

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

Could the Twin Towers Have Been Saved?

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Racial profiling. A demeaning, possibly illegal, probably prejudiced way of seeking out potential enemies. If you look Middle Eastern and speak with an accent, you can expect additional scrutiny as you get on a plane. In spite of the President's reassurances to the Arab world that we are not targeting them as potential terrorists, we can't help but to be nervous when we see them.

At the risk of being controversial (who, me?) and politically incorrect, I would like to suggest that there seems to be Biblical precedent for the profiling of Arabs, expecting the worst. After all, our cousins the Ishmaelites have been at war with us for thousands of years.

We read in Rashi's commentary of the treachery of the descendants of Isaac's brother Ishmael. He explains that our "cousins" tricked the starving Israelites into eating and drinking in a manner that caused them to die an agonizing death. When the first Temple was destroyed, and the Jews were being led into exile, they turned to their kinsmen the Ishmaelites. The Jews hoped that their relatives would treat them with compassion. The Ishmaelites gave them salty food, which made them thirsty. They then provided skin bags that appeared to be filled with water, but were in reality inflated with air. When the dehydrated Jews thirstily poured the "water" down their throats, the air blew into their stomachs and killed them.

Arab hatred of Jews seems so ingrained that it actually led the angels in Heaven to engage in racial profiling:

Ishmael was dying. He and his mother had been sent away from Abraham's home because he was exerting a negative influence on Isaac. (See "Under the Influence of Dregs") They were out in the desert, and Ishmael was suffering from fever. They had run out of water, and Ishmael's mother left him under a tree and walked away, so as not to have to watch him die of thirst.

There was a debate raging in Heaven. Here was Ishmael, a young man that Genesis, 17:12 describes as "*a wild man, his hand against everyone* (in theft -- Rashi) *and everyone's hand against him* (in hatred -- Rashi) *and over all his brothers he will dwell.*" The angels argued against Divine Mercy for Ishmael. They pointed - toward the future - to the events described above. "This man's descendants will some day murder Isaac's children by thirst, and You are going to give him water?!"

I suspect that the argument didn't end there: I am sure that the angels, who obviously knew the future, warned G-d that in 1929, the Arabs of Hebron would massacre the defenseless Jewish community. Surely they showed him the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who invited his hero Adolph Hitler to bring his Final Solution to Palestine. They must have shown Him Arafat's bazookas being fired at school busses in Maalot, and body parts flying out of a pizza shop in Jerusalem. Can there be any doubt that the angels in Heaven pleaded with G-d to prevent the carnage in the World Trade Center?

All that was needed was one thing -- kill the boy! Let him die! He's no good anyway! The angels argued that the world would have a safer future if Ishmael would die in the desert. No need for a 1948 War of Independence. No Six-Day War and no Yom Kippur War. No need to mourn for 3,000 innocent victims at Ground Zero!

G-d said no. Why?

The Talmud says that G-d asked the angels one question: "What is he now, righteous or wicked?" They responded, "Righteous." (Apparently, he had repented some of the behavior that had led to his expulsion from his father's home.) An angel then said to the boy's mother, "*Don't be afraid, because G-d has listened to the voice of the boy **where he is.***" (Genesis, 21:17) G-d then revealed a well from which Ishmael's mother was able to draw water and save her son.

By listening to the boy "**where he is,**" G-d was showing that He judges people on the basis of what they are doing now, not based on what may (or will) happen in the future.

People are inherently good. We should never jump to conclusions about people. The simple fact that someone is an Arab, a descendant of Ishmael, doesn't make him a terrorist.

How quickly do we assess people on the basis of race, religion, or political affiliation? If we are orthodox, do we look with disdain upon those who aren't? If our outlook is more secular, do we cringe at the "old fashioned" appearance of someone who is Chassidic?

G-d judged Ishmael simply based upon the present. The question of what his children might someday do was totally irrelevant. We don't appreciate when people judge us with preconceived notions. We want to be judged "where we are" now.

It behooves us to give the same courtesy to others.

Have a great Shabbos.

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