

OUT OF THE DEPTHS:

Spiritual Support For Parents Of Estranged Children



By Carol P. Hausman, Ph.D.

Coordinator, Washington Jewish Healing Network
4707 Connecticut Ave NW #104
Washington, DC 20008

(202) 966-7851
washheal@comcast.net

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Sarah saw the son (Ishmael), whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.....But God said to Abraham, "...whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says..." Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. (Genesis 21:9-14)

"How could Abraham do that?" "Why didn't he fight back? He argued with God when it came to saving Sodom and Gomorra, why not here, for his own son Ishmael? And why didn't he fight with God later when God told him to sacrifice Isaac?" "What kind of father is he anyway? - - didn't he love his children?" Abraham's treatment of his sons was incomprehensible to people who would give anything to have their children back.

These responses to the passage from the first book of the Hebrew bible occurred in meetings with groups of parents who have been estranged from their children. The parents joined spiritual support groups sponsored by the Washington Jewish Healing Network, led by a rabbi and a psychologist. Spiritual support groups are one of the major offerings of healing centers throughout the country.¹ The purpose of the groups is to give participants a safe setting in which to express their feelings, to relate to others who have the same experience of loss or illness, and to help them to connect to their Jewish tradition at a most difficult time. Study, community, blessings, and prayer -- all used in these groups -- are among the most powerful tools of Jewish healing.

In groups for estranged parents, no one promised the magic trick of bringing their children home. The objective of our meeting together was another kind of healing -- the healing of the spirit, the achievement of a sense of wholeness and comfort, when loss has interrupted our connection with God and with our community.

Another objective of this group was to help lessen the shame that estranged parents feel -- the sense that they are being judged as bad parents. When the group leaders first approached

¹ Other major offerings include, but are not limited to, training in *bikur cholim* (being present with those who are ill) and healing services in synagogues.

several rabbis about offering this group, many said they could fill the group from their own congregations, yet despite many calls -- some anonymous -- very few of them actually came to the sessions. When we give talks about spiritual support groups and mention this particular group in passing, the people who want to talk privately with us afterwards are almost always people with estrangements in their own families. Talking to a stranger is easier. The pervasiveness of this tragedy, and the shame that accompanies it, was a surprise to us. Many parents of estranged children have the major definition of themselves being that of a person who has lost contact with his/her child. We hoped they would come to see themselves as much more than that.

In the initial session of the spiritual support groups these parents had joined, the passage about Abraham's sending Hagar and Ishmael away was read aloud without comment from the group leaders. Those strong responses started the process of bringing the group together.

Among the estranged parents who joined the groups was a couple who had been out of touch with the older of their two children for about ten years. Their other son had some contact with him and kept the parents informed of his whereabouts, but the estranged son never responded directly to the frequent messages they sent him. Another mother hadn't seen her daughter in more than twenty years, and she felt at a loss as to the reason for the estrangement. One estranged father said that from time to time he sat outside the building where his son worked in the hope of catching a glimpse of him going in and out in his nice suit with his leather medical bag. One woman's daughter had nothing to do with her and her stepfather, and allowed them only minimal contact with the grandchildren. Another got only intermittent angry messages from her 27-year-old son who had not spoken to her in almost a year. One mother received a birth announcement of her first grandchild from a daughter she hadn't seen in four years -- with no return address but with a note asking her not to try to get in touch. Two sons refused to see their parents until reparations were paid for the emotional damage they see their parents as having perpetrated. An elderly father had not seen his two children since the court proceedings

concerning his divorce from their mother forty years earlier, and was hoping for a reconciliation before it was too late.²

Parents of estranged children connect deeply when they study the story of Abraham and Ishmael. In addition to their horror at the idea of Abraham sending Ishmael away, they have a strong reaction at a later part of the story when they read about Ishmael growing up and doing well:

God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Genesis 21:20)

