

We Are All Made of the Same Stuff

Parashat Vayetze



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In the book of Genesis, Jacob is depicted as being a person of profound character. During his lifetime, he changed his disposition and seemingly matured. He went from being the Jacob that harmed other people, to the one who was given the name Israel. Even more so, Jacob continued to develop from a religious and spiritual aspect. Let's take a look at some of the previously mentioned patriarchs of the book of Genesis and do a quick comparison amongst them.

We encounter Abraham at age 75, when he leaves his country, people, and father's household. Indeed, he encountered many trials along the way, but they all pointed to a depth of faith that he already possessed. Likewise, the changing of his name from Abram to Abraham was meant to expand his purpose as the father of many nations.

We do not know many details about Isaac from an emotional or personal perspective. Last week we read Parashat Toldot - the account of Isaac the son of Abraham. This Torah portion was meant to discuss the story of Isaac, but instead we quickly move on from his story and focus on Jacob, his birth,

his purchase of the birthright, his stealing of the blessing, and his escape to Harran.

What Does Jacob Represent?

Of these three patriarchs, our focus remains solely on Jacob.

From the Torah portions, we learn of the tumultuous relationship he had with his brother Esau, with his parents, with Laban, as well as with his wives and sons.

Furthermore, we also discover the changing of his name from Jacob to Israel and the significance behind it. The question that preoccupied many Torah commentators was why God specifically chose Jacob to fulfill his promise through. This question arose because Jacob's name was associated with so many scandals. In fact, neither Jacob nor his sons (the heads of the tribes of Israel) had a moment of rest or peace during their lifetimes. Jacob's family was the type of family that no one would ever want due to its immense dysfunctionality.

His family life was brimming with quarrels, jealousy, hatred, the selling into slavery of Joseph by his brothers, the bitter rivalry between the wives, inequality, and even the mass murder of the inhabitants of Shechem by his very own sons.

There are those who explain that the three patriarchs are the pillars on which the people of Israel are built. Abraham represents the great believer who was willing to sacrifice everything - even his son of promise, Isaac. As we've discussed before, the symbol of uncompromising faith is illustrated with Abraham.

Isaac symbolizes the son of promise; he was passive and went along with events that he did not initiate. We also tend to follow suit in this way. We flow into the course of life, we are born, and on the eighth day we enter the Jewish life cycle without anyone asking us, we live the promise that was given to us and to our predecessors.

What does Jacob represent? He is the embodiment of our national character - trouble. We are a people, who throughout history, have lived in instability. As a nation, we have gone through wars, went out and returned from exile, and escaped from those who sought to hurt us.

We can easily relate to Jacob's story because like many of us, he went through many trials and hardships in one aspect or another. Our father Jacob was cheated several times by numerous people. His own brother desired to kill him. In addition, he had a complicated and difficult relationship with his children. Yet despite these trials, Jacob always sought after peace. I believe that this is a profound quality for us to emulate. In amongst the hardships that we all endure, similar to Jacob's, at the end of the day, we too ought to seek peace and quiet.

How God Speaks Using Dreams

Going back to this week's Torah portion, it begins with a dream known as "Jacob's Ladder," which is one of the notable subjects from this section.

When God uses a dream to convey a message, there are typically two main ways in which He communicates. Sometimes He speaks in the dream, as He did with Laban and with the King of Gerar. Other times, God shows a particular image in a dream, as He did with Pharaoh and Joseph.

One of the most famous dreams in the New Testament is the one that Peter had on a roof in Jaffa, found in Acts 10. Simon Peter was hungry for bread, and while food was being prepared, he fell asleep and dreamt of food. In the dream, a sheet fell from the sky containing all kinds of unclean animals in it. Suddenly, he heard a command from heaven, "Kill and eat!" Peter's initial answer was, "No way! I've never eaten anything unkosher!"

This dream appeared three additional times after that. Today, there are those who interpret this dream as permission to eat anything. As if the biblical kosher laws do not apply to us any longer and that God had made everything clean. However, if we look at these verses carefully, we can see that food is used simply as a metaphor. In this particular lesson, God taught the first believers as well as to us, the importance of receiving Gentiles into our communities and accepting every person equally.

Peter arose from his dream in a daze. He attempted to sort out what it was that he had seen and what God was trying to tell him. The Lord made His message clearer to Peter when he sent him messengers from Cornelius and commanded him to accompany them back to his home.

Peter understood what God had tried to convey, as can be seen in the

following verse:

He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." - Acts 10:28 [NIV]

This often misinterpreted dream about food was not meant to be taken as an authorization for the first believers to eat all unclean things. Rather, the dream's purpose was to teach them to receive and welcome every individual, whether Jewish or not, because we are all created in God's image.

After Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he testified and taught about Yeshua the Messiah. After he finished, the Holy Spirit came and filled the inhabitants of the house and Peter baptized them.

But what happened after that? The story does not end here. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the believers there complained about him, saying, "We heard that you go to the homes of Gentiles and eat bread there. Why?"

Peter replied, "Wait!" (This appears in Acts 11, from verse 1 onwards.) He went on to explain, "I had a dream and God commanded me not to call unclean what He made clean - then I woke up and God commanded me to go to Cornelius' house. There I preached the gospel, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I baptized them."

I decided to repeat this story only because the New Testament also tells it twice. This is in order to emphasize the importance of accepting others and that faith is for every person. God is not my God alone and He is not only the God of the people of Israel. God created the world and every man in His perfect image. Man was created as a clean being. I personally prefer not to dwell on the question of original sin and the idea that we were created as sinners. In my opinion, it is not true. God created all of us in His image and in His purity. What we do with our life is another matter.

As human beings, we tend to make a separation between ourselves and others. We put up walls and partitions to keep ourselves safe. But as it is written in Ephesians 2:14, Yeshua broke down the barriers that separated and divided us. The Almighty God is our Lord and Yeshua is the Messiah and King over us all, together as one.

In Conclusion

We discussed the three patriarchs as pillars of our Jewish world, Abraham representing faith, Isaac as the son of the promise and the continuation of the path, and Jacob as a symbol of the instability that we are sometimes met with as well as our yearning for peace and tranquility.

In closing, we are left with the idea that God created us all as equals and that we are all made from the same materials.

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