



ERNST ABEL

THE SORROW OF IBRAHIM

BY HASSAN KHALIFA

How many times on television have you heard the news depicting life in the Middle east? Whenever the Middle East is mentioned the average American's mind echoes with the words "rival warring Jewish and Muslim factions" resulting from the continuous bombardment of these words from newscasters on every major channel in the U.S. But how many see something beyond the faces and have the intelligence to refrain from the *nuke 'em till they glow and shoot 'em in the dark* theorem that seems to characterize American thinking in the 1990s. The Hebrew/Arab/Jewish/Muslim conflicts reach farther back in history than most would want to acknowledge. The conflicts between the two tribes is not some monolithic ignition switch that was turned on when the suggestion of Israel was made in the 1940s nor was it that both races decided to do battle just for the sheer euphoria of it as the news often insinuates.

The racial front of Hebrews and Arabs is both historical and has a mystical tinge to it. The Hebrew and Arab race both draw their roots to a race called Semites, which is a word drawn from *Shem* who was one of Noah's sons in the *Tanakh*. *Shem* later had children and farther down the line of descendants a man named Ibrahim was born and was told he would be a father of nations. (*Genesis* 11:27-25:11) Now Ibrahim's wife Sarah was barren so she gave him her maidservant Hagar so he might have a family line through her. From Ibrahim and Hagar, Ishmael ("God Hears") was born and jealousy and internal differences began that were present up to the birth of Ibrahim's second son (by Sarah) Isaac ("He Laughs").

The two children remain in the same household until again strife develops in the way of Hagar and Sarah, only this time Ibrahim by order of his wife takes Hagar and Ishmael into the desert with food and bids them farewell. That desert was to become one of the most influential cities of its time and who would have believed that its first citizens were Hagar and Ishmael. Some refer to it as the holiest of all holy cities but everyone knows it as Makkah (or Mecca). This division in the house of Ibrahim would profoundly affect the rest of the world. It must also be mentioned that there were Arabs and Hebrews who were not Semitic because of their existence before Ibrahim's children with Hagar and Sarah, but since they were later circumcized they were welcomed to the "House of Shem." And those who were not? It is hard to say whether they still exist. In the later stages their brotherhood is referred to but nothing special, which leaves the door open for dissension.

Now we take a step into the 20th century and we can still find Ishmaelites (Arabs) and Isaacites (Hebrews) more numerous than ever before, but instead of the "House of Shem" you see a deep rift that might be comparable to the one impressed upon the Red Sea in times past. Now there exists a racial barrier. There exists the fear that an Arab might walk into a Jewish market, plant a bomb and leave the store smiling sardonically as it is reduced to rubble. On the Arab side there is a fear of the Hebrew who is so bored with himself he waddles about cities and towns eager to start trouble and then blame events on those who can't accept his "Hebrewness", and this goes for soldiers and police brutality against Arabs also. To each other the member of the other tribe is revolting and definitely unacceptable and the jokes, stigmas, stereotypes and terrorism testify to the chasm of separation between them. The revulsion to Arabic or Hebraic literature displayed to rival members induces a kind of facial, emotional and probably in some cases physical opposition — all this just by seeing rival writings.

As much as I wish it might have been, this is not a one layer issue. This breaks down not only racially but in terms of service to God. The tribes have brought faith attacks into play, speaking about none other than Jewish (Hebrews) and Muslims (Arabs). The argument stems from the very basis of the Semitic father Ibrahim. There exists within the Jewish a minority that

holds that Ibrahim was Jewish and that Ishmael (Arabs) was cursed since he was removed from the house of Ibrahim, and since Sarah's distress was answered by a son, Isaac, the covenant of God was through her line only, not Hagar's. The agitation of this statement to Muslims is well understood and the counteraction is that Ibrahim was a Muslim and the line of Isaac is cursed. The Muslims later refer to the fact Ibrahim was neither Jew or Christian but a Muslim. The Muslim extremists also go so far as to say that God cursed the Jews for scorning Muhammed, whom the Muslims uphold as the last prophet sent by God.

