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Abraham's Tent

Heather Farrell

A rabbi asked a man how he could tell when the night was over and a new day had begun. The man replied, "When you look into the east and can distinguish a sheep from a goat, then you know the night is over and the day has begun." The man then asked the rabbi how he could tell that the night was over and the day had begun. The rabbi thought and said, "When you look into the east and see the face of a woman and can say 'she is my sister,' and when you can look into the east and see the face of man and say, 'he is my brother,' then you know that the light of a new day has come."¹

The light of a new day is dawning. I know because I can see it. The light isn't strong yet, but I am beginning to feel its warmth, and as I look toward the east I can see the face of my sister. Her name is Noor.

It may seem strange to claim Noor as my sister; we certainly don't share any of the qualities that normal sisters share. She is Arab; I am American. She is Muslim; I am Mormon. She speaks Arabic; I speak English. She wears the hijab; I wear the garments of my faith. She's never eaten waffles; I'd never tasted falafel. Yet none of those differences matter because we can see that we are children of the same family. We can see that we share the same father, Adam, and the same mother, Eve; that we share a belief in one God who created man from a single soul and scattered him across the world. We can see that we share the traditions of the prophets and that we both share respect for God's word. Most of all, we can see that our roots are the same; we share a common heritage. We both claim an inheritance from the tent of Abraham.

Yet when Noor and I look at the world we have inherited, all we can see is fear, hatred, and violence. What has happened to us? If we were one

in the beginning, why can't we be so now? Shall the children of Abraham always hate each other? Or will we find the story of reconciliation, the story of peace?



During my undergraduate years at BYU, I worked for a professor doing research on the effectiveness of peace education. My assignment was to find all the peace education programs in the world and to see which programs were creating long-term peaceful worldviews. Over the course of a year, I read nearly three hundred scholarly articles, analyzed over a thousand websites, and read more than forty books on international peace and education. What I found was discouraging. Not one of the peace education programs could provide significant evidence that their method was creating long-term peace. In fact, most of the programs focused only on creating participants who could coexist and tolerate one another. And none of them mentioned God. I had been researching to find answers, hoping to find an example to follow, to find a story of reconciliation and hope for the future. But I didn't find one.

So, I went searching for an answer. I signed up for a BYU volunteer program to Amman, Jordan. My plan was both to work with an organization providing breastfeeding resources for Iraqi refugee women in Amman and to learn more about Islam. But that summer Amman was in chaos. Three weeks after I arrived in Jordan, an Israeli soldier was abducted by Hezbollah. Before anyone knew what had happened, Lebanon was in ruins. Within days, Amman's already full streets were flooded with refugees, and Amman was a city alive with fear and anger. Almost every day there were anti-Israeli and anti-American demonstrations on the college campuses and in the streets. God's name was shouted as a justification for revenge and retaliation. Yet there were some who were quietly pleading to God, trying to understand the violence and the hatred. I could see that they were just as confused about the nature and justice of God as I was.



I saw the fear in Noor's eyes when she turned to me and asked, "Do you like Condoleezza Rice?"

I was surprised by the question and gave her a blank stare.

"You know, Condoleezza Rice, your secretary of state. Do you like her?" she persisted.

I paused for a moment, pulled back my hair, and said, "Honestly, Noor, I can't say that I've ever given her much thought. But I guess I like her. Why?"

“Because I think Condoleezza Rice is the devil and that she deserves to burn in hell!”

In all the time I had known her, I hadn't heard her so much as raise her voice. To hear pure, unadulterated hatred and anger in her voice scared me.

“Every time she comes on TV, she is talking about things she does not understand,” she continued. “She says we need a ‘new Middle East,’ but we don't want a ‘new Middle East.’ We just want to be respected and understood. Arabs and Muslims, we are not bad people. But America, she doesn't listen, she doesn't understand, she doesn't know who we are.”

I just stared at her pain-filled eyes and didn't say anything. I realized that what she had said was true; America and Islam don't understand each other. I'd been in the Middle East for only six weeks, but already I could see that the root of the violence and fear went deep. The problem didn't go back just to Lebanon, the Iraq War, the Seven Days' War, or even 1948 when Israel was recognized as a nation despite the silent screams of the Palestinians. The root of the fear and hate went back to the ancient story, back to Hagar and Sarah and Ishmael and Isaac. We were still stuck reenacting an ancient story of violence and hate, a story where one brother always triumphs while the other wanders homeless in the wilderness. I saw that these problems would take a lot more than a little democracy and a Band-Aid to fix.



