

Dear Chavraya,

In the context of Jewish-Muslim relations locally, in the context of so much pain and separation throughout the world, so much seeking and yearning for wholeness out of brokenness, we come this week to *Parashat Vayera* (Gen. 18-22). In our Thursday morning learning at JP Licks this week there was a certain emotional depth that comes some time of realizing how real and immediate the tellings of Torah can be. In this portion, so full and so rich, we read in its midst of the *Shilu'ach Hagar/the Sending out of Hagar and Yishma'el*. It is the beginning of a journey ever seeking return, so much pain in its long aftermath in the separation of Jews and Muslims, each beloved of God and of our common father Avraham/Ibrahim. As so often the case in the way of the Torah's teaching, seeds of hope are planted in the furrows of sorrow. That Avraham is so filled with pain reminds us to feel our own heartache along with his. That Jewish and Muslim tellings of what follows are so similar, seeking wholeness and return beyond the text is its own cause for hope. Our role is not to judge, but to feel the intensity of what is felt by each of the characters in the human drama. It is our story and now it is for us to respond, to help bring wholeness. Toward finding our own place in the drama, I share with you the following meditation that I wrote as part of a larger telling.

We enter the book and engage life. That is the purpose of a living Torah, a living Teaching, it is a Teaching about life, *Torat Chayim*. It is about us. Our feelings in response to the stories are part of the stories themselves. That is why we read them, they are meant to elicit feelings that impel us then to act as the stories unfold today. God forbid, that we just stand there as Hagar and Yishma'el are sent away. Do we at least offer them our tears to help replenish their spent water skins? How do we see them in the dim light and shadows of that fateful early morning? Do we remember if Isaac was awake yet and if he said anything to these two he was so close to? Wide-eyed and still, like the desert air, did he wonder in the loneliness of his heart how his mother could tell his father to "cast out this handmaid and her son," the words still echoing within him as he tries to make sense of them? Flesh and bone of his own father, of himself, how could his father accede to his mother's demand. He had heard the argument on that dark night, angry words added for good measure, "the son of this handmaid shall not inherit together with my son Yitzchak." He felt his mother's pain, too, she who cried over him each night with joy and fear, having waited so long, she couldn't bear the thought, lest anything happen to him. But why couldn't she say their names, Hagar/Hajar, Yishma'el/Ismail? How ironic the pretext, for his mother had seen his half-brother *m'tzachek*, making mockery, making sport. How confused and twisted words become, and the feelings of which they speak, in the jealous, fearful heart. *M'tzachek*, it simply means he was laughing! Yishma'el also laughed. The two brothers were joined by a bond beyond words, laughing until they cried. What if his mother had asked him, the one who would bear the burden of the past into the future? What if he had run at that moment and hugged his brother Yishma'el? What if Hagar had put her arms around his mother and said, "I understand?" The two mothers embracing, weeping for all that had been and would be, and in that moment, what if his mother had also said, "I too understand, there must be another way."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor