

## The Red Pill or the Blue Pill?

*extricating ourselves from a Matrix of violence and exclusion*

We say, what does the text say? Ancient readers ask 'How do you read it?', 'What is your interpretation?', 'Who is your rabbi?' and more tellingly, 'Through whose eyes do you read this text?' and we would have answered in early Christianity days, 'Jeshua Rabenu'.

Mixed messages confuse and confound. You know the kind...when someone is telling you something, but the way they're saying it contradicts what they're saying. They say that you're loved, they say that they love you. And then they belt the daylights out of you because you were showing off to your adopted aunties, dancing to *Bill Haley and the Comets*, rockin around the clock, when you did one pirouette too many around the coffee table and fell, smashing it to smithereens. Not even the shouts of adopted aunties could arrest the hand of the father who beats you.

And the next day, when the father asks for forgiveness. What is a six year old to say? 'Don't worry Dad, it was my fault'.

Really? Was it?

Johannes de Silentio, in Søren Kierkegaard's *In Fear and Trembling* (1843) captures the quiet desperation of the little boy lost, when he notes:

[...] When Isaac saw Abraham's countenance again its was changed, his eyes were wild, his appearance a fright to behold... then Isaac trembled and cried out in anguish: "God in heaven have mercy on me [...]; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father."

Similarly, this morning's Old Testament reading messes with our mind. Sarah sees the son of Hagar (Ishmael) playing with her second and only true son Isaac who has just been weaned off the breast. It's party time and in the midst of the celebrations as she's watching them both playing, she suddenly decides that she doesn't like what she sees. Of course, we can only guess what's going on in her mind, apart from her: "Abraham, I don't want him. I want Isaac".

If the request upsets Abraham, it apparently doesn't worry G-d too much, "Don't be distressed", G-d says to Abraham..."it's ok I'll make a nation for him."

So, the account, with strong overtones of the binding of Isaac story to come, depicts Abraham rising early, taking bread and a skin of water, and telling Hagar to take their son Ishmael into the desert. And being a slave, she dutifully and pathetically does what she's told, 'wandering about in the wilderness of Beersheba'.

What's to do? thinks the desperate woman Hagar, once she's out there: "Give the kid some water and when that's gone, just get rid of him, just sit him down a bow shot away and try not to watch him die, and try not to cry. But she can't help herself: she wails and cries her heart out.

G-d, it seems, only has ears for the boy. He can hear the boy's cries, which are inaudible, but apparently doesn't hear the wailing woman? Then G-d asks what seems like an incredibly stupid question, "What troubles you Hagar?" "Don't be afraid... For God has heard the voice of the boy where he is." Small comfort. He hears the boy, but apparently is deaf to the woman's distress.

And as the story continues, the focus is still on the boy. "Come lift up the boy", the angel says to Hagar, "and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him". That's why the boy must always upstage his mother, who's role is reduced to a bit part

**God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.**<sup>21</sup> He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Progressive Rabbi Alexandra Wright, comparing Genesis 21 and 22, nails it when she observes that:

**Hagar is the archetypal victim.** As an Egyptian in the land of Canaan, she is first of all—a **foreigner**. Secondly, she is a **slave**, a fact mentioned several times in Genesis 21. Thirdly, she is **grossly manipulated** for the purposes of her mistress, Sarah, so that Sarah can obtain children through her. Fourthly, and perhaps most grotesquely, **she is expelled together with her son into the wasteland of the desert with little more than a skin of water and some bread**. Yet, in spite of [all] this, one thing remains clear: **God is on her side**. A commentary assurance that sits awkwardly with us, particularly in the context of Rabbi Alexandra's next comment to her readership:

Few realise that her story is, in fact, **a powerful inversion of our own story** as foreigners in Egypt, expelled into the desert with little more than the dough hardening in the sun on our backs. **Suddenly, when we realise that Hagar is the symbol of our future oppression and victimisation, we sit up and take note, and become interested in her background and her story.**

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg in *The Beginnings of Desire* (135) makes a blunt assessment, siding with Sarah, which adds to our discomfort: 'Though they [Isaac and Ishmael] seem to be playing together, there is murder in the wind'. Sarah sees in her son and Ishmael, a replay of Cain and Abel'. The commentator Rash citing the *midrash* that the boys are playing a kind of William Tell game with Ishmael shooting arrows at Isaac, defending it by saying, 'But I'm only playing', agrees with Sarah's disquiet. Rashi concludes that they'll end up both going out into a field not dissimilar to the place where Cain murders Abel.

**My thesis this morning is simply this: when a story throws up mixed messages, is self-contradictory, it wants to alert us to a story behind the story...it wants us to negotiate its truth (come and let us reason together), struggle with its meaning, like Jacob with the angel that very dark night, before he became Israel. It demands that we question the very assumptions upon which the dominant narrative is based. To fail to heed its warning, is to fail.**

**It's a thesis that invites us to take the red pill in order to extricate us from the cultural matrix, the cultural structures, the cultural constructs that play blind man's buff with us. Only *then* can we see with clear eyes, something that is denied Sarah, who dies without being able to reverse this image of two brothers in conflict with each other.**

Rabbi Wright admits that, 'The image resonates painfully. We think of Israel and Palestine and ask ourselves will these two peoples ever live peaceably with each other? Is it possible to create a parity without removing or oppressing one people to make place for the primacy of the other?' Which misses the point. Because Sarah's vision of humanity, Isaac only in the world, is too one-sided. And yet Abraham's vision, more complex, more painful, more emotionally involved, sees two beloved sons, the only sons of their mother.

In the Torah, both Ishmael and Isaac come back to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah. Here it is clear that both brothers establish their line through their descendants. Both fulfil the promise made to their father by the angel of God and offer a message of companionship, healing and hope. But the reality of Israel and its appalling human rights' record with the Palestinian Territories casts a very long shadow over this 'feel good' exposition.

Which leads me to

**\*an uncomfortable analogy** hinted at earlier: **the analogy** of the **red and blue pills** from *The Matrix* Trilogy. **Explanations follow...**

**\*Finish with: The Jibus pill the story of a failed Chaplaincy, the story of a failed exegesis.**

In the words of our Romans and Gospel readings:

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

**And...**

<sup>24</sup> 'A **disciple** is not above the **teacher... it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher...** If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

<sup>26</sup> 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

<sup>27</sup> **What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops [...]** whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

<sup>39</sup> **Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**