



A Tale of Two Brothers

What is the core of the conflict, and what should we do about it?

Son of Hamas

“Son of Hamas” is the title of a book written by the son of one of the leaders of Hamas during the first Intifada in 1996. He was captured and imprisoned in Israel, where he changed his mind about his father and his movement, and decided to become an Israeli spy.

In 2009, he wrote a book in which he recounts his life story. In the introduction, he attempts to explain why there will never be peace between Palestinians and Israelis—and he draws from these Torah portions to understand the root of the conflict, from the story of our forefather Abraham.

In Parshas Lech Lecha, we read about Sarah, Abraham’s wife, who suggested that he take Hagar, their Egyptian maidservant, as a wife. Like a good husband, Abraham listened to her, but things didn’t turn out well. When Hagar became pregnant, she gained self-confidence and began to belittle Sarah. This obviously angered Sarah, and she treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar fled into the desert. In the desert, an angel appeared to her and told her to return to her mistress, promising that she would have a son named Ishmael, who would be a “wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him.” She returned to Abraham and bore him a son.

The saga continues in Vayeira with the miraculous birth of Isaac. As Isaac grew, Sarah noticed that Ishmael’s influence on him was not a positive one. Ishmael engaged in idolatry and other behaviors, and according to the Midrash, he even tried to harm Isaac. Sarah finally told Abraham to send Ishmael away; Abraham protested, but G-d intervened and told him, “All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice.” (From then on, there is no avoiding it—every Jewish man must heed his wife’s advice).

The next morning, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. They went

off into the wilderness of Beersheba, and Ishmael fell ill and drank all the water they had. Soon, he was on the verge of death. At this point, an angel revealed himself to Hagar and told her, "Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad." She looked up, and found a well of water, saving Ishmael (Genesis 21). Ishmael never returned to Abraham's household; the next time we hear of Ishmael and Isaac together is at Abraham's funeral (Chaye Sarah 25:9).

With this long story, the "son of Hamas" tries to explain that the conflict is not about a piece of land which can be resolved through one political resolution or another. Rather, it is a deep-rooted animosity that dates back to biblical times.

A Young Rebbe

Here is another tale of two brothers - both very righteous personalities; yet it can give us some insight into our current day situation.

This week is the 20th of Cheshvan, the birthday of the Rebbe Rashab, who was born 163 years ago. There are several very interesting stories about his relationship with his brother, but first, I want to give you a glimpse into his righteous personality - from a very young age.

When he was just 5 years old, he came to his grandfather, the famous Tzemach Tzedek for a visit. The young boy started crying.

"What's bothering you?" the grandfather asked.

"I learned in school (in this week's Torah portion) that G-d revealed Himself to Abraham. why doesn't G-d reveal Himself to us?"

His grandfather responded, "When a righteous Jew of 99 years old decides to circumcise himself, he is worthy that G-d reveal Himself to him. (Reshimas Hayoman pg. 276).

How many five year olds cry real tears because G-d hasn't revealed Himself to us?

The Rebbe Rashab had an older brother, known as the Raza, who was 3 years older than him. He was a famous and holy personality in his own right, and many stories were retold about him. Now, children everywhere play copycat; they play "house," and imitate whatever their parents do. What do children and grandchildren of a Rebbe play? A game called Rebbe-Chossid.

One day, his older brother says, “You be the chossid and I will be the Rebbe.” The Raza sat down on an important looking chair and the younger brother approached with “deference and humility,” seeking a tikkun. A tikkun means a correction; Chassidim would come to the Rebbe for guidance in their Divine service, and if they felt that they had behaved incorrectly, they would ask the Rebbe for advice on how to correct it.

So the Rebbe Rashab tells his older brother that he needs a tikkun, because he cracked nuts on Shabbat. From the baseline of Jewish law, that is permitted behavior, but Chasidim generally avoid doing so on Shabbat, so he asked for a tikkun.

