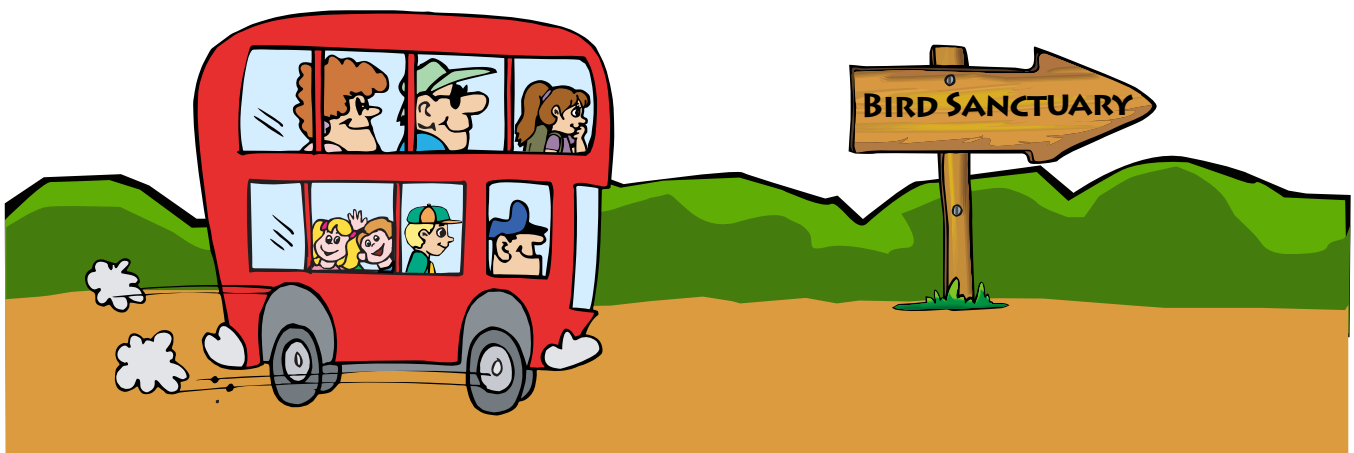


Tour of the Holy Lands - Beersheba

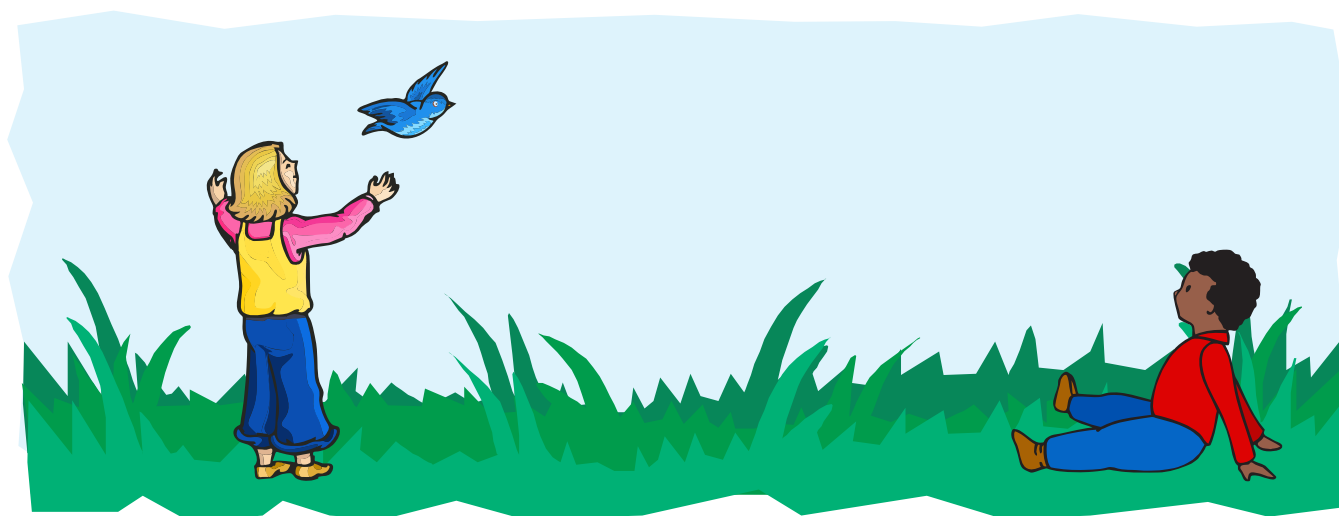


We're sorry to leave the Red Sea, but we don't want to miss this bird sanctuary. A sanctuary is a place of protection. Here, we can see the same birds we read about in the Bible - doves, sparrows, eagles, larks, storks, swans, pelicans, ravens, owls. After migrating across the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea each year, birds need a place to rest and eat. Here, there are just the right plants to provide bugs and berries. Birds teach us about God and about ourselves.





Under the shelter Professor Reuven Yosef is carrying colorful little cloth bags tied with strings. He reaches in and pulls out a live bird. Oooooooooo! The bird was quiet inside the bag, thinking it was night time. Reuven tells us its name, where it comes from and where it's going. We see the metal band on its leg. It has a number on it so that when it's caught again in another country they can record more of its history. Reuven asks for a volunteer. He shows us how to hold the bird gently and then how to open our fingers to let it go. Whoosh, the bird is free. We're glad when it's our turn.

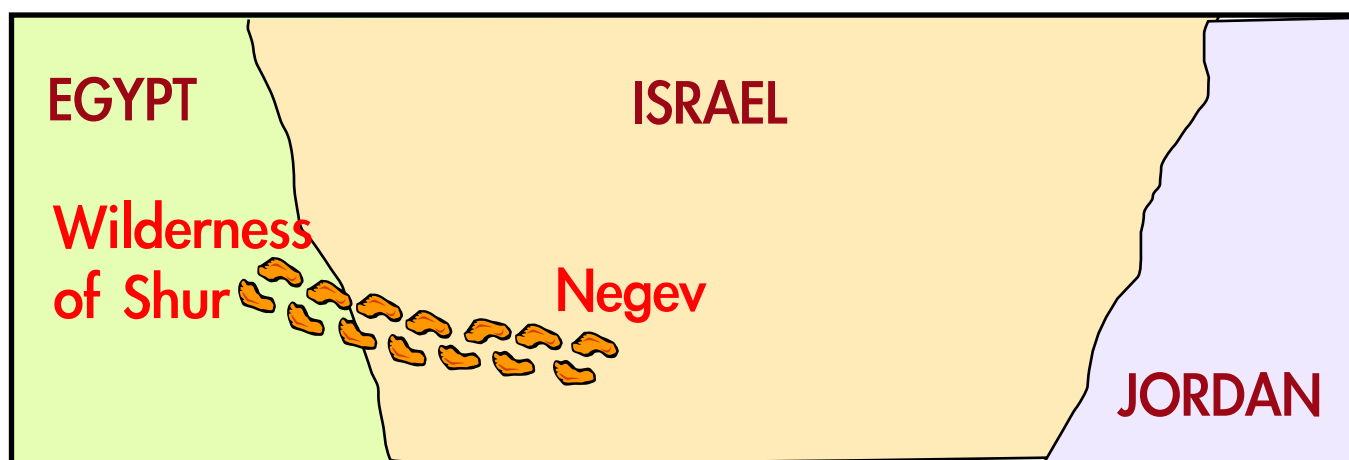




