



Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Lech Lecha. Sins and Virtues of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs

Our parsha introduces us to two of our great forebears: Avraham and Sarah. We term these characters *Avot* (patriarchs) and *Imahot* (matriarchs). They are exemplars in many ways – in their faith, their adherence to God, their hospitality, their moral sense. And after Avraham and Sarah, we shall meet many other Biblical figures, who stand as towering icons, heroes of the Jewish consciousness: the other Avot and Imahot, Joseph and Judah, Miriam, Moses and Aharon and so forth.



We praise these figures for their virtues, but do we ever criticize them?

In our parsha, the biblical commentator Ramban, Nachmanides (1194-1270), finds fault with both Abraham and Sarah for their moral failings. First, he blames Abraham for claiming Sarah as his sister which then led to her being abducted by Pharaoh's courtiers:

“Our father, Avraham, committed a great sin unintentionally, in which he brought his righteous wife to stumble into transgression because of his fear of getting killed. He should have trusted God to have saved him, his wife and all that was his, as God has power to help and to save. Also his leaving the land due to famine – a land to which he had been commanded live - was a transgression that he committed, because God would have saved him from death even under conditions of famine...” **(Ramban. 12:10)**

In chapter 16, we read the story of Hagar, previously a maid in the home of Abraham and Sarah, who gets pregnant with Avraham's child and then disrespects her mistress Sarah. Sarah responds by “oppressing” Hagar. Ramban writes:

“Our mother sinned in this oppression, and Abraham too, in permitting her to do so. And God heard Hagar's oppression and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah in all kinds of suffering.”

So, this is fascinating. Our religious role-models are held to a high moral standard. Rabbinic commentary is unflinching when it feels that our biblical heroes are involved in an ethical or religious infraction.

This is interesting because sometimes, religious figures are deemed so holy that certain thinkers will suggest that they are flawless. And might such comments might disparage or belittle these figures? On this topic, **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch** (1800-1888) writes:

The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect, it deifies no man, says of none "here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine became human."

...The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of truthfulness to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given us of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no ways made lesser, but actually greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection, we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us. Were they without passion without internal struggles, their virtues would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and certainly no model that we could hope to emulate. Take, for instance Moses's humility. If we did not know that he could also fly into a rage, his meekness and modesty would seem to us to be his inborn natural disposition, and lost to us as an example. Just his anger at the rock when he said: 'Listen you rebels!' [and struck the rock] gives his humility its true greatness, showing it to us as the result of a great work of self-control and self-ennoblement which we all should copy because we all could copy. The Torah also shows us no faults without at the same time letting us see the greater or lesser evil consequences. From our greatest teachers of the Torah, and truly Ramban can be reckoned amongst the very greatest, we should accordingly learn that it never be our task to whitewash the spiritual moral heroes of our past, to appear as apologists for them. They do not require our apologies, nor do such attempts become them. Truth is the seal of our Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers. (commentary to Bereishit 12:10-13.)

This powerful passage warns us that the Torah teaches us both through the flaws of our forebears and not just from their virtues. It cautions us against whitewashing our heroes or censoring the Bible.

Please Discuss:

- Rav Hirsch suggests that the criticism of the Avot/Imahot enhances our esteem for them. How so?
- Can we measure biblical characters by our own ethics? Can anybody level criticism, or only figures like the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash or commentators of the stature of Ramban?
- If I do criticize biblical figures, might I reach a point where I lose respect for them, or merely view them as flawed just as we are? If so, what makes them our "Avot and Imahot?" What makes them special?
- Dare I allow myself to take these personalities off their sacred pedestal and judge them, limited only by the terse biblical text and my contemporary vantage-point?

- So ... what are the benefits and what are the drawbacks of the approach promoted by Rav Hirsch?

Shabbat Shalom!