Ishmael himself, of course, later becomes a leader of a great nation. “How bittersweet,” one parent said, “to learn that your child does well in life and you had nothing to do with it! “ The people with whom we worked had children who were doctors, accountants, engineers, parents themselves. How difficult it is to take pleasure in what makes other parents and grandparents so proud when they themselves are barred from sharing in it. When their child is successful, it becomes hard to hold on to a previous explanation that some had that the child is mentally ill as a rationalization for the estrangement. Here, instead of condemning Abraham, they can identify with what they imagine to be his pain at missing Ishmael’s coming of age. It is even more difficult, of course, when the missing children flounder in life, or when the parent has no idea how they are faring. Guilt, self-blame, second-guessing their parenting styles, all add to the anguish these parents feel. Based on just two sentences from Genesis, the parents interpreted how Abraham was feeling and related it to their own feelings in what they saw as a comparable situation.

This is a brief illustration of how bereaved people -- and estranged parents are definitely bereaved -- can identify with religious texts and use them as catalysts for creating new interpretations (“*midrash*”³) based on their own experiences, allowing them to connect in a profound and personal way to their religious tradition at this time of pain and loss. *Midrash* is

² In this and one other case, meetings did occur before very elderly parents’ death. One was actually a deathbed reconciliation that was less than satisfactory for the daughter. In the other case, the daughter and her elderly father are continuing to meet and to try and to understand each others’ motivations.

³ The word *midrash* is derived from a Hebrew root which means to ask or to seek out.

one of the categories of Rabbinic literature, and has, since ancient times, been a way for students to understand the biblical text. Although the word historically refers to a compilation of Rabbinic commentary on the Torah⁴, it is still used today as a tool to make the Torah, and by extension other literature, accessible and personal. One who is creating *midrash* might take a passage and imagine what happened before the story or after it. In creating their own interpretation they relate it to the present and discover ways that the text speaks to them.

This process of relating to and creating stories can be intellectual, emotional, even humorous. “As Jews we are animated by stories. When reading the Bible, we find stories that illuminate our own lives; we create *midrashim* (plural), tales of our encounters with the Bible, that in turn explain ourselves.⁵ Even in the midst of intense grief, one can laugh and marvel at the creativity of one's own ingenious interpretations and take comfort from them. Excitement and energy come into play. A sense of empowerment occurs when bereaved people find themselves being creative and getting positive feedback for it from others. Connections to each other, as well as to one's tradition, take place. *Midrash* is a powerful tool of Jewish healing, used over and over with these parents who no longer had contact with their children.

A second tragedy in the Abraham story also involves a son of his. The *Akeda*, the near sacrifice of Isaac, includes:

God said, ‘Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.... (Genesis 22:2)

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac....And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven:....”Do not raise your hand against the boy.....” (Genesis 22: 9-12)

This passage is probably one of the most provocative in the Bible and has inspired countless interpretations. One *midrash* about this story sees it as representing both sides of Abraham's ambivalence about Isaac -- both the rage and the love that everyone experiences toward every child at one time or another. Another interpretation sees Abraham's raising his

⁴ The Torah contains the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

⁵ Merit, Ralph. [The Outstretched Arm](#), date?

hand against Isaac as an expression of Abraham's own disappointment in Isaac. In this interpretation, the angel's staying of Abraham's hand is a message from God to Abraham that this is his child and he must accept and love him, no matter what.

Reading the *Akeda* prompted parents of estranged children to talk about their own love, rage, and ambivalence. At first some had the same angry reaction described earlier to Abraham's sending Ishmael away -- how could he do that, why didn't he fight back? But later they came to see Abraham's raising the knife as a metaphor for a temporary withdrawal of love, something that every parent feels at some time. They realized that, although most children can tolerate the normal anger and ambivalence, the mistakes, inconsistencies or overprotection which all parents have, others cannot. Perhaps their children were among the ones who found ordinary ambivalent parenting intolerable.

There is no evidence in Genesis that Abraham and Isaac ever spoke to each other after the *Akeda*. Imagine the dismay and connection estranged parents must feel in discovering that Abraham may have been estranged from his son -- just like them.

