

Questioning the Morality of the אבות

בראשית פרק י"ב, פסוק א'

וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִרְדָּ אַבְרָם מִצְרָיִם לְגֹר שָׁם כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ:

There was a famine in the land, and Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there because the famine was heavy in the land.

רמב"ן, בראשית פרק י"ב, פסוק א'

ודע כי אברהם אבינו חטא חטא גדול בשגגה שהביא אשתו הצדקת במכשול עון מפני פחדו פן יהרגוהו, והיה לו לבטוח באלהיו שיציל אותו ואת אשתו ואת כל אשר לו, כי יש באלהים לעזור ולהכשיל (דברי הימים ב כ"ה:ח'). גם יציאתו מן הארץ שנצטוו עליה מתחלה מפני הרעב עון אשר חטא, כי האלהים ברעב יפדנו ממות. ועל המעשה הזה נגזר על זרעו הגלות בארץ מצרים ביד פרעה.

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for G-d surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the land concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine G-d would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.

Does Ramban's judgment seem harsh to you?

Does it make you uncomfortable to read Ramban criticizing אברהם so strongly?

Do you agree with Ramban's suggestion that the exile in Egypt was because of this?

בראשית פרק ט"ז, פסוקים ה'-ו'

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָה וְאֶקַּל בְּעֵינַיִךָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ:
Sarai said to Avram, "You are responsible for the wrong done to me! I gave my maidservant into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I became slight in her eyes. May Hashem judge between me and you!"

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי־לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינַיִךָ וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי וַתִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵיהָ:
Avram said to Sarai, "Here, your maidservant is in your hand. Do to her as you see fit." Sarai afflicted her, and she fled from her.

רמב"ן, בראשית פרק ט"ז, פסוק ו'

חטאה אמנו בענוי הזה, וגם אברהם בהניחו לעשות כן. וישמע י"י אל עניה ונתן לה בן שיהיה פרא אדם לענות זרע אברהם ושרה בכל מיני הענוי.

Our mother (Sarah) transgressed with this affliction, as did Avraham in allowing her to do so. So G-d heard her (Hagar's) affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Avraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction.

Do you feel similarly about Ramban's criticism here as you did in the previous case?

Why or why not?

Does Ramban's punishment here seem more appropriate to you than the previous one? Why or why not?

"What is deeply interesting about Ramban's approach to Abraham and Sarah is his willingness to point out flaws in their behavior. This answers a fundamental question as far as our understanding of the narratives of Genesis is concerned. How are we to judge the patriarchs when their behavior seems problematic?...

The stories of Genesis are often morally perplexing. Rarely does the Torah pass an explicit, unequivocal verdict on people's conduct. This means that it is sometimes difficult to teach these narratives as a guide to how to behave. This state of affairs led to their systematic reinterpretation by rabbinic Midrash so that black and white take the place of subtler shades of grey...

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes explains that the tendency of Midrash to make the heroes seem perfect and the villains completely evil is entirely for educational reasons. The word Torah means "teaching" or "instruction," and it is difficult to teach ethics through stories whose characters are fraught with complexity and ambiguity. Yet the Torah does paint its characters in shade of grey. Why so? He gives three reasons

The first is that the moral life is not something we understand in depth all at once. As children we hear stories of heroes and villains. We learn basic distinctions: right and wrong, good and bad, permitted and forbidden. As we grow, though, we begin to realize how difficult some decisions are. Do I go to Egypt? Do I stay in Canaan? Do I show compassion to my servant's child despite the risk that he may be a bad influence on my child who has been chosen by G-d for a sacred mission? Anyone who thinks such decisions are easy is not yet morally mature. **So the best way of teaching ethics is to do so by way of stories that can be read at different levels at different times in our life.**

Second, not only are decisions difficult. People are also complex. No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect..."There is none so righteous on earth," says Ecclesiastes, "as to do only good and never sin." (Ecclesiastes 7:20)....

Lastly and most important, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, between G-d and human beings. Because G-d is G-d, there is space for humans to be human. In Judaism, the line dividing them is never blurred."

"Lekh Lekha: How Perfect Were the Patriarchs?" Essays on Ethics, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Can you recall ever noticing a change in your perspective on a character in Tanach as you grew up?