The sky was growing dark as the last strains of the evening call to prayer echoed through the open window. I sat uncomfortably at my desk, but my eyes kept straying to where Mervat was praying. Her veiled head was pressed to the floor, and holy words flowed from her lips. Only a few minutes earlier, she had washed herself, hung her head out the window to orient herself to Mecca, and laid her small mat on the floor. As she began the prayers that she had said five times a day every day of her life, my thoughts turned to my own prayers offered to God in faith each morning and night. I wore no veil. I knew no holy words from the Qur'an. We both believed that there was just one God. And if we both prayed to the same God, whose words did he hear and whose prayers did he answer?

Mervat was different from any believer I had met. She had a devotion to God that I respected, admired, and even envied. I am a faithful Mormon. I have been taught to keep high moral standards. I don't smoke. I don't drink. I don't swear. I dress modestly. I believe that sex should be saved for marriage. I pray every morning and evening. Throughout my youth these behaviors set me apart from my American peers, and I had

anticipated that my religious beliefs would set me apart in Jordan as well. During my first days in the Middle East, however, I felt like a prostitute among nuns. By my standards I was dressing modestly, and by American standards I was even stuffy and conservative. Yet compared to Muslim women, who covered their arms and their legs, veiled their hair, and wore little or no makeup, I was revealing, provocative and ostentatious. I felt confused and a little betrayed. I wondered, should it have been Sarah who was cast out rather than Hagar? Certainly Hagar's posterity, among whom I was living, led good lives. I began to question a God who would choose me over them.



In search of answers, I turned to the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. In the Hebrew Bible, I found that although Ishmael, Hagar's son, was Abraham's firstborn, he was not the child of promise. Instead, it was Sarah's son who became the heir to Abraham's covenant, while Ishmael wandered in the desert (Gen. 17–18). Yet the story in the Qur'an claims that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, who was the child of promise (Sura 19:54). Therefore, God's promises were meant for Ishmael's descendants, not Isaac's.

So, which story is true? Or, more importantly, why does God appear to play favorites? Certainly such favoritism, as interpreted by Muslims and Christians, has resulted in bloodshed rather than kinship. Why would a Father God be a respecter of persons, creating an endless cycle of vengeance by choosing one daughter and her son over another?

If God has a chosen people, if he differentiates between the prayers of a Muslim and the prayers of a Christian, then wouldn't it mean that he is a "respecter of persons," that he is an unjust and changeable God, one who finds a sadistic pleasure in blessing one people and cursing another? Wouldn't it mean that there must only be one religion, one people who have the whole of God's words, and one people with his truth? Yet my whole soul cries out against such an idea. How is faith possible in a God who is a respecter of persons? In the Lectures on Faith, we read:

In order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation . . . men should have an idea that he is no respecter of persons, . . . because if he were a respecter of persons, they could not tell what their privileges were, nor how far they were authorized to exercise faith in him, or whether they were authorized to do it at all, but all must be confusion; . . . God is no respecter of persons, and . . . every man in every nation has an equal privilege.²

I cannot believe in a God who is a respecter of persons. Nor can I believe that he has chosen one people, that he gives truth and guidance

to only one people, that he hears the prayers of only one people. I believe that while he requires people to qualify for his blessings by obedience and faith, he does not make them compete for them. If that were the case, there would be no hope for peace. There would be room only for fear, the fear that someone else's faith would cancel out yours, the fear that if someone else was right, then you must be wrong, and the fear that if someone else appeared to be blessed, then God must be cursing you.

The great irony is that neither Christianity nor Islam professes belief in a God who is a respecter of persons or who is changeable and unjust. The Qur'an says: "Those who believe (the Muslim) and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabeans—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve" (Sura 2:62).

In the New Testament, Peter expresses a similar belief when he says: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34–35).

Yet despite these statements of God's love for all his creations, the children of Abraham still cling to prejudice and ancient stories that cause violence and competition. Abraham's children fear that they are competing for God's blessing. This competition provides no room for cooperation, no way to find common ground, and no hope for peace. It just creates fear.



