

The Displaced

Rosh Hashanah Morning
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On of the things my wife has had to make her peace with concerning me, is that I alphabetize the spices in the kitchen. (Doesn't everyone do that?) It makes me crazy when I'm cooking, to have to go hunting for a particular jar of seasoning. If it's alphabetized in the spice rack, I can find it in a second. The same is true with the books I have in my study. They're arranged on the shelves by topic so I can locate them quickly and whenever I find a book in the wrong spot I put it back where it belongs.

Though each of us has a different level of tolerance for disorder, everyone of us, in the end, has a boundary, a line, for distinguishing between properly placed and out of place. Societies are built on this premise. In many cultures, it is vital to know where on the hierarchy one is, so proper honor can be given to one's superiors and elders or proper distance can be assumed before one's juniors.

Even in our permissive, non-hierarchical American society, knowing one's place is still called for. There are differences between a host and a guest, a client and an

agency, between boss and employee, between teacher and student and parent and child. No matter what the culture, not knowing one's place has consequences. Putting someone in their place, while it denotes a social snub, also has the deeper meaning that there is a true place and a false place for individuals to be. Not only, however, can we put people in their place, we can also displace them.

To displace is different than misplace. Misplacement is accidental, displacement is deliberate. The early American settlers, for example, didn't misplace Native Americans, they displaced them.

Our Torah portion for this morning, is the result of displacement. The story of Abraham, commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It opens with the words: "Achar hadevarim haelaeh" "After these things, God tested Abraham." After what things? Well, right before this episode is the story of Abraham and his firstborn son, Ishmael. The covenant that Abraham has with God is not going to be passed on to Ishmael but rather to Abraham's younger son, Isaac and that being the case, Sarah demands that Ishmael and his slave-mother, Hagar, be driven from their tent and sent out into the wilderness. Abraham, distressed, asks God what he should do and is told to listen to his wife. (That's good advice, in general, by the way). And so Ishmael is driven

out into the desert with but a small flask of water to keep him alive.

And now, after these things have taken place, after Ishmael has been displaced, now God tests Abraham, in essence saying: "You were willing to listen to Me when it came to the son of the slave-girl; you cast him out quickly into the desert. Will you listen to Me when I command you to offer up your favorite son, Isaac?" The displacement of Ishmael has led to the sacrifice of Isaac.

And though Isaac will be saved at the end, as I have shared with you on previous High Holy Days, this test comes at a cost, for Isaac will never live with Abraham again, Sarah and Abraham will separate from one another and God will stop talking with Abraham, as well.

But while things that we misplace may not turn up again, those whom we displace, never really go away. They return in some form or another. Ishmael will survive; he will grow to be a wild desert nomad. And he and his descendents will return again and again. When Joseph's brothers want to get rid of him, who is conveniently passing by the pit where Joseph has been thrown but a caravan of Ishmaelites, descendants of Ishmael. The brothers haul Joseph up from the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites who carry Joseph down to Egypt.

Isaac, who survives being slaughtered by his father, will grow up, marry and have two twin boys: Jacob and Esau. In this next generation, it is Esau who will be displaced by his tricky brother, Jacob. Jacob will take Esau's right of inheritance and steal the blessing meant for him. We should not be surprised to learn that Esau, displaced from his position, will marry a daughter of Ishmael. Esau, too, will become a wild man of the desert, and when hundreds of years later, the Israelites leave Egypt, who attacks them in the desert, but the Amalekites, the descendents of Esau. When Mordechai is in the palace, who dares to plot his downfall, but wicked Haman, another Esau descendant. Our rabbis believe that the Romans, who destroyed the Second Temple, leveled Jerusalem, and exiled the Jewish People throughout the Roman Empire were also descendants of Esau. The displaced do not go away and when they return, it is to our detriment. The displacement of Ishmael leads to the Sacrifice of Isaac.

The displaced will not go away. The displaced, until they are dealt with, will not leave us alone. We know this in our gut. This is what Freud wrote about. That which we seek to push away, to repress, comes back.

The Native Americans come back to haunt us with their casinos, as they take from us the only thing that ever mattered to the European white man, which was money.

Hundreds of years ago, slave traders displaced blacks from one continent, bringing them forcibly here. After Emancipation, we exiled them to shacks and city slums, to the backs of buses and separate bathrooms. But they came back. They moved into our city neighborhoods in NY, and Newark, in Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles, and so we fled to the suburbs. And when court mandated busing brought black children into our schools, we fled from the public schools into the private ones, and locked ourselves in gated communities. The Displacement of Ishmael brings the Sacrifice of Isaac. And as much as we want this forthcoming presidential election to be about issues, the fact is that it's also going to be about race. The displaced don't go away.

And as Jews, perhaps the paradigmatic displaced People of the earth, we have been struggling for one hundred years now with those whom we, in turn, displaced. In historical hindsight, we can see the terrible irony, of how our people, homeless for almost 2 millennia, found security and safety in a land of our own, only by having to displace most of the Arab population living there, through change of

land ownership, as a result of war, and sometimes through deliberate policy. And how double ironic that the ones we displaced were Ishmael's descendants.