With these words we come to a story that at first glance seems more than a little strange. Avraham left the Land that had been promised to him; he did not rely on G-d, Who knows how to provide even in a wilderness; and it appears at first glance that he compromised the moral welfare of his wife in order to save himself!

Yet, even if we were incapable of explaining the strange events in this story; even if we were forced to conclude as the Ramban concludes, nevertheless none of this would perplex us. **The**

Torah does not seek to portray our great men as perfectly ideal figures; it deifies no man. It says of no one: "Here you have the ideal; in this man the Divine assumes human form!" It does not set before us the life of any one person as the model from which we might learn what is good and right, what we must do and what we must refrain from doing...

The Torah does not hide from us the faults, errors, and weaknesses of our great men, and this is precisely what gives its stories credibility. The knowledge given us of their faults and weakness does not detract from the stature of our great men; on the contrary, it adds to their stature and makes their life stories even more instructive."

Rav Hirsch on Sefer Bereishis, 12:10

In what ways do you think Rav Hirsch and Rabbi Saks agree?
Does one approach resonate with you more than the other?

"What we must always keep in mind, is that the Torah chose to tell us these particular stories about our Avot, even when they are apparently uncomplimentary. Had the Torah wanted to whitewash them and present them as pristine models, it would have done so in a manner that would be undeniably clear to all. This is not the case. The very tales that the Torah chooses to relate are the ones G-d thought would be instructive to us, and it is our job to discover the message(s) in each anecdote. Rather than see the stories of the Avot as problems to which answers must be found, we must see those very stories as G-d's plea with us to look even more carefully at the text and discover the message hidden therein."

Another Perspective on the Avot and Imahot, Tzvi Grumet, Ten Da'at 1992

The footprints of the *Avot* and *Imahot* are therefore indelibly etched into our historical psyche. Therefore, even though the Ramban takes Abraham to task, once the *Avot* chose to act as they did, it automatically assumed the cosmic dimensions of *maaseh avot siman l'vanim*. Similarly Hazal critique Yaakov in initiating the encounter with Esav, described in the beginning of *parshat Vayishlah* cited by the Ramban. Yet even though Yaakov could and perhaps should have chosen an alternate approach and *modus operandi*, once he opted for a particular methodology it became hallowed in our value system....There exists a tendency to either portray the *Avot* and *Imahot* as angels that we cannot relate to or to depict them as finite mortals with foibles and weaknesses that we encounter daily. The first position engenders the problem described above; the second, however, reveals an egregious lack of understanding of individuals whom the Ramban often characterizes in kabbalistic terms as being "the chariot of the Almighty." ...One must, therefore, be extraordinarily careful not to approach the *Avot* with an intellectual arrogance that would equate them with everyday mortals, but simultaneously one must not catapult them to heights where any attempt to relate to them and learn from them would constitute an impediment to relatively spiritual Liliputians. It's a tensile balancing act that must be utilized recognizing the pitfalls in both approaches.

Perspectives on the Avot and Imahot, Rabbi Avishai David, Ten Da'at

How do you think Rabbi David's opinion is different from the previous opinions?
Can you see how they might agree in some ways?

"How are we to view, and to teach about the Avot? Let it be clear that it is critical to distinguish between two issues, which are obviously different, but are all too often confused. One is the issue of how to perceive the Avot themselves- were they in fact superhumans or merely inspired mortals. The second is an education issue- despite who the Avot really were, how should we be presenting them to our students?"

Another Perspective on the Avot and Imahot, Tzvi Grumet, Ten Da'at 1992

Do you agree with Tzvi Grumet's distinction between how we ourselves perceive the Avot and how we present them to students?

Grumet suggests, "Sometimes educational issues take precedence over determination of absolute truth." Are you comfortable with that?

"In Judaism, the moral life is about learning and growing, knowing that even the greatest have failings and even the worst have saving graces. It calls for humility about ourselves and generosity towards others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature."

"Lekh Lekha: How Perfect Were the Patriarchs?" Essays on Ethics, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Questions for Reflection:

Do you remember ever feeling conflicted by this issue in your own learning? What was the prompt?

Which of the approaches did you relate to the most? Why do you think that is the case?

Do you think one approach allows us to learn more from the Avot?

Which approach would you choose to employ in a classroom setting? Would it change based on the age, as some suggest it should?