

Son of Hamas

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

What lesson can we learn from the hamasnik-turned-peace maker?

The Incredible Story

Have you ever heard of the book *Son of Hamas*? It's the fascinating story of Mussab Hassan Yusef, the son of Hamas leader Hassan Yosef, who became a secret agent for the Mossad, Israel's legendary spy agency.

In 1996, Mussab was arrested by the Israeli military after buying illegal weapons, which happened after his father had already been arrested by Israel. He went through intense interrogations, but one day, a Mossad agent approached him with a surprising offer: to work as a spy for Israel. Mussab agreed, not asking for any payment. However, deep down, his plan was to use the information he'd get from working with the Mossad against Israel once he was free.

To avoid suspicion, the Mossad kept him in prison for 16 months. During that time, he was exposed to a side of Hamas that shocked him. There was a group of Hamas prisoners whose job was to sniff out anyone working with Israel. Even a rumor was enough to put someone through brutal torture—needles, burning cigarettes, and other horrific methods.

Since Mussab was the son of a high-ranking Hamas leader, he was respected by the other prisoners and even part of the group interrogating suspected traitors. But after watching how they treated their own people so cruelly, over nothing more than suspicion, he began to lose faith in Hamas. By the time he left prison, he made a vow to himself that he wouldn't work for Hamas—or Israel—ever again.

After he was finally released, Mussab decided to keep an open mind and see what the Mossad had to offer. Surprisingly, he found them to be quite different from what he expected. These were people who genuinely didn't want to hurt anyone, not even members of Hamas. Their focus was on preventing violence and saving innocent lives.

At their second meeting, his Mossad handler told him something that really stuck

with him: “You’re the son of a sheikh. You need to act with integrity, find a good job, and get your life together. And don’t forget to finish school.” They also insisted that if Mussab was going to work with them, he had to honor his parents.

What really caught Mussab off guard, though, was when the Mossad agent asked him, “Did you say your noon prayers?” Mussab hadn’t prayed, so the agent told him, “Go do your ritual washing, say your afternoon prayer, and then we’ll continue.” That moment struck a chord with him.

And so, Mussab began working for the Mossad under the code name “The Green Prince”—a nod to his status as the son of a Hamas leader (prince) and the green of the Hamas flag. Over the next ten years, he helped Israel prevent countless attacks and saved hundreds of lives, including foiling an assassination attempt on Israeli leader Shimon Peres.

One of the most personal moments in his work came after a terror attack in Jerusalem. Then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon gave the order to eliminate all Hamas leaders, including Mussab’s father. But thanks to his position, Mussab was able to protect his father from the hit.

Captain Louie, his Mossad handler, once called Mussab Israel’s top spy. His instincts were unmatched, able to pick out suspects from crowds and uncover things no one else could. But after a decade of secret work, Mussab moved to the U.S. and decided to share his story with the world.

In his book, Mussab writes that while everyone talks about wanting peace in the Middle East, each new leader thinks they’ll be the one to solve it. Yet, when he speaks with Americans, they ask many questions about Israel, but few understand the real issue.

He points out the common questions: “Why can’t people in the Middle East get along?” “Who’s right—the Arabs or the Israelis?” “Why doesn’t Israel just return the land it took in 1967?” These are important questions, but he argues they miss the deeper issue.

In his view, the struggle traces all the way back to the ancient conflict between Sarah and Hagar in the Book of Genesis. Understanding that history, he says, is the key to grasping the true roots of the conflict. Only then, he believes, can real peace be achieved.

The Torah Reading

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we read that very story of Sarah and Hagar. The Torah tells us how G-d remembered Sarah, and she gave birth to a son, Yitzchak. The reason we read this on Rosh Hashanah is clear: the Talmud teaches that Sarah was remembered by G-d on this very day, which is why we read about Yitzchak's birth on Rosh Hashanah.

But that's just the beginning of the reading. As we continue, we come across a dramatic moment: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian playing." What does this mean? It means that once Yitzchak started to grow, Sarah saw Yishmael's behavior and decided it was time for him to leave. Yishmael is described as a *pere adam*, a wild man, and Sarah feared he would negatively influence Yitzchak's upbringing.