We leave the cool green sanctuary and head to the Negev desert. Abram and Sarai were the first in the Bible to travel here. We remember that God promised Abram that he would start a great nation, be blessed by God and bless others. (Gen 12:2) He waited and wondered. Without children, he must have felt as dry as the desert sands. But God said, “If you could count the dust of the earth, that’s how many children you will have.” (Gen 13:16) He still waited and wondered. He asked God, “May I adopt my servant as my son, so his children could help start the nation?” “No,” God said, “You yourself will be the father of a child. Look at the night sky. Can you count the stars? That’s how many children you will have.” (Gen 15:2-5) Abram and Sarai spent ten years waiting for a child. Then Sarai got an idea. Since servants could have children for their masters, Sarai told Abram, “Marry my slave girl, Hagar the Egyptian!” And he did. But this was not the answer God had in store for Abram and Sarai. (Gen 16:1,3)



It wasn't long before Hagar was expecting a child. Sarai wasn't as happy as she thought she would be. Instead, she was annoyed. Hagar now thought she was better than Sarai. Abram told Sarai that she was in charge of Hagar, so Sarai began to mistreat the servant. Hagar became angry. She refused to stay where she was abused. She ran away to the wilderness of Shur, back toward Egypt, carrying the precious unborn child that everyone wanted.





