

Parashat Vayeira 5768
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Parashat Vayeira is exceptionally rich in patriarchal narrative. It's so rich that it's easy to view the "stories" in it as unconnected with each other – they stand on their own as powerful challenges – spiritual challenges, moral challenges, ethical challenges – we could spend hours debating whether Abraham was right to argue with God over the fate of a wicked city, what the sin of Lot's wife really was that caused her to be turned into a pillar of salt, and of course, what the relative merits of Abraham's response to God's call to him to sacrifice Isaac were.

While it is tempting and also at times appropriate to see the individual parts of the narrative, we are also called not to 'mistake the forest for the trees'. There is a 'forest' here – and like the nature walks you remember from your camping days the trees are marked so you can get from one to the next, remaining on the path. Here the path is the narrative arc of the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, and when we step back and look at it as a whole, we recognize that without each step happening just how it did, the picture turns out much differently. Given that these are the foundational narratives of the way we view ourselves, at least a good part of the inspirations for how we view, think about, and struggle with the presence of God, if these narratives aren't connected just the way they are, our existence as a people would be much different, if at all.

One connection that proves the point is the one that exists between the rather remarkable death of Lot's wife and the narrative of the incest between Lot's daughters and dear old dad. It's a complex morality play and the Torah doesn't tell us what to think about it – the sordid (or hopeful?) details are presented in a matter-of-fact way. What's the connection? Had Lot's wife not looked back, she would not have been turned into a pillar of salt, and it is hard to imagine that Lot's daughters would have gone to their father in "that way" had she still been in the picture. Why does it matter? Because one daughter gave birth to Moab, ancestor of the Moabites – who is the most famous Moabite? Ruth. And who is the most famous descendent of that famous Moabite? King David. How do you like Jewish history without King David? In other words, the connections might be difficult to make in the context of the story itself – perspective is much harder to gain when you are too close to the painting. Step back and the whole picture – the good, the bad, and the confounding – comes into sharper focus. It's not a guarantee we will like what we see – but we'll see things for what they are, not for what they might have been.

Here's another one that transcends this parasha and is the subject of much debate and discussion. Three different times a patriarch disguises his wife as his sister in order to protect himself. Abraham does it with Pharaoh, Abraham does it with Abimelekh, and Isaac does it with Abimelekh (whether the same one or not I/we don't know). How can a narrative repeat itself that closely and still be taken seriously? These narratives are fodder for biblical criticism which sees them as three versions of the same, likely lost, narrative. Even looking at them as individual accounts of the lives of the patriarchs one is tempted to ask: Do things really happen over and over again the same exact way?

Well, in a word, I would say yes. I don't really care if the Torah and modern takes on the human personality jive with each other – just as I don't really care if scientific evidence runs contrary to the creation narrative (which it might or might not), or whether the narrative of Noah's ark “happened” in history – that's all irrelevant to the declaration that the Torah is holy and crucial and vital because it is our heritage and our best path toward meaning, borne out over many generations living in wildly diverse circumstances. But the fact that we know better now than ever that certain traits that we exhibit, certain tendencies, even, sadly, addictions ‘run in the family’. Abraham repeated himself – or the narrative shows Abraham to have repeated himself – for the simple reason that sometimes our strategies don't change. And Isaac repeats his father's act – for the simple reason that sometimes – more often than we would often like to admit – we are not free agents in this world, much of the quality of our reactions to the challenges in our lives are ingrained deeply in us. This doesn't absolve us of responsibility for our actions – but it does help us to understand, and maybe even learn from – and, what the heck, even change for the better – our very lives.

A last, but related link, this one pointed out by Rabbi Lewis Barth, a professor emeritus at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, the ‘missing link’ between the “wife-sister” narrative and the “argument with God at Sodom”. What is Abraham's argument to God – will you destroy the innocent with the guilty? Far be it from you to take the life of anyone who hasn't done something wrong – it doesn't speak to your ultimate Goodness. And God seems convinced by the argument. What is less well-known is that Abimelekh makes the same exact argument to God when God tells him He is going to kill him for messing with Sara – Abimelekh says wait a minute, I didn't do anything, and you are going to punish me for it? What kind of a God are you...and the Torah seems to want the reader to demand that God not mete out an undeserved punishment, not to the righteous of Sodom, and not to the as-of-yet innocent Abimelekh.

Would that these narratives reflected a reality that contains unqualified justice, fairness, reward, and punishment. Sometimes the righteous are rewarded and the innocent are freed – and sometimes what looks like quite the opposite. That's true in the Torah as well – our ancestors deal with problems, challenges, difficulties, and heart-wrenching losses just as we do – and that's exactly what makes them easier to relate to, and is, in my opinion, the reason we come back year after year to study the same narratives – they haven't changed, but we have, and so our view of them changes. They lived with the paradox that sometimes our lives contain uncontained (to turn a phrase) and unexplainable blessing, and at others unexplainable things that seem to be unrelated to any sense of fairness or justice. Our ancestors lived in that tension and so do we. Not having answers shouldn't prevent us from seeking the lines of connection that link the events of our lives, when possible learning and growing as a result, and when not possible at least seeing ourselves as part of something much grander than ourselves. The Torah is our prism through which the connections of our lives intertwine with those of our ancestors, and their narratives and ours are the better for it.