At that time some of the Jews in the Middle East were idol worshippers. They worshipped Ezra as the son of god and many other idols that were currently captivating at that period. To help support more of the "Jews are cursed" stigma, Muslim extremists refer to the Old Testament and Lot's daughters having sex with him as a sign of how unclean Jews were and are.

Unfortunately the prejudice doesn't end here. There are fanatical Jews who have their own interpretation of the Old Testament in the eyes of what is called the "true Jews." They claim that due to the fact of Ishmael being mentioned in the Old Testament very rarely that God cursed Ishmael by exclusion. It is also affirmed by these disgruntled Jews that Ishmael will be a nuisance to the Jews because he will be a wild donkey of a man and his hand will be against all his brothers. (*Genesis* 16:11-12) All the evil traits of Ibrahim passed through and were discarded by him through Ishmael. Just listening to *Genesis* 16:11-12 helps to reinforce the image of the angry, violent Muslim who is cursed by God. As one can well see, the hate is racial and religious and the two are usually intermingled into the fabric of the whole world view of the opposing sides.

When Israel became a nation in 1948, things began to rebound against each other with a velocity unknown in recent history (though the struggle between Serbs, Croats and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia is an exception). In an area that brought civilization and regular dietary and bathing habits to the western world, bombings are now commonplace. The area of the world that brought the *Tanakh*, *Torah* and *Qu'ran* to a large tribe of diseased people in the West is now split with religious

and racial hatred. In the 1990s hope is bleak and children look to adults for encouragement and receive nothing but orders in regards of what to do to this Jew or that Muslim (and who is human and who is not).

The largest question of all asked when the racial and religious bigotries of the two tribes is looked over is: *What Happened?* One thing I find fascinating is I can find plenty of hate between the two tribes but I am unable to find a genesis of the whole skirmish. Many theologians on both sides state that the rift between Hagar and Sarah widened the gulf between the two tribes rather than the covenant of Ibrahim bringing them together. It is also a subject of the Jewish extremists not acknowledging Muhammed as a prophet and the Muslims not recognizing the promise of Israel to the Jewish by word of God in the *Tanakh*. For those who take a more secular route in dealing with these problems, the problem is politics.

There are a number of Arabs who despise the West and see nothing of Israel but the expansion of western imperialism that has to be curbed before the cancer of America manifests itself. There are however a number of Jews who look to America in reverence for voting yes on Israel's statehood as the deciding vote. They feel a deep allegiance to America must be upheld since Israel is the third largest arms supplier in the world and receives most of its economic aid, if not nearly all, from America. Political stances like this can make or break you in extremist situations and the ultimatum is either you are in or out. Most stay out but some feel the pressure of fanaticism and plunge in headlong without second thoughts.

It is difficult not to look at the Middle East as the land of peace and war simultaneously but within that chaos order is for the most part prevailing. The negotiations and televised embrace of King Hussein of Jordan and Yitzhak Rabin of Israel brought Semites in view of each other. The embassies of each country are now running more smoothly even if fanatics are present. The true spark behind the uprising of Semites is uncertain but everyone recognizes the war the two wage against each other. What is certain is that the years of this war cannot be counted on anyone's fingers.

The negativity expressed in the western press is not the true reflection of Middle Eastern living in the ancient cities in which an even older people battle against each other tenaciously. Most young Arab and Hebrew children learn three languages growing up and are studious examples of jurisprudent authority. Within this fighting circle there are bending points. Muslim and Jews make use of the same crowded streets side by side and in the wee hours of morning, about an hour before dawn, one can hear Hebraic and Arabic collide as each calls its followers together. It is quite safe to say that the people who fight together pray together and some hope will stay together. The act of getting Muslims and Jewish together already exists but they do not see each other as they stumble about alley ways and avenues. They *must* acknowledge the existence of one another. In classrooms with mixed amounts of students from both tribes, heated debates always erupt in classroom discussion. One might wind up arguing Muslim/Jew relations in a home economics class because of such tensions. Some classes operate rather orderly and students greet each other warmly and speak courteously but there is always a barrier that remains as a result of the differences between both peoples. Student textbooks have at times had the potential to "steer students in the right direction" as supposed by the bigots who write them, which narrows their world view. Some books merely intimate at who is wrong and who is the master race, but others contain enough savagery and condemnation of "inferiors" that Hitler's mustache would have bristled after reading them. Fortunately, most students reject these fanatic teachings and press on to be quite liberal minded in the atmosphere of all these occurrences.

Who is the wolf in this story? Who is the frail sheep who was sodomized by the shepherd? While still young I fanatically studied this subject to find if maybe someone was at fault so we could blame it on them, demand restitution and move on from there. But I found inscrutable error on both sides of what is supposed to be one house instead of two. It is the Jews' fault for making bomb threats against the Dome of the Rock, and it is the Muslims' fault for making bomb threats against the Wailing Wall. The Muslim bigots uphold that in the holy *Qu'ran* it states Ibrahim was neither Jew nor Christian but a Muslim (*House of Ibrahim*, verse 67). This is true in the sense of the *Qu'ran* using the word *hanif* (one who worships only one God) because that is what Ibrahim was and *hanif* or Muslim in that sense meant monotheism practiced in its truest form. This does not however convey Ibrahim being a Muslim as what is practiced today because Ibrahim's period of existence was before monotheistic faith impacted the world by way of God through the *Tanakh*, the *Qu'ran* and the Gospels.

It is a monstrous falsehood to declare Isaac accursed, or Lot. As for narrowminded Jews who are no better than their Muslim counterparts, Ibrahim was not a Jew. Some assert he was a Hebrew and thus a Jew, which is incorrect. I am an Egyptian Arab but that does not automatically make me a Muslim. Arab is my race, Muslim is my faith in God. So goes the Hebrew race and Jewish faith. Now the frailty of this argument shines through. Some say that a scripture that mentions Ishmael as "a wild donkey of a man" makes him an abomination but this is a gross error in judgment. Wild donkey of a man in that period stresses freedom, wisdom and growth of a great nation as symbolized by the donkey. "His hands being against his brothers" merely points out his stubbornness which is inherent in the donkey (his *I know I'm right!* attitude) not that he is unreformable or an abomination to God. Those who think Isaac is above Ishmael and doubt the true unity of the house and rights of a firstborn such as Ishmael should refer to *Deuteronomy* 21:15-17, and to the Jews who condemn Muhammed and say he is an abomination to the world, I recommend *Deuter* 18:18-19, *Deuter* 33, *Genesis* 49:1-11, *Isaiah* 21:7, *Isaiah* 42:1-8 and 11-13.

Many of my Semitic brothers and sisters ask what is the use of it and why even bring up points like these. "No one will listen. No one cares," the voices groan. I am not concentrating on CNN or the other commercial throat-slash networks that show our candle of hope being blown out. I cry tears for the house of Ibrahim and the brothers who feel so caged-in that violence seems the only answer to the atrocities heaped on them. To all the extremists who believe that extremism is the only wisdom, I want to know if they even know why they are fighting, or if they are in the middle of a war not *Space Invaders* on Atari. I would like to thank King Hussein of Jordan and Yitzhak Rabin of Israel making the impossible seem graspable. So maybe one day, I, Hassan Khalifa, can sit down with the Abdur Rahmans, Joshua Ben Israels and David Ben Shlomos of the world without gunplay or school buses exploded from what could have been avoided by changing the subject, leaving the room, walking away or speaking courteously.

Hassan Khalifa lives in Astoria.

