

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation has been generously sponsored by The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl ז"ל. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings to Jewish communities around the world.

— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL
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On Being a Jewish Parent

Lech Lecha 2016 / 5777

The most influential man who ever lived, does not appear on any list I have seen of the hundred most influential men who ever lived. He ruled no empire, commanded no army, engaged in no spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, performed no miracles, proclaimed no prophecy, led no vast throng of followers, and had no disciples other than his own child. Yet today more than half of the 6 billion people alive on the face of the planet identify themselves as his heirs.

His name, of course, is Abraham, held as the founder of faith by the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He fits no conventional stereotype. He is not, like Noah, described as unique in his generation. The Torah tells us no tales of his childhood as it does in the case of Moses. We know next to nothing about his early life. When God calls on him, as He does at the beginning of this week's parsha, to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, we have no idea why he was singled out.

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham: "For I have made you father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5).

There are today 56 Islamic nations, more than 80 Christian ones, and the Jewish state. Truly Abraham became the father of many nations. But who and what was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this exemplary role?

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the one we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terach comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, "Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the largest idol. It must have been him." Terach replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?"¹ This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. Abraham, says the midrash, is like a man travelling on a journey when he sees a palace in flames.

He wondered, "Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" God looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."²

This is an extraordinary passage. Abraham sees the order of nature, the elegant design of the universe. It's like a palace. It must have been made by someone for someone. But the palace is on fire. How can this be? Surely the owner should be putting out the flames. You don't leave a palace empty and unguarded. Yet the owner of the palace calls out to him, as God called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice, the man who sees the beauty of the natural universe being disfigured by the sufferings inflicted by man on man.

Finally comes a third image, this time by Moses Maimonides:

"God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice."

After he was weaned, while still an infant, Abraham's mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, "How is it possible that this celestial sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn, for it cannot be that it turns itself?" He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything. He was surrounded, in Ur of the Chaldees, by foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. But his mind was constantly active and reflective, until he had attained the way of truth, found the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, He that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no God beside Him.

¹ Midrash Bereishit Rabbah, 38:13

² Ibid., 39:1

This is Abraham the philosopher, anticipating Aristotle, using metaphysical argument to prove the existence of God.

Three images of Abraham; three versions, perhaps, of what it is to be a Jew. The first sees Jews as iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age. Even secular Jews who had cut themselves adrift from Judaism were among the most revolutionary modern thinkers, most famously Spinoza, Marx and Freud. Thorstein Veblen said in an essay on “the intellectual pre-eminence of Jews,” that the Jew becomes “a disturber of the intellectual peace . . . a wanderer in the intellectuals’ no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.”

The second sees Jewish identity in terms of tzedek u-mishpat, a commitment to the just society. Albert Einstein spoke of the “almost fanatical love of justice” as one of “the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.”

The third reminds us that the Greek thinkers Theophrastus and Clearchus, disciples of Aristotle, speak of the Jews as a nation of philosophers.

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham’s father Terach as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit. The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham’s challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: “Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?” As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

“What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving.”

What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving. Abraham was chosen simply to be a father. The “Av” in Avram/Avraham means “father”. In the only verse in which the Torah explains the choice of Abraham, it says: For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.” (Gen. 18:19)

The great scenes in Abraham’s life – waiting for a child, the birth of Ishmael, the tension between Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Isaac, and the binding – are all about his role as a father (next week I will write about the troubling episode of the binding).

Judaism, more than any other faith, sees parenthood as the highest challenge of all. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah – the anniversary of creation – we read of two mothers, Sarah and Hannah and

the births of their sons, as if to say: Every life is a universe. Therefore if you wish to understand the creation of the universe, think about the birth of a child.

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of A Brief History of Time that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific “theory of everything”, we would “know the mind of God.” We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent.

The miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the-love-that-brings-new-life-into-the-world that is God’s creativity.

“To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent.”

There is a fascinating passage in Yossi Klein Halevi’s book on Christians and Muslims in the land of Israel, At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden. Visiting a convent, he is told by a nun, Maria Teresa:

“I watch the families who visit here on weekends. How the parents behave toward their children, speaking to them with patience and encouraging them to ask intelligent questions. It’s an example to the whole world. The strength of this people is the love of parents for their children. Not just the mothers but also the fathers. A Jewish child has two mothers.”

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality; what is elsewhere considered normal and sees it as a miracle. What Darwin saw as the urge to reproduce, what Richard Dawkins calls “the selfish gene”, is for Judaism high religious art, full of drama and beauty. Abraham the father, and Sarah the mother, are our enduring role models of parenthood as God’s gift and our highest vocation.



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