

A rabbi and an imam: The story of Isaac and Ishmael can be a source of hope

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*(RNS) Tomorrow, as Jews end their Yom Kippur fast, Muslims will begin the Eid al-Adha holiday. Imam Haytham Younis and Rabbi Alana Suskin met for coffee and then exchanged the following e-mail dialogue about the two holidays' convergence and the meaning of a shared story that lies at the intersection of both faiths. (The exchange was edited for length and clarity.)*

**Suskin:** It is a rare occurrence for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and Eid al-Adha (the Feast of the Sacrifice) to fall back-to-back, but seems appropriate somehow. Just a week ago, on Rosh Hashanah, we read the Torah portion relating the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son — the Jewish perspective of the same story that underlies Eid al-Adha. For Jews, this is the story of the sacrifice of Isaac at God's command (stopped, of course, at the last moment, by an angel sent by God).

**Younis:** Yes. Eid al-Adha similarly commemorates the obedience of Abraham and his son to the command of God in fulfilling the sacrifice, as well as the observance of the pilgrimage to the House of God (the Kaaba) in Mecca, which, we believe, was established by Abraham. According to the Quran, the son involved in the sacrifice however, was Ishmael, not Isaac.

**Suskin:** For Jews, Abraham's perfect awe for God, demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice his son, established his legacy.

**Younis:** Indeed. Of the very few things on which Islam and Judaism differ, the disagreement as to who was the sacrificial son may seem very important. To Muslims, however, it is not as significant. We recognize each of these two sons of Abraham. Since Muslims believe both Isaac and Ishmael were included in God's covenant, whether the sacrifice took place with the one or the other makes small difference.

**Suskin:** What you are describing is something most Jews probably don't know. In Jewish commentaries, the focus is on Isaac. There is discussion, however, of the less-than-warm relationship between Sarah (the mother of Isaac) and Hagar (the mother of Ishmael). Some sages try to explain Sarah's demand that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael by blaming Ishmael. Others are disturbed by Sarah's action. Some suggest the pain Sarah felt when Isaac was taken to be sacrificed was a measure of the pain that Hagar felt at leaving Abraham's household.

**Younis:** The Islamic tradition is quite different. According to our beliefs, Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to the Wilderness of Paran solely out of obedience to the command of God. God's purpose was to establish two related but separate nations, each blessed by prophecy. Just as Muslims are forbidden from making prejudicial distinctions between any of the prophets (never saying that Muhammad was greater than any of the prophets of Israel) so, too, Muslims do not perceive any superiority of Ishmael to Isaac. To us, they were always brothers at peace with each other.

**Suskin:** "Brothers at peace with each other" brings up something that I have thought about a lot. The story is not wholly one of conflict. The story of Isaac is also one of brotherhood. The Torah mentions that after the sacrifice, Isaac lives in a place called Beer Lachai Ro'i, where the Torah elsewhere suggests Hagar ended up. It can be inferred that Isaac went there to join her. That Isaac chose to make his home with the mother of Ishmael implies that the brothers bore each other no ill will. Indeed, according to the Torah, when the time comes to bury their father, they do so together.

**Younis:** That is interesting. In the Islamic narrative, there is no ill will between Isaac and Ishmael and no ill will between Sarah and Hagar, either. The resettlement is seen as a completion of God's intent to establish two separate nations of believers.

**Suskin:** Perhaps one reason God insisted that Abraham tell Hagar to leave was to prevent future generations from being poisoned by the antagonistic relationship of their parents' generation. Instead, Isaac and Ishmael were able to escape their mothers' conflict and establish a new generation — two peoples — untouched by the strife of the previous one.

**Younis:** Throughout history, cooperation between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael has been the norm. If there was or is a conflict between these relatives, peace is possible, due to their shared ancestry, history and culture. By

extension, Muslims who share no ancestral connection to Abraham also feel related to the Jewish people because of their connection to the prophets of Israel.

**Suskin:** This shared ancestral connection, for me, speaks to my own sense of how Yom Kippur and Eid al-Adha connect. Commentaries link the sobbing sound of the shofar (the ram's horn blown during the Jewish High Holy Days) to Sarah's weeping when she heard that Abraham had taken Isaac up on the mountain to sacrifice him. Because the theme of Yom Kippur is repentance and forgiveness, this is a moment for us as Jews to take stock of the wrongs we do as a people. Hearing Sarah weep — and the echoes of Hagar's weeping — should be a reminder to Jews of the terrible pain of a family torn asunder — pain that can only be healed by seeking reconciliation.

**Younis:** Yes. Our understanding is that God established us as two separate nations — each serving the same Creator. When Muslims turn to face the House of Abraham in Mecca it is in recognition of the covenant God made with Ishmael, and it does not denigrate the covenant God made with Israel. There are many people who make the claim that Islam is anti-Semitic. The truth is, the Quran lauds with great praise not only the prophets (of whom Moses is mentioned most often) but also their sincere followers (known in Islam as “ahl al Kitab” or the People of the Book). Perhaps the confusion comes from places where the Quran criticizes Jews, but that criticism is directed towards those who do not uphold the Torah. The Quran encourages the children of Israel to remain true to the law they received.

**Suskin:** And it is important to remind ourselves: The conflicts we see now are not religious conflicts, but political ones, and will need to be solved politically. These conflicts are not based in our religious traditions, both of which regard the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac with hope, and even love. The shared story of our two holidays can be a story of hope for peace between our peoples, in the Middle East and across the globe.

**Younis:** Times of conflict notwithstanding, we, like you, await the coming of Messiah. When he comes, we are told, the conflicts we are now suffering will be resolved; there will be reconciliation and peace. Imagine the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael embracing with a full, hearty, loving embrace. That would be a fine reunion.