

Abraham and Sarah: Creating the Model for Rabbinic Judaism

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In this week's Torah reading, VaYerah, we find a number of celebrated and disturbing stories about the founders of Judaism.

First of all we have God's appearance and promise to make Abraham and Sarah's descendants as numerous as the stars and the sand. This includes the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael as part of the Abrahamic heritage. (Jews, Christians, and Muslims are spiritual descendants of Abraham.)

Then we are given several story puzzles and encounters which are deeply troubling. One we are familiar with from our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out, left to die in the wilderness, while God hears their cry and saves them.

Abraham and Sarah are presented as human beings with great merits and flaws. Their signature is hospitality to the stranger, and gratitude to God. These traits and actions in deeds and words, characterize Judaism right up to the present. Our service is a service of thanks, our Kiddush and Motzee a sanctification of the Sabbath through gratitude, blessings, and hospitality. What would our service be without Hallel, wine, water, cookies, something to offer our worshippers and guests?

This mirrors what we have learned from Abraham and Sarah. Abraham thanks God through sacrifice and making a sacred space, the setting up of stones and anointing them with oil, so that a place is sacred. We do that by setting up a bimah, an Ark, having a Torah and reading it, blessing it and the custom of 'going up' spiritually to read the Torah.

What is troubling? Plenty - we are told that God remembers Sarah, yet in fact it seems that God forgot Sarah who painfully went through life without the hope of a child, certainly that hope disappeared once she was beyond the years of childbearing. Now in her old age, God remembers her and teaches us that God can do anything - a foundation of all religious belief.

We have the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra. This is a violent story based on the opposite behavior of Abraham and Sarah. The people of these two towns, abuse strangers, even raping them. It is for this reason that God says I will destroy them.

The beginning of Rabbinic Judaism starts with Abraham arguing with God. Will you destroy the good with the evil? From that we have a man, Abraham who will not let go until God relents and agrees to save the cities if there are ten good men. It is not to be.

Even before this one can see that Sarah's laughter expresses both her disbelief and her joy at the news that she would give birth. She is adjusting to this promise, and while I am sure she was grateful, she wondered 'Why now when I have so little to offer a baby?'

Abraham has this plan to pass Sarah off as his sister to Abimelech, a King. This too puts Abraham in a negative light as he risks the safety of Sarah in order to save them both. He succeeds in what he does, yet the rabbis are critical of Abraham for what he did, however he gets points for the success of his strategy.

Another disturbing idea which gives us pleasure and has caused us pain is God's promise to Abraham "through you the nations of the earth shall be blessed." This idea of being chosen is one in need of reevaluation. What does that mean? We are chosen to receive the Torah and Tanakh, yet, we have been singled out for hatred, torture, expulsion, subhuman treatment, and a constant target for bigots and demagoguery throughout the world. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, and we are amazed that this can be happening after the world knows the consequences. Tevye, the milkman, said "Lord, just once, could you chose someone else."

The story of Isaac is also a troubling story. Abraham made a feast for Isaac's weaning ceremony, and again the rabbis criticized him because he did not thank God. Also, Abraham was troubled by the casting out of Hagar because he loved Ishmael. There is a dispute between Abimelech and Abraham over a well and again we see Abraham's skill as a negotiator for peace and a man of courage, an evolving Abraham.

Lastly is the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. The poet Wilfred Owens said this story is a metaphor for war. God does not want us to sacrifice our children to the senseless and endless wars such as WWI in which Owens was killed.

This story is a quintessential story of faith that Abraham would do what God asked him to do without challenge. Yet, in changing the course of history and the way people functioned, we have to remember that sacrificing humans was the norm in the surrounding countries, in the Pacific Islands, in Central and South America. Here we have a man of faith who obeys God, takes his son, without telling Sarah why, and readies him for the horrible deed - yet at the last moment

his hand is stopped by the angel and he looks and sees the Ram caught in the thickets, and substitutes the Ram. This is Rabbinic thinking. How do we overcome what God asks people of faith to do in impossible situations and find the statement and action which is acceptable?

We sound the Shofar on the Holydays to remind us of this moment. This is a reminder and statement that God does not wish us to do what is wrong, and that we must find another way, a good way of living - an angel will show us the way.

This story is a transformational event in Judaism. God's wants us to choose life. This is the foundation of our system of belief: Choose Life so that we can celebrate, welcome the stranger, and thank God. The complexity of these stories and the responses to them continue to be an engine of discussion for Rabbis and the descendants of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

Shabbat Shalom!
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