Then a remarkable thing happened. An angel found her by the border near a well, and called to her. “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?” The angel’s words made her stop and think. Was she running away from an important duty? “Go back to your mistress. You’ll have many children.” This Egyptian slave is given the same promises as Abram; in fact, she is the first woman in the Bible to be given promises by God. (Gen 16:4-16)

We think Hagar is like a bird in the sanctuary. God knows her name and is with her no matter where she’s been or where she’s going.



The angel said, “You’ll have a baby boy and you’ll call him ‘Ishmael,’ which means ‘he who hears.’ (He who hears God or God who hears him.) His people will no longer be slaves, but free to roam the open spaces, fearing no man.” This describes the bedouins we’ve been seeing.

Hagar was a slave but she felt so important. She wanted to tell the world who this God was, so she gave him a name. She called him “Thou seest me.” She was the first person ever to name God. Hagar returned to the family tent, gave birth, and gave the baby to Sarai. We don’t hear about her for 13 years. (Gen 16:11-16)

Abram, too, was given new divine promises, “You’re not going to be the father of just one nation, but of many. Your name will no longer be Abram, but ‘Abraham,’ meaning exalted father. As for Sarai, her name will no longer be Sarai, or princess, but ‘Sarah,’ meaning mother of nations. And Sarah will give birth to a son.” Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He thought, “Can I be a father at 100? Can Sarah be a mother at 90?” (Gen 17:5,6,15,16)



God had more to say to Abraham, “You are to name your son ‘Isaac.’ As for Ishmael, he will produce 12 princes.” We’re happy their first son wouldn’t be forgotten. (Gen 17:19,20)

Three strangers arrive at Abraham’s tent one day. What a delicious lunch was fixed. Like a good wife, Sarah never showed her face, but stayed behind the tent curtain listening.

Then she heard with her own ears something her husband had already heard – that she was going to be a mother. She laughed. She tried to hide it, but it was too absurd. And then she heard a very important truth, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen 18:1-15)



As we drive through this barren land, we hear the story of this barren woman giving birth. We look around and can understand barrenness. We can see their town, Hebron, on our maps.

Well, God blessed Sarah with a son just as He had promised and she called him “Isaac,” meaning laughter. There was plenty of laughter in their tent that day, all except for Hagar and Ishmael. What was to become of them? (Gen 21:1-6)