Nidal looked at me with intense eyes and handed me a Qur'an. "I am giving this to you so that you will know that we, Muslims and Christians, do not have to hate each other. We are very similar, and I want you to read that," he said, pointing to the Qur'an, "so you can find truth—that we are the same."

For the last hour, Nidal and I had been talking about religion, about his beliefs as a Muslim, about Muhammad and about Jesus Christ. At first I had been scared of Nidal, intimidated by his passion and zeal for Islam, but as we talked, the fear melted away and I found that we shared many of the same beliefs. By being a good Muslim, Nidal taught me how to be a better Christian.

"Remember," Nidal had instructed me, "you must go home to America and tell your family what you have learned. Christians must respect Muslims and Muslims must respect Christians if we are to achieve harmony in our world."



It is an exciting time to be alive, an exciting time to be young. The possibilities for peace, understanding, and international cooperation presented by globalization are phenomenal, yet so are the possibilities for war, fundamentalism, and hatred. Globalization is a pendulum that swings both ways, with the possibility to drive us apart and widen ancient divides or to bring us together and heal ancient wounds. We must be prepared to find common ground in spiritual stories in order to create lasting peace, based on respect and understanding and not just tolerance and coexistence.

Young people like Noor, Mervat, Nidal, and I are the architects of the future generation. It will be our challenge to move the world beyond religious tolerance, beyond fundamentalism. We must remember and celebrate our common roots—that we are children of the same God. We must seek for a modern-day tent of Abraham, a tent with four sides opened toward all the corners of the earth, where there is no feud between Hagar and Sarah and no “chosen” between Ishmael and Isaac, a world in which there is space for interreligious conversations, room for the religions of the world to freely and openly talk about their shared beliefs, values, histories, fears, and goals. We must be willing to listen to people’s stories, to let go of our bipolar constructions of the world and to find the truth in the beliefs of others. We cannot be so afraid that someone else’s God will make our God irrelevant that we leave him out of our social and political conversations.

The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi testified of such a world when he said, “Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, . . . and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth? . . . Wherefore, I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another” (2 Ne. 29:7–8).

To gain peace we must realize that no one has a monopoly on truth. Truth is like a great puzzle whose pieces have been scattered across the world to all nations, cultures, and religions. Together we have more parts than we have alone. When we try to understand our piece of the puzzle as a piece that fits into a great whole, we begin to get a vision of what the completed puzzle must look like. This knowledge should excite us and fill us with love for all the other millions of other people who hold the other pieces. Gathered together we will gain more pieces of God’s truth and better come to understand our place and purpose in the world.



On my last night in Jordan, Noor and I sat eating dessert on the balcony of a café overlooking the city of Amman. I looked out across the city and saw Jordan's flag flying across the sky, and I realized that this land, this people, this way of life felt like home. It felt like family.

There were tears in our eyes when we said goodbye that night. Something beautiful and sacred had happened between us the last few weeks, and neither of us knew how to name it. My eyes filled with tears, and they spilled freely down my cheeks. Noor saw the unspoken words in my eyes, and she put her arm around my shoulders, pressed her white veiled head next to mine, and whispered in my ear, "Do not be afraid. This is not goodbye. It is not the end. You are my sister in America, and when you come back to Jordan, you must stay at my house."

As the taxi drove away, I realized that Noor was right. Tonight was not the end; it was the beginning. It was the beginning of a gathering, the gathering of the family of Abraham. Our friendship is evidence of the children of Abraham returning home to his tent. Yet they will not come as Christians, Jews, or Muslims, but rather as brothers and sisters. For Noor and me, such a gathering has already occurred. We are sisters, the daughters of Ishmael and Isaac. We know each other, each other's stories, fears, and hopes. We have dried each other's tears. We have laughed together and worked beside one another. The ancient feud is over; Sarah and Hagar may once again live in peace. I have seen the face of my sister. I have learned her name, and now I see that the night is past and the light of a new day is beginning to dawn.

This essay by Heather Farrell (heatherlady@gmail.com) won second place in the *BYU Studies* 2008 personal essay contest.

1. See Gordon B. Hinckley, "Experiences Worth Remembering," devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, October 31, 2006, available online at <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=11434&x=52&y=9>.
2. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 38, 43.