Later in the same chapter Abimelech, a King with whom Abraham had a complex relationship, said to Abraham:

"God is with you in everything that you do." (Genesis 21:22)

As we read it together, one parent broke in: "Yes, your friends think everything is great in your life. They only see the surface. They don't see or ask about what's going on underneath." Another: "He doesn't know the anguish Abraham is going through." And, "Nobody asks about our missing children. They probably think we should get over it." What deep feelings can be stirred up by just one sentence, a sentence that one might expect to read quickly in passing!

And what a good example of creating *midrash*, filling in the blanks in a sparse sentence from their own experience. The parents became Abraham, suffering deeply under the facade of contentment with life. They felt the pain and guilt that they imagined Abraham to be feeling in never seeing his two sons again. Abimelech became all the friends who failed to recognize their

pain, with whom they were putting on a happy face, or whom they were avoiding. Many parents of estranged children describe how they stay away from some social gatherings in which pride in children is bound to be a topic. In fact, parents who chose to join our groups described this setting as the only place where they felt safe and could talk openly about the estrangement.

And what about Abraham and Sarah? How did they get along after what Abraham nearly did to Sarah's son of her old age? After Isaac's life is spared, the text says:

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba. (Genesis 22:19)

A bit later:

Sarah died in Kiriath-arba... (Genesis 23 :2)

One estranged parent expressed alarm: "They died in different places! Aha! They got a divorce!" The others nodded in agreement. They saw it as obvious that Sara would have nothing to do with Abraham after he almost sacrificed Isaac. It does say that after Sarah died Abraham "*mourned and bewailed her,*" (Genesis 23:2) but either they didn't believe it -- just another facade for the public--or perhaps he did mourn not only her death but her leaving him, and he blamed himself for causing the rift. Or, perhaps he was bewailing the guilt he felt for not arguing with God when God told him to sacrifice Isaac. But, whatever the reason for what appeared to be a separation between Sara and Abraham, the parents were certain that Sarah, like Isaac, never spoke to Abraham again. They compared what they imagined happened between Abraham and Sarah to what often happens between spouses when there is an estranged child in the family -- how much it disturbs not only the marital relationship but all the relationships in the family. At the times when we were able to meet with both parents of an estranged child, we observed tension and underlying mutual blaming as they tried to figure out why this tragedy happened. The use of *midrash* -- finding gaps in the text to fill out from one's own life, looking for flags that draw attention and cry out for interpretation -- brought about a close identification with their ancient ancestors.

As we discussed Sarah and Abraham and whether they stayed together, whether they ever saw Isaac again, we were reminded of yet another text. Two chapters later it happens that Isaac and Rebekah were about to get married. It says:

*Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.
(Genesis 24: 67)*

To the group members, that confirmed the divorce they had suspected. "It may be true," someone said, "that Isaac had nothing to do with Abraham after the *Akedah*, but it's obvious that Isaac went to live with Sarah afterwards and had a good relationship with her until she died."

In one group, this passage precipitated a discussion about the two parents' different reactions to the estrangement. Intimacy between spouses is often affected when there is an estranged child in the family. Although they feel that they somehow have to get on with their lives, be present for the other kids and do their jobs, the spouses are often in very different places in this process, similar to parents whose children have died. Those who are able to suppress their grief can be intolerant of the parent whose grief is more open. Those who express the grief more strongly are sometimes disdainful of the seeming lack of feeling in the other. Sometimes one parent is at a point where he or she is willing to let the child go. As that parent admits this willingness, the other parent often becomes more entrenched and determined to find a way to reconcile. The two estranged parents act out the two sides of the ambivalence of both of them.

As we presented more material, we kept finding that parents of estranged children kept rejecting texts that implied that the parents had responsibility for the estrangement. Even though they may have made many mistakes, they didn't do anything worse than other parents whose children were respectful and loving toward their parents. They were not Abraham. They didn't send a son away, they didn't raise even a metaphorical knife against their child, or do anything that could cause such anger and estrangement. On this they were united. When we read passages from the book of Job together, they insisted that they were not the God or father that Job describes as being too strict, making a mountain out of every small misdeed. Job accused God:

You inspect man every morning, examine him every minute. Will You not look away from me for a while, let me be, till I swallow my spittle? (Job 7:19)

Nor were they the non-listening, destructive parent Job describes when he bewails his treatment by God:

If I summoned Him and He responded, I do not believe He would lend me His ear, For He crushed me for a hair; He wounds me much for no cause.... Though I were blameless He would prove me crooked? (Job 9:16 ff.)

They could, however, identify with a passage from the Prophets, where the blame for the estrangement between Israel and God rested on Israel's (the child's) shoulders:

I reared children and brought them up and they have rebelled against me. (Isaiah 1:2)

Nobody, they said, is a perfect parent, but they were unable to see anything they ever did that could have caused such an extreme reaction. As one mother said, "Everybody makes mistakes. Some kids move on. Others fixate on the mistakes."

In Genesis there are many incidents of parents' disappointment in children. Starting with the Garden of Eden, God was disappointed in His children when Adam and Eve did the one thing God asked them not to do -- eat from the tree of knowledge. Later, in the story of Cain and Abel, we can imagine how disappointed Adam and Eve had to have been at Cain's behavior -- after all, he killed his brother, denied it, and was expelled from the land. When these stories were first presented, most of the parents in the groups denied resonance with them, saying they had not raised their children in an atmosphere of disappointment.

Yet we know that children have a sixth sense that tells them when their parents are disappointed in them. At a much later time in the group some acknowledgments of the childhood difficulties and the accompanying disappointment began appearing. Because they were in a safe place, they were able to struggle with questions of whether they had some responsibility for the alienation. Am I to blame? Is this a mental illness? What should I have done differently? Is it all in the genes? Am I blaming myself too much? Am I assuming I had a power I didn't have? This struggle reflects the argument of the rabbis in response to a line in Proverbs which we read:

Train up a child in the way he should go. (Proverbs 22:6).

In a commentary on this passage, one rabbi said, “If you train your son with words of Torah until he becomes a young man, he will continue growing in allegiance to them. Even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Yet another said, in describing two sons who grew up together, “...one went to the houses of study and the other to shrines of idolatry.”⁶ After exploration of the impossibility of solving this dilemma, we noticed a gradual softening of their defenses which allowed for the possibility of changing how they would respond to their children now if given a chance.

From time to time the group experience seemed to produce some movement in their relationship with the estranged child. Sometimes the movement seemed slight, and at other times more dramatic, even mysterious. Although they had no definite ideas about what made the difference, they thought that perhaps the tone of their heretofore unanswered messages to their children had changed, or perhaps their other children had told the estranged child of some shifts they had made.

For example, one child who had been estranged for many years agreed to meet with her parents with an intermediary present. They met three times -- twice in a neutral place and once at home -- the first time she'd been there in seven years. It was tense and uncomfortable and infinitely less than they wanted, but it was definitely something. At the end of the second meeting, the daughter allowed her mother to give her a hug (even though she didn't hug back). At the end of the third session, she helped her father with a small task in the house.

Meanwhile, the daughter of another of the estranged children secretly got in touch with her grandparents on the promise that the estranged son/father wouldn't learn about it. This granddaughter continued corresponding with them and promised that she would try to find a way to reconcile the family. Perhaps she made this contact because she was now in college and not constantly under her parents' watch. When she had dinner with her grandparents, she showed them a picture of her younger brother, their ten-year-old grandson whom they had never met.

⁶ Bialik, Haim and Ravnitzky, Yehoshua, Eds., The Book of Legends, New York, Schocken Books, 1992, p. 634.

After that the grandmother decided to call her son, and they had a short conversation which she prayed would lead to more contact.

One couple were shocked to receive an unexpected invitation to their grandson's bar mitzvah. Rites of passage are perhaps a time that thoughts of reconciliation emerge. Although at the bar mitzvah ceremony the grandparents had no "eye contact" with their daughter, they at least were there and were able to take some delight in their grandson. Some time later their daughter and her children attended a holiday lunch at the grandparents' home. The conversation was stiff and shallow, but again, they were there. Subsequently we learned that at the time of the next grandchild's bar mitzvah, the daughter was actually able to ask her mother's help in planning the event.

A father, who had almost written off his daughter, miraculously got a Fathers' Day card from her and made the decision that any healing had to come from him. He telephoned his daughter. It wasn't a long conversation, and it wasn't very substantial, but it happened. One estranged son attended his grandfather's funeral and managed to hug his father to whom he had not spoken in almost a year. This prompted a discussion of how both Isaac and Ishmael, the two estranged sons, attended their father Abraham's funeral. The parents were able to talk about how desperately they wanted a different scenario in their families -- a reconciliation with their children before their own funerals.

All of the contacts with their children were bittersweet, so much less than what they yearned for, but the contacts allowed the estranged parents to continue to hope. They felt that perhaps a miracle would happen, just as a miracle had happened to Sarah:

The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age..."
(Genesis 21: 1-2)

After discussing this passage, Sarah's having a baby in old age became a model for never giving up hope, how one can't be sure of anything, how miracles do happen. In almost every one of the slight instances of reconciliation, the parent reporting the incident was afraid to attach too much significance to it, perhaps as a protection against further disappointment. In each case

when the incidents were reported in a group, the others' responses were excited and energetic, as if a mini-miracle had occurred.

Several estranged parents expressed a general feeling that Jewish ritual was offering them nothing helpful in their situations--in fact, it sometimes made things harder. Lighting the Friday night candles and going to synagogue services were the worst times of the week for them. When they sat in services, they pictured their children at their bar mitzvahs and confirmations. When they sat around the Sabbath table with the whole family, the child's absence was more painful than ever. But later one mother softly said that when she lights the Sabbath candles she says a prayer for her son and his family. Why? "Because it acknowledges him and comforts me -- that's all I can say." Perhaps it was a small way for her to exert some control over this unbearable situation. Another mother said that she takes a silent moment after lighting the candles and says a prayer for her daughter -- but she never tells her other children that she does it because she doesn't want to inflict her pain on them. Both of them seemed to be letting in a bit of the voice of the angel who stayed Abraham's hand.

Absence of ritual is a prominent theme for estranged parents. They talk about the rituals surrounding death, and the comfort that bereaved people receive from the community. The death of a child is acknowledged and marked. People attend the funeral, visit during the week of *shiva*⁷, talk about the deceased, observe *yahrzeit*.⁸ These bereaved people had no such rituals. In the groups, we decided to create an exercise that we hoped would address three things -- the lack of closure, the need for ritual, and the importance of continuing to hope.

Remembering that two members had reported saying silent prayers for their estranged children during their Sabbath candlelighting, we suggested that each person bring candlesticks, light a set of candles, and say a private prayer for their child. Prayer is the opposite of feeling an angry helplessness. It is often something to do when one feels that everything he or she has tried has failed, when there is nothing else to do. At its best, prayer has the power to transform anger

⁷ *Shiva* is the seven day period of mourning following the burial. *Shiva* means seven. During this time friends and relatives visit the mourners, often bringing food to the house of mourning.

⁸ *Yahrzeit* refers to the anniversary of the day of death, when it is customary to recite the *Kaddish* (the prayer for the dead) in the synagogue, light a memorial candle, and perform acts of kindness and the giving of charity.

into love. We hoped that this exercise would lead to a weekly family ritual of including the estranged child in the celebration of Shabbat.

After this exercise, they spontaneously began to reminisce about happy memories from the past. Someone described how her daughter had been very caring and present when she had been in chemotherapy several years back. Someone else described the deep connection she and her son had had when he was young, how they loved to sit in the synagogue together, and how easy it has been to forget those moments. One mother told about how beautiful her daughter is. Others talked about some wonderful vacation times.

Later we looked at the Job passage again, about how Job felt that God was unfairly watching and judging every little thing about his life, and asked them to put themselves in their child's place for a minute. What would their children say if they were in the room? There was a long silence.

Then one father said, "He would say we were evil, that we damaged him, that we made him defective and unable to function in the world vocationally and socially, and that we owe him reparations." A mother said, "She would wish we hadn't adopted her, that we were the wrong fit for her, that she's been angry at us all along for that." Another: "We weren't warm and loving parents." A father said, "We did everything for him, kept rescuing him, never made him take any responsibility." Still another, "We preferred her sisters and gave them more love and attention."

We also talked about at how the siblings of the estranged child acted and felt. When the parents described the siblings' reactions, we compared them to what we had learned from people whose siblings had died -- that there is a difference between the siblings' mourning and their parents' mourning. Do they feel they have to take care of their parents? Do they have to hide their own loss? Was the parents' grief too much for their other children to bear?

Many parents reported that it is difficult to get the siblings to talk about their feelings toward their missing sister or brother, even as the absence was constantly present in their home. Some say that their other children have given up on the missing sibling because of how little they

get in return when they try to have contact. Their other children, like bereaved siblings, want to get on with their lives and don't want to be defined in relation to their estranged brother or sister. One parent wondered whether the other children were envious of all the emotional attention the absent brother received. Another felt that the siblings were too angry at the absent sister's effect on the family to talk about her or to try to find a way to relate to her. In some cases the estranged child used his/her siblings or other relatives to maintain a tenuous tie with the parents whom he/she could not address directly.

Later we read a passage from Jonah:

"Let everyone turn back from his evil ways. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath." (Jonah)

We asked: if your kids were to knock on your doors one day and ask to be allowed back in, what would you feel? What would you say? Would you turn back from your wrath? Would your other children be able to turn back from theirs? There was a wide range of responses -- some said there would have to be some kind of understanding and apology and repentance on both their parts, while others said they would welcome them with open arms, no questions asked.

Invariably, every successful short-term group wants to continue past the designated number of sessions, and for many reasons most group leaders feel that would not a good idea. A group has a certain rhythm and flow and it is usually wise to let it end at the designated time, with members being invited to join subsequent groups. However, with the groups for parents of estranged children we had a different feeling. The group leaders were sometimes quite puzzled, frustrated and hopeless. They found themselves taking on the urgency of the members about the need to do something and also took on the frustration of the constant rejection by the estranged children. But at the same time, the members kept coming, kept saying that this was the only place they had where people understood them. When someone had to miss a session they wished they could tape it. And we realized that, first of all, the healing was in the sharing and telling and in being together; and secondly, that their hearts were softening. Based on the small contacts they were beginning to have, it was clear that they were finding tiny ways to be in touch, to let

their estranged children know that they were available, perhaps in a different way than they had been before the group. So we decided to continue meeting on a less frequent basis.

At the last session of one of the groups, we decided to use as text the story of Joseph. We recalled how Joseph was the favored son of Jacob, and how his brothers, in their intense jealousy, threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery, and then told his father that he had been killed by a wild animal. We pointed out that later in life Joseph became the second most powerful person in Egypt, yet he never bothered to send a messenger to his father Jacob to let him know he was indeed alive, despite the fact that he must have known how much Jacob was suffering. (Genesis 37-39).

The group became silent. Then someone said, “It would be so hard for an estranged child to come home after many years away. How could they believe that the door would be open to them and that they would be welcomed with loving arms?” It was clear that some of the anger had turned softly into empathy, to some ability to put themselves in their child’s place.

Many estranged parents will never reconcile with their children. Others may be able to form some kind of relationship some day, but the lost years and the tension from the time of estrangement will always be there. The healing that took place with these parents arose from their connections to the ancient parents from their tradition; from the ability to comfort each other; from their having a place to tell their story and to be heard; and from their acknowledgment that the estrangement had hurt many of their other relationships.

They may not be able to bring their child back, but they came away with the feeling that they could find ways to rob the estrangement of its power to hurt their other children and their marriages and their other relationships. One woman began getting in touch with long-lost relatives and trying to mend a relationship that had turned sour. Another, like some bereaved parents, is doing volunteer work in her daughter’s name, just so that she can feel that *something* good came out of her tragedy. Somehow they found lessons in their loss.