But the displaced do not go away. And so, beginning in the 1960s, they came back to haunt us with the murdering of children on the northern border kibbutzim and the hijacking of the Achille Laura, and Entebbe and the Olympics... First the PLO and the Al Aksa Brigade and then El Fata and now Hamas. The bombs planted in restaurants and buses and then the human bombs...

Ishmael, who has been displaced, is not going away. And as long as Ishmael is displaced, then fathers and mothers in Israel must expose their children to the sword. Must send them to patrol settlement towns with angry Arab populations, must be vulnerable to the next human bomb who sets himself or herself off in a crowded market place, must still huddle in shelters as rockets are fired from Gaza into Israeli cities. The Sacrifice of Isaac comes because of the displacement of Ishmael.

I don't have any easy answers for the Israeli Palestinian crisis. But I do know that the moral issue of displacement needs to underlie whatever solutions are proposed. I don't know, here in America, how we repair generations of chaos in the black community, with nearly

10% of all young black men behind bars, enormous poverty and illiteracy, drugs, teen pregnancies... but I do know that the moral issue of displacement needs to be addressed.

What is the moral corrective to displacement? It is replacement, but unfortunately that seems impossible to do. We can not undo what was done. We are not returning the blacks to Africa, we are not returning the lands of America back to the Navajo and Sioux nor are we returning California to Mexico, though the Mexicans have done a good job of reclaiming their former lands. Israel is not going to give back all of the land taken from the Palestinians, and Jerusalem is not being handed back to them either.

What then can we do? Is there no way to right a wrong? I suggest on this Rosh Hashanah morning, that we must do teshuvah, that the model of personal atonement can be applied both domestically and internationally.

What are the steps of teshuva? First, a recognition that we have sinned. Second, a contrite heart and genuine remorse. Third, words of apology and fourth, restoration and repair.

Recognition of our sin and apology are important. That's what the Armenians want from the Turks. For them to say: "We did it, we're sorry." That's what the Chinese wanted from the Japanese for the crimes committed against

them during WWII. That's why we Jews don't want the Poles glossing over the fact that at Auschwitz it was Jews who were murdered, not simply Polish citizens. Teshuva involves recognizing whom we have displaced and apologizing for our actions publicly, loudly and repetitively.

And teshuva must include repair and restoration, even if we can't fully return the displaced to where they were. To assign a place at the table is to correct displacement. To make space for others is to correct displacement. To reestablish, to reassign, to regroup, to reinstate, to reallocate, to relocate, to replenish, is to help repair displacement, to aid in the restoration of the displaced.

Now, God knows there doesn't seem to be anyone sane on the Palestinian side for Israel to talk to, right now. It seems that all the Palestinians want to do is kill us. And so Israel does need to defend itself, and erect its security wall, and do everything necessary to keep our people safe as the rockets are shot into Israeli villages. But I do know that the words of responsibility, an "al chet", an admission of sin must come forth from Israel, that the displaced will not go away, and that ultimately Israel is going to need to engage in the work of restoration and repair to the children of Ishmael.

And while we will argue back and forth as the November elections draw closer as to whether Obama or McCain, Biden or Palin is better for Israel, I will tell you that those candidates who talk about the Palestinians and their rights are not enemies of the Jewish people. And, in fact, watch out for those candidates who think they are going to win votes among the Jews of America by ignoring the displaced. The candidates who say that Israel has got to be strong and secure but who do not say that they've got to make peace, that they've got to negotiate, are the candidates to watch out for. Because the displaced won't go away.

And the candidates, who pretend that the elderly and the sick without health care and the poor are not in our midst, the candidates who declare that the growing number of the unemployed, and hungry are not among us, they are the candidates to avoid. The candidates who declare that the homosexuals who historically we have displaced from our midst, whom we have exiled from teaching jobs and government positions and the military and housing, those candidates who declare that their monogamous, loving, supportive relationships aren't marriage, are to be avoided as well. For none of these displaced will leave us. They will be with us, they will return again, and again, and again, until we make amends. As the election time grows

close, keep your eye on the candidates who are willing to look at the misery and suffering throughout much of this country, who are willing to speak up for the forgotten, the misplaced, the displaced, the out of place.

As difficult as teshuva is, as complex as repair may be, both domestically and internationally, our Torah tells us that repair is possible. Ishmael and Isaac come together to bury their father, Abraham. Jacob and Esau, estranged over many years, embrace one another and weep. Joseph and his brothers who sold him, come together and Joseph houses and feeds them in Egypt.

In the end, the displaced must be recognized, apologized to and restored in some fashion. Only then can there be embrace and an end to hostility, suspicion, enmity, violence and war, only when that happens will we see an end to the displacement of Ishmael and the Sacrifice of Isaac, only then, can Isaac and Ishmael embrace.