His older brother listened to the story, and suggested a tikkun: “Always pray from within a siddur.” If you grow up with a Jewish education, you know many prayers by heart, but it’s nevertheless better to pray from within a prayer book because—in addition to ensuring you won’t skip anything— it helps you focus and avoid distractions. So the older brother, the “Rebbe,” suggested to his younger brother that he always pray from within a siddur.

Sometime later, their mother noticed that he wasn’t listening to his older brother’s advice. “Why aren’t you observing your tikkun?” she asked him.

“The tikkun won’t help,” the Rebbe Rashab explained, “because he’s not a real rebbe,”

“Why not?”

“Because he didn’t sigh before giving me an answer,” the Rebbe Rashab explained. “It’s not the answer that helps; it’s the sigh.” The young boy instinctively understood that when a Jew visits his Rebbe, he sees that his Rebbe empathizes with him and feels his pain. That’s what makes the experience so real, and that’s what makes the advice effective. (Reshimas Hayoman p. 279).

But here’s the most important story:

The Rebbe Rashab was taller than his older brother. Once, as they played in the backyard, the older brother dug a hole in the ground and pushed his younger sibling into it. He stood beside the pit and said, “See, I am taller than you.”

The Rebbe Rashab started crying, and their father—the Rebbe Maharash—came out to see what was going on. After learning about

the incident, their father turned to the older brother and said, "If you want to be taller than your brother, you don't have to lower him into a hole. Stand on a stone or a chair instead. Elevate yourself instead of bringing others down" (Reb Mendel, page 219).

I think this is very relevant to our current day.

People wonder about the persistence of anti-Semitism. Why is there so much hatred and animosity towards the Jewish people? The answer lies in how individuals react when they encounter others who excel. When you see another person doing something virtuous or commendable, you have two paths to choose from: the correct and challenging path is to learn from that individual, striving to emulate their positive qualities. The easier path is to belittle or denigrate that person and what they do.

If you see your friend exercising regularly, dedicating at least an hour every day to it, the correct approach is to attempt to follow suit. Get up early in the morning and go for a run. But that's difficult and painful. The easier path is to belittle the importance of his efforts and attribute everything to genetics. "Those born with good genes will live long lives without exercise, while those without good genetic won't gain from exercise anyway—look at all the people exercise and it doesn't help them."

This analogy applies to anti-Semitism as well. The world sees that Jewish people live spiritual lives, possess strong ethical values, care for the poor, establish loving families, raise good children, excel in various professions, and invest their money wisely. They care for each other, and help those in need.

Some try to emulate it -Koreans and Japanese people even try to study the Talmud.

But Jewish morality is something that bothers other nations. As the Nazis were taught, "Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish like circumcision."

It's easier to blame Jewish people for all the world's problems. We cause all the wars, we cause all the problems—so we need to get rid of the Jews, and by getting rid of the Jews, they can stop feeling guilty about not living up to these high moral standards. Anti-semitism persists not because of our faults, but because of our success.

G-d's Embrace

Here is one final story from the Rebbe Rashab, one that can be an inspiration during this difficult moment:

When the two brothers would visit their grandfather the Tzemach Tzedek, he used to test them on their studies and give them a coin as a reward. One day, the Rebbe Rashab was trying to enter his grandfather's room, but there was a large crowd waiting outside and the attendants didn't allow him through.

The young child began to cry. The Tzemach Tzedek heard the commotion and asked that he be let in, and he picked him up, kissed him, and gave him a full handful of coins.

His older brother was jealous that he had missed the encounter, so he snatched the coins away. The Rebbe Rashab ran to his mother and told her, "He may have the coins, but the kiss remains mine..." (Reshimas Divrei Yimei Harabanis Rivkah).

Many of us are incredibly worried and saddened by the state of the Jewish people. Lately, we have become insatiable consumers of news, and it's not doing us any good.

There is something we should always remember: Power may be in the hands of others, but we have the kiss—we have G-d's loving embrace. And that is something no one can take away from us.

When a Jew wraps himself in a tallis, it's as if G-d is hugging them. When a woman lights Shabbos candles or immerses in a mikvah, it's a hug from the Almighty.

My dear friends, there's no reason for despair. We have G-d on our side, and with this embrace, we will bring Moshiach very soon.