

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Answering The Call

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The early history of humanity as told in the Torah is a series of disappointments. God gives human beings freedom, which they then misuse. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Cain murders Abel. Within a relatively short time the world before the Flood has become dominated by violence. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth. God creates order. Man creates chaos. Even after the Flood humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, is guilty of hubris, thinking they can build a tower whose top “reaches heaven.”

Humans fail to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father’s house and travel “to the land I will show you,” but what he is to do there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham’s mission? What makes him special? What makes him, not simply a good man in a bad age, as was Noah, but a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous essays that a, perhaps the, key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack *personal* responsibility. Adam says, “It wasn’t me; it was the woman.” Eve says, “It wasn’t me, it was the serpent.” It is as if they deny being the author of their own acts – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, “It wasn’t me. It was Abel’s fault for provoking me.” Instead he denies *moral* responsibility: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Noah fails the test of *collective* responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

Understand this and we understand Abraham. He exercises *personal* responsibility. A quarrel breaks out between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no

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random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, “Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.” (Gen. 13: 8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him all the other captives, whom he returns safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – not the image of Abraham the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. Its presence is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother’s (or brother’s son’s) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot had chosen to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham did not say, “His safety is his responsibility not mine.”

Then, in this week’s parsha, comes the great moment at which for the first time a human being challenges God himself. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?”

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This is a remarkable speech. *By what right does a mere mortal challenge God himself?* The short answer is that God himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the LORD said, “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him” ... Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

Those words, “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?*” are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond, otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he is about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.”

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah “did as God commanded him.” Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle: *collective* responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not his brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1623):

No man is an island,
Entire of itself ...
Any man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.

But a question remains. *Why* did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? The idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, “he walked *with* God.” But to Abraham, God himself said, “Walk *before* me,” (Gen. 17: 1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

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