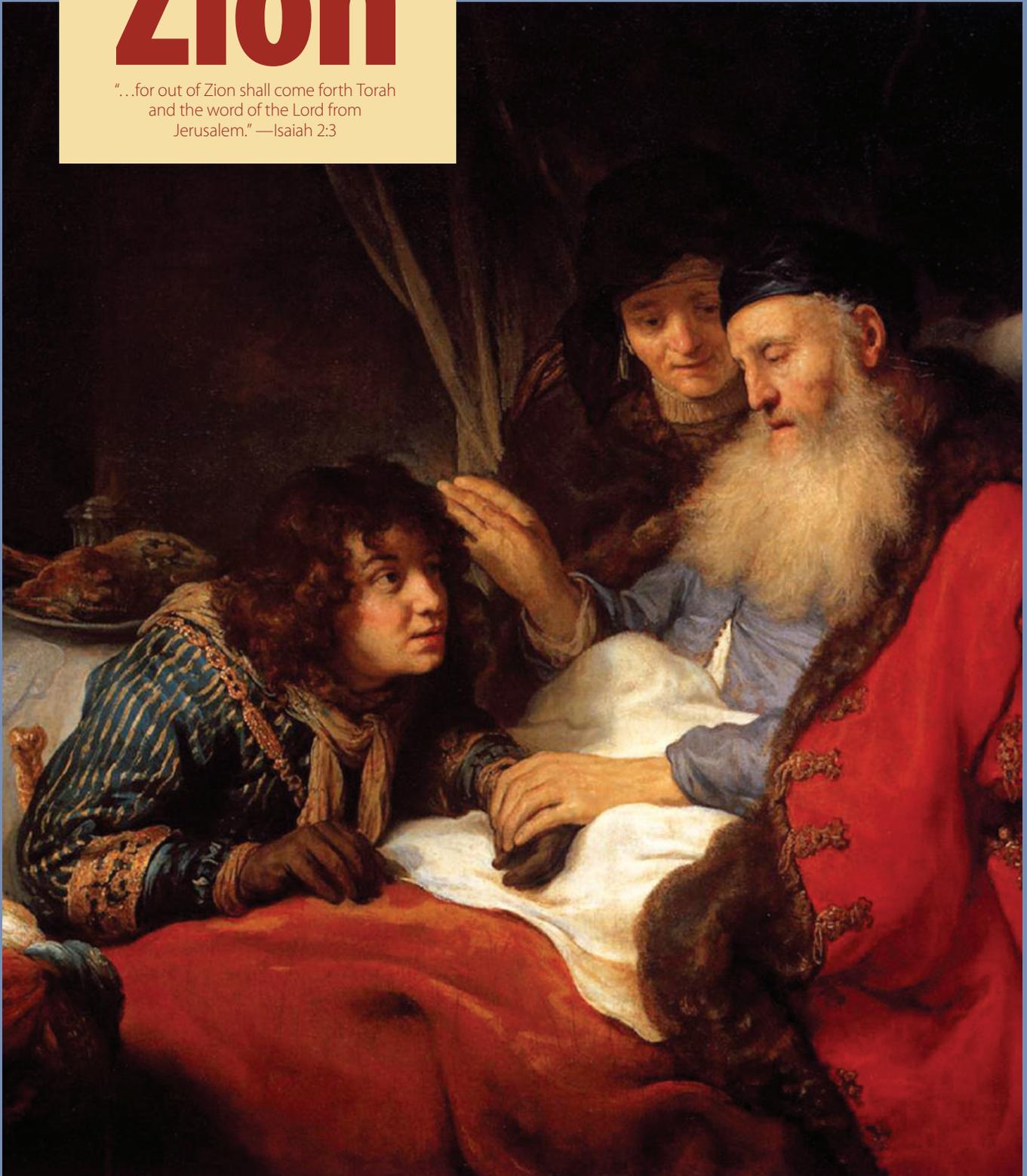


# Teaching *from* Zion

Netivyah Bible Instruction Ministry  
Jerusalem, Israel

ISSUE 35 OCTOBER 2016 / TISHREI 5777

"...for out of Zion shall come forth Torah  
and the word of the Lord from  
Jerusalem." —Isaiah 2:3



## From the Beginning

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN GENESIS | MY BROTHER'S KEEPER | JEALOUSY AND REVELATION | THE HOUSE OF JOSEPH



## From the Beginning

Relationships Within the Story of Creation  
JOSEPH SHULAM . . . . .4

Am I My Brother's Keeper?  
HANNAH KOVNER . . . . .9

Upon the Ark: Noach and His Family  
ELHANAN BEN-AVRAHAM . . . . .14

Abraham Our Father: A Family Man  
JOSEPH SHULAM . . . . .15

Life of Jacob: Jealousy and Revelation  
SOLOMON INTRATER . . . . .20

The House of Joseph: Genesis 45  
BOAZ MICHAEL . . . . .22

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### About Netivyah

Netivyah in Hebrew means "the Way of the Lord." "The Way" was one of the names by which the early community of believers was known in the Brit Chadashah (New Testament). Paul says: "... According to the Way which they call 'sectarian,' I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is accordance with the Torah, and that is written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14). As followers of "the Way," we believe in the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We try to be faithful to God's law (the Torah) and to the rest of Scripture—the Prophets and the Writings. We believe that the Messiah promised