

Dear Chavraya,

They are archetypal stories, as much about us as about our ancestors, telling of what it is to be human in all of our grandeur and frailty. They tell of sorrow and strife, of transcendence and triumph, of people wrestling and yearning, within themselves and with each other, seeking wholeness. The pain of separation and the hope of return fill the Torah portions of these weeks. At the very outset of the Jewish journey, in the portion *Lech L'cha* (Gen. 12-17), Avram, not even as Avraham yet, is given strange reassurance, "you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age, *b'sayva tovah*." In what becomes much more than a personal cataclysm for Avraham, its impact still churning among his descendants, peace is shattered in the next portion, *Vayera* (Gen. 18-22), with the sending away of Hagar/Hajar and Yishma'el/Isma'il. Only later, when Avraham is "gathered to his people," do we understand the promise and the hope of long ago. We are told in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chayei Sarah* (Gen. 23:1-25:18), that Avraham died *b'sayva tovah/in a good old age*. Now we understand, as commentators point to the next verse, *vayik'b'ru oto Yitzchak v'Yishma'el banav/Yitzchak and Yishma'el, his sons, buried him....* In the Quran there is also wholeness for the elder Ibrahim who says, *Praise be to Allah who has given me Isma'il and Isaac in my old age* (Surah 14:39)! Wherever Jews and Muslims live side by side, the Torah story continues to play out in all of its pathos of separation and yearning among the descendants of Avraham/Ibrahim. Toward our return to each other, I share with you an op-ed I wrote that appears in this week's Jewish Advocate.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

Dialogue as the Beginning of Return
Rabbi Victor H. Reinstein

During a bleak time in relations between Boston's Jewish and Muslim communities, as controversy swirled around the building of the new grand mosque, the ISBCC in Roxbury, a group of Muslims and Jews gathered in search of ways to overcome the divide. At that meeting, I befriended a young Muslim colleague with whom a friendship grew, offering a model and possibility beyond our selves. We sought to create a different reality, starting a program to bring imams and rabbis together to learn each other's texts. The primary goal of "Building Bridges through Learning" has been to engage with each other as people, holy texts as the starting point for holy encounters.

The focus of study for the very first "Building Bridges" gathering in 2008 was our common ancestor, Avraham/Ibrahim. Following that session, a Rabbi shared reflections that continue to inspire me in this work, that speak to the essence of why dialogue is so important. He acknowledged honestly the suspicions he brought to the meeting, musing on degrees of separation among participants from a suicide bomber or an Israeli settler. "I came in not knowing what to expect..." he wrote. "I was uncomfortable and uneasy.... But there were moments, as when I heard the Koran chanted for the first time, of awe and

wonder.... By the time I left, my unease was reduced and I felt honored to have had a chance to meet the people I did." Giving context to the poignant sharing of one participant, my Muslim partner wrote: "Sometimes I feel that family members are getting together after a loooong period of separation. We have so much catching up to do!"

It saddens me that we are still debating as a community the relative merits of engaging in dialogue with our Muslim neighbors. Whether to engage or avoid affects the overall tenor and tone of life in the Jewish community and in the general community, one of fear and suspicion or of openness and opportunity. There is greater security in relationship than in separation and alienation. Through open and honest dialogue that takes place on multiple levels, context is created in which to share concerns and pursue a common agenda. When out of our own fears and loyalties either party speaks words hurtful to the other, there is opportunity to address and redress. Direct knowledge of the other as it forms through dialogue and relationship is far safer than the misperceptions that give rise to stereotypes in the other's absence. Dialogue and engagement is enriching, bringing joy and excitement on wings of discovery, recognizing so much of our selves in the other, realizing too that difference need not be threatening. One of the unexpected gifts and ironic challenges of dialogue for each partner is the necessity to know oneself, as an individual and as part of a people and tradition, deepening our own identity in the process of coming to know the other. The degree to which Jews and Muslims can engage with each other in Boston is its own measure for what is possible elsewhere. Instilling hope and offering a path of possibility, we empower our children to be active shapers of tomorrow and of the world in which they will live. Whether that will be a world of greater peace than we know today will depend on our children's confidence and courage to engage with others.

There are wonderful people-to-people efforts in greater Boston to build bridges between the Muslim and Jewish communities. More needs to be done to deepen and expand those efforts, aided in common cause by the encouraging voice of communal and organizational leadership. One of our challenges as a community is not to be immobilized by the clash of worldviews among us, whether to see an enemy at every turn, or the possibility of a friend. The pain of separation and the hope of return fill the Torah portions of these weeks, Isaac and Yishma'el/Ismael torn from each other, each beloved of God and of their common father Avraham/Ibrahim. In dialogue is the beginning of return. "We have so much catching up to do!"