So she told Avraham, "Banish this maidservant and her son." Naturally, Avraham wasn't too thrilled about that idea. After all, Yishmael was his son too, and he had a deep love for him. Long before Yitzchak's birth, when G-d promised Avraham another son, his initial reaction was, "If only Yishmael could live before You!" In other words, he was content with Yishmael and wasn't expecting anything more. His hope was that Yishmael would grow up to be a source of pride, and that was enough for him.

So when Sarah suggested sending Yishmael away, Avraham wasn't on board. But then G-d stepped in and made it clear whose side He was on. G-d said to Avraham, "Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice." And just like that, the matter was settled. Avraham followed G-d's instruction, and Yishmael and Hagar were sent away, leaving Yitzchak as the sole heir of Avraham. (This moment has echoed throughout Jewish history, serving as a guiding principle for every Jewish husband: "Whatever Sarah says, listen to her voice.")

But the story of Yishmael doesn't end with him being cast out and forgotten. In fact, there's a touching moment later in the Torah, in the portion of Chayei Sarah (Bereishis 25:9), where we read that after Avraham's death, "his sons Yitzchak and Yishmael buried him together."

They Ended the Fight

At funerals, it's not uncommon to see family feuds carry on, even during such a solemn occasion. Sometimes, even the death of a loved one isn't enough to bring people together. One side of the family sits on one end of the funeral home, while the other side sits across from them, continuing the divide. Some relatives sit shivah here, others there, and in many cases, the younger generation doesn't even know what the original fight was about.

But when Avraham passed away, his two sons—Yitzchak and Yishmael—put their differences aside and came together. Rashi explains that this teaches us something powerful: “Yishmael repented.” The Rebbe adds that Yishmael, being Avraham's son, couldn't ignore what he had learned from his father. It stayed with him, pricking his conscience over the years until he finally did *teshuvah*—he returned to the right path.

From this story, we learn two important lessons. First, Sarah was right when she insisted that Yishmael be sent away. His behavior was harmful to Yitzchak, and when raising a child, you have a duty to protect them from negative influences and harmful ideologies. A strong, complete Jewish education is vital.

But there's also a second lesson: Even though Yishmael was distanced for a time, as Yitzchak grew up, he reconnected with his older brother. And in the end, Yishmael did *teshuvah*. If Yishmael, the ancestor of the Arab people, was capable of repenting and changing his ways, then surely his descendants have the potential to do the same. Our mission is to help guide them, and through that, they can come to respect and support the Jewish people.

In fact, not too long ago, Baba Mondi, a leader of the Bektashi branch of Sufi Islam—representing millions of followers—declared that “there is no place in religion for violence. Religion is pure spirituality.” He even expressed disappointment with Turkey's government and called for the renewal of ties with Israel.

The Rebbe often spoke about the Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah, which are meant to serve as a universal moral code. He emphasized that every Jew has the responsibility to ensure that non-Jews also believe in G-d and fulfill their moral obligations. If we engage with this mission, we can help create a world where

mutual respect and peace flourish. And who knows? Just as Yishmael found his way back, perhaps many others will follow.

In Conclusion

I'll conclude with a short story.

Many years ago, a group of Chabad rabbis in Toronto met with the Canadian Prime Minister. Before the meeting, they sent a report to the Rebbe, explaining that they planned to present the Prime Minister with a Kiddush cup as a gift. The Rebbe responded with an insightful question: "What will he do with it? On the other hand, a prayer book with an English translation... because several prayers at the beginning, like *Modeh Ani*, are relevant even to a Noahide."

Similarly, there's a story about Rabbi Chaim Azulai, a great Jewish leader who lived around 200 years ago in the Middle East. He once encountered an Arab who told him that he had come to believe in one G-d and wanted to pray to Him. Rabbi Azulai advised him to say the *Shema Yisrael* every morning and evening.

The message here is simple: to change the world, we don't need to accomplish monumental feats overnight. Instead, we each have to light a single candle—to share a bit of light. Sometimes that might mean offering a non-Jewish friend a prayer book that brings them closer to G-d, and through that, closer to the Jewish people.

Just like Mussab Hassan Yusef—the "Son of Hamas"—who became a friend of the Jewish people and saved hundreds of lives, we can hope that if we help non-Jews recognize their connection to G-d, there is potential for a better, more peaceful future. Just as Yishmael found his way back, others can too, and together we can build a world filled with more light, understanding, and respect.