowds yelling “Jew-S-A” about supposed Jewish control of the media.

By the way, the media companies are all publicly traded—look at their boards of directors—Jews do not control the media. Someone in my family said she wanted to know about emigrating, not because she disagrees politically with Donald Trump. No, she is concerned about haters who go on CNN and wonder aloud whether or not “Jews are really people at all?” I grew up on a street where I and my family were called “Christ-killers.” I thought those days were long gone but now I’m not so sure.

I believe with all of my heart that the hour is late and we cannot afford to be sluggish or hesitant to stand together against hatred and prejudice against each other. I believe in intimate, interfaith dialogue, but this day I am calling for a public event, sometime this spring, in which all our faiths stand together to decry hatred, demonization, suspicion and fear. We can do this now or we can wait until it’s too late. If you want this to happen, please bug me until we all organize it.

What might we say at such a rally?

We will not be moved

We will not be silent

We will not get weary

We will not go away

We will not wait four years

We will not give in to despair

We will organize

We will join hands

We will reject hatred

We will demand to be heard

We will stand up and be counted

We will re-forged old alliances and make new ones

We will save each and every life we can

We will keep hope alive

How many deaths will it take for the Children of Ishmael and the Children of Isaac to come together? Isn’t it possible for us to come together before one more irreplaceable life is taken? That, my friends, would be the truest expression of the blessing of Abraham’s life. To come together beyond fear, mistrust and suspicion. To grant each other the pain of victimhood and suffering. To lower the bloody flags we raise to rally our supporters to the ramparts of hatred.

The Torah teaches, the Bible proclaims:

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham in all things.

The Torah teaches, the Bible proclaims:

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 the Hittite, facing Mamre...

We, who claim to stand for God and faith and the Bible—why can't we proclaim the truth of this teaching: The Children of Ishmael and the Children of Isaac together, at peace the way we are taught we should be? Why can't Christians stand with both of us, instead of with one against the other? Why can't we, the people of the ONE GOD, reflect God's unity by being unified ourselves? Can't we make God's blessing of Abraham real, here and now, for we who desperately need it?

Rabbi Tarfon, the brilliant sage of the 2nd century taught: Lo alecha ha-m'lacha ligmor v'lo atta ben chorin l'hi-ba-teil mi-me-nah. You are not required to complete God's work in this world, but you are not free to desist from it, either. (Pirkei Avot, Chapters of the Fathers, 2.16)

Let us get to work and not wait to bury even one more precious soul. Let us get to work to bury our fear and hatred instead. Let us bridge the chasm between us now. Now. Together. In Faith, Hope, Love and Blessings. Like Abraham's children. Like Abraham himself. Like Abraham himself.