

A Parent's Prayer

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When we think about Abraham and prayer, we might immediately recall the patriarch's bold petition to God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. We might even think of God telling King Abimelech that Abraham is a *navi*, a prophet, and thus has the special capacity to pray on the king's behalf. Yet Abraham emerges as a person of prayer even earlier in his story. Following years of his wife Sarah's infertility, and the birth of Ishmael to Abraham and Sarah's slave Hagar, Parashat Lekh Lekha narrates the Divine promise to Abraham that Sarah will finally give birth. But instead of expressing joyous gratitude to God, Abraham responds: **לֹא יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים לְפָנָי** — "If only Ishmael could live before you!" (Gen. 17:18).

Abraham's plea to God uses only four words in Hebrew, and they seem fairly straightforward. But many commentaries and translations have understood the prayer idiomatically, suggesting that Abraham requests something beyond Ishmael literally remaining alive: that Ishmael live in God's favor (NJPS), with God's blessing (NIV), or with divine protection (Shadal); that he live with fear of God (Rashi); that his descendants remain established forever (Nahmanides). Abraham's plea may seem straightforward, but the many different interpretations of his words point to something less simple.

I would like to suggest three possible readings of Abraham's prayer, including one reading that understands it literally, and two possible idiomatic readings. These different readings hinge on how we interpret the single word **יִחְיֶה**! "will live" in the prayer. The adage goes: two Jews, three opinions. In this spirit, I offer one word, three readings.

Let's start with a literal reading of Abraham's plea that Ishmael "live before" God: that is, that Ishmael live and not

die. The problem, of course, is that in Genesis 17, Ishmael does not appear to face a threat to his life that would call for such a reaction. In fact, Ishmael receives no mention at all in this chapter before Abraham's prayer. The promise of a son to Sarah would surely have implications for Ishmael's future, but it does not amount to a threat to end his life.

In next week's parashah, on the other hand, Ishmael experiences precisely such a life-threatening scenario. When Sarah orders Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael and God encourages Abraham to do what Sarah says, Abraham does not stop and pray to God. Instead, Abraham sends them away with limited provisions. As the banished pair wander in the wilderness, Ishmael's water runs out and his desperate mother awaits his death and cries. Immediately, God reacts—not to Hagar's crying, but to the boy's previously unmentioned crying—and the boy lives.

There is a sense in this story that a key detail is missing. How does Hagar's crying lead to God hearing her son? The midrashic work *Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer* fills in this gap, imagining Ishmael praying that God grant him death rather than allow him to die of thirst. Like the midrash, we might also attempt to reconstruct how Hagar's crying leads to God noticing her son's previously unmentioned cries. Imagine: perhaps *Hagar* prayed as she cried, leading God to pay attention to her son. And what ready-made biblical prayer would better suit the painful circumstances than "if only Ishmael could live before you!"?

I suggest we notice how much more sense it would make for Hagar to have uttered this prayer while Ishmael is dying, than for Abraham to have spoken it when Ishmael's life is not at stake. A literal prayer for Ishmael's life does fit a biblical story, but not this one. Instead, we ought to seek an idiomatic alternative. I'd like to suggest two possibilities.

First: In the Tanakh and in texts in Aramaic, Hittite, and Akkadian, scholars have identified a common ancient idiom involving pairs of words meaning "to keep alive" and "to kill," where "killing" refers to execution and "keeping alive" refers to "pardon" or "remission of punishment." In light of this idiom, we might understand Abraham's prayer as follows: "If only Ishmael could receive pardon before you!" In this reading, "before you" (i.e., before God) reflects the sense that from Abraham's perspective, Ishmael stands in judgment before God, who has judged him unfavorably. Within this context of divine judgment, Abraham appeals to God to invoke divine prerogative and grant Ishmael a pardon. The full scope of what this pardon entails emerges in the continuation of the passage, as God promises an impressive legacy to Ishmael, but excludes him from the covenant. To pardon Ishmael fully would have meant to include him as a covenant partner, but God does not agree to this. Abraham, who later prays to God to remit the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah and then of King Abimelech, might be understood as first acting in this capacity on behalf of his rejected son.

We might also consider a second idiomatic understanding of the request for Ishmael's "life": In Biblical Hebrew and in Akkadian, words meaning "to live" also occur in contexts relating to adoption. At the beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha, the surrogacy arrangement between Hagar, Sarah (Sarai), and Abraham (Abram) could have led to Sarah adopting Ishmael as her own. But this is not what happens. Sarah never accepts Ishmael as her own child and eventually drives Abraham to expel him from the household altogether. In Genesis 17, Ishmael is a child who has been rejected both by Sarah, his would-be adoptive mother, and by God, who has not chosen him as covenant partner. Elsewhere in the Tanakh, covenants are metaphorized as adoptive relationships between God as parent and Israel as

child and between God as parent and the king of Israel as child. Abraham prays to God to let Ishmael "live": that is, to let him be adopted, fully accepted, whether he means as Sarah's child or as God's covenant partner. But whichever Abraham prays for, the prayer does not lead to a change in Ishmael's status.

Abraham develops as a person of prayer, so much so that the rabbis consider Abraham the founder of *Tefillat Shaharit*, the morning service that Jews recite daily (Berakhot 26b). While Abraham's lengthy plea for Sodom and Gomorrah truly seals his reputation, we can also look to his earlier prayer for Ishmael. This prayer uses only four words, yet these four words burst with meaning. It is perhaps no coincidence that the rabbis also praise Abraham for "saying little, but doing much" (Tanhuma Vayera 4). As we choose our own words of prayer and recite those of our ancestors, we might reflect upon how very much meaning each of our words may hold, and how closely we may stand in relationship with God, even when our words are few.