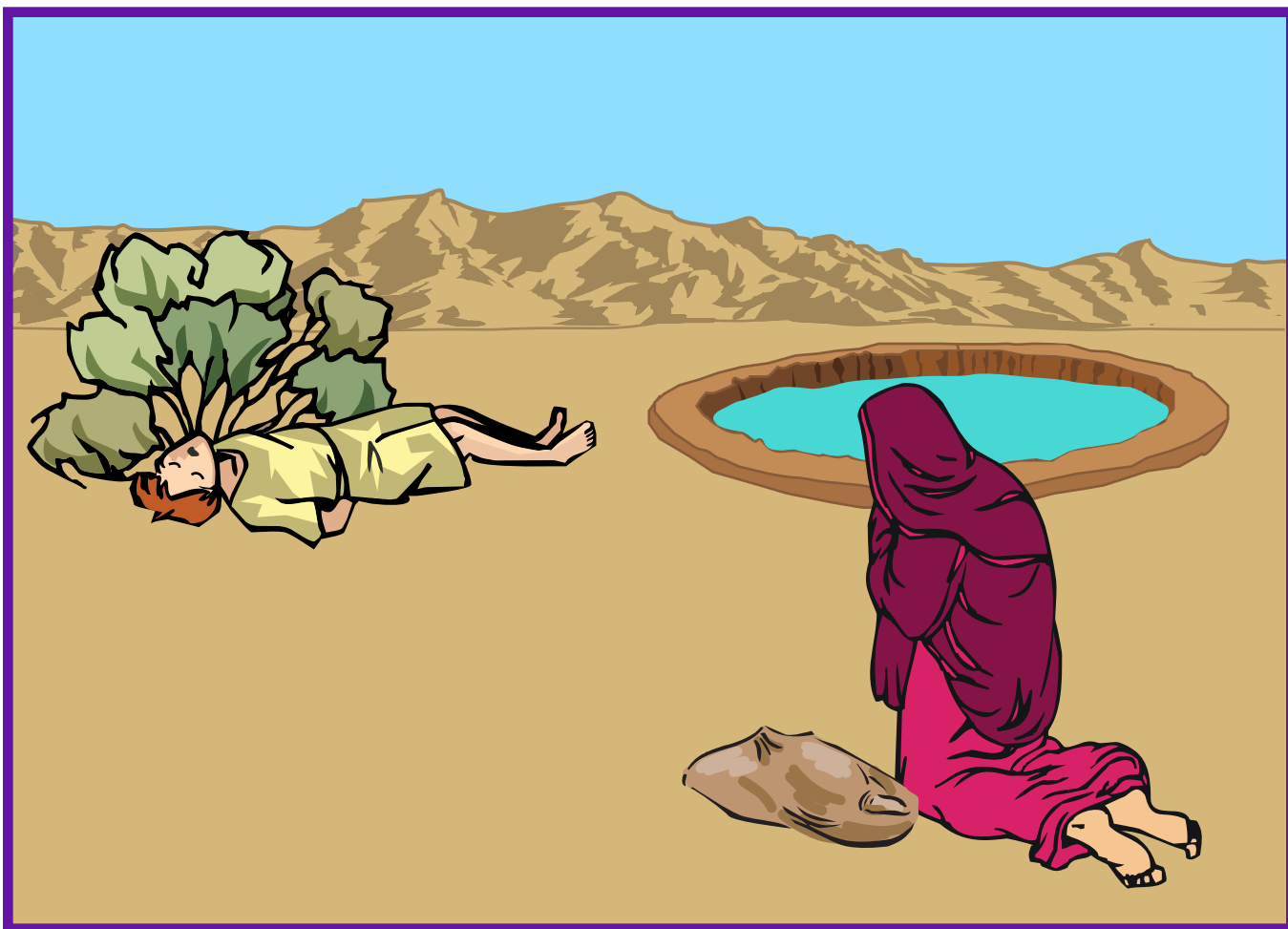


Baby Isaac is now three. It's time to celebrate. Servants prepare a feast. Isaac is the center of attention, as Ishmael used to be. At 13, he's just a teenager at the party. Just now Sarah sees Ishmael "mocking." Maybe he's teasing, maybe he's showing off. Whatever she sees, she doesn't like it. He has to go.

"Cast them out!" Sarah says to Abraham. "My son will not share anything with her son." Abraham is so sad. He loves his first-born. He listens for what God has to say. God says, "Don't worry about the boy and the slave girl. Each son will have an important place one day."



Quietly, Abraham obeys and trusts. He gathers bread and water, (often carried in a goatskin bag and slung over the shoulder). Hagar and Ishmael set out early into the dry land of Beersheba. But they lose their way and run out of water. Hagar tearfully drags the boy across the hot, rocky sand and lays his head in the shade of a bush. She is so scared, she just leaves him. Soon her wailing is as loud as his. She can't watch him die. (Gen 21:8-16) We want to hold our ears. What a sad picture!



Then, God hears the boy's voice. Isn't that what "Ishmael," means? "God hears?" God calls out so lovingly, not to the boy, but to Hagar, "What's wrong, Hagar?" Almost to say, "I don't see a problem." So full of comfort, He says, "Fear not." Yes, she left him under the bush, and they were kicked out of the tent, but they were never out of God's reach. He says, "Hold him and comfort him. Remember my promise: I will make him a great nation?"

Once Hagar stopped wailing to open her ears, she also opened her eyes. And what did she see? Not only a crying young man and an empty water skin, but water, and not just a puddle, but a well of water. Was it there all the time? (Gen 21:16-19)



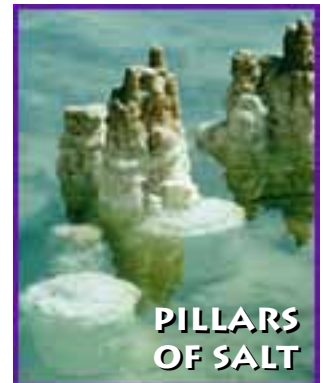
Hagar and Ishmael never go back. Isaac and Ishmael become heads of two great peoples - Jews and Arabs, making their father Abraham the father of nations (of Christians too), just as God had promised. And he continues to be a blessing. Naming his sons “Isaac” meaning “laughter” and “Ishmael” meaning “listening” is a good recipe for peacemaking.

Our bus pulls into Beersheba to see a well. It isn't Hagar's but it's nearby and it stands for peace. Here, Abraham and the King of Philistia agreed to live together in peace. (Gen 21:22-34)



Our bus is taking us back to the main road near the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah near the Dead Sea. There was much evil in those cities and very little good. Abraham prayed for his nephew Lot and his family who lived there. Abraham stood staring in the direction of the cities from his tent in Hebron. All of a sudden there was a great fire in the sky. The cities were being destroyed.

We pretend we can see and hear what's going on. There's Lot with his wife and two daughters running from the blaze. They don't want to leave, but two angels are pulling them along by the hand. They urge them, "Run, don't look back. Don't stop till you reach the mountains." Oh, no! Lot's wife is turning her head! Didn't she hear the warning? Now, she's stuck to the ground, like a statue. Her body has turned to salt. She can't move at all! They've left her all alone. She'll stand there forever as a warning to all who pass by - never look back. We see pillars of salt in the shallow waters of the Dead Sea, reminders of Lot's wife. (Gen 18:14-17, 24-30)





Leaving Lot's wife we drive north a few miles, to another story and we meet a different kind of wife, wise and pretty. But Abigail was married to Nabal, who was evil and stingy. He had thousands of sheep and goats in Carmel off the road here. Also in our story is David. We all remember him as a boy killing Goliath with one stone. As a young man now, he made his living protecting other men's flocks. But when David's men asked Nabal for their pay, he refused. So David armed 400 men with swords to kill Nabal and his men. When Abigail got word, we watched. Our bus stopped and we peeked into the desert hills and began to imagine. (I Samuel 25:2-17)



Abigail quickly packs bread, raisin and fig cakes, meat, roasted grain (which David loves), onto her donkeys and sends them ahead. We watch as she rides her donkey round one side of a hill while David arrives from the other side. She hears his voice grumbling about Nabal. She jumps off and bows very low. “Don’t be angry at Nabal,” she said. “Pay no attention to him. He’s a fool. Here, take these gifts for your men. You’ll be king one day. Don’t do anything to harm your good name. God has always taken care of both you and your enemies. And when you’re king, remember who gave you this advice.” David said, “Thank God for your good sense, for keeping me from shedding blood.”

We think David was in love. When Nabal died, David married her. We think she must have helped him learn patience. (I Samuel 25:18-35, 39-42)



As the sun begins to set over the hills we're grateful for all the happy endings we've seen today. But the biggest happy ending would be swim-suit time in the Dead Sea. We're told the rules: First, put your finger in the water and touch it to your tongue. With that horrible taste you'll find out quickly why no one wants that water anywhere on the face. So, no swimming or splashing. Floating only. In fact, you can't sink because the water is so heavy with salt and minerals. It has a dozen different minerals and 10 times as much salt as other sea water. It's called "Dead" because it has no outlet and contains no life. It's also the lowest spot on earth. They say that somewhere under that water lie the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

What a strange feeling to float in the Dead Sea! We touch toes like in water ballet. We giggle when our bodies want to float when we want them to stand up. And it feels good to wash off in the beach shower. We look out the hotel window and see the country of Jordan on the other side of the sea. We were there not long ago. Thanks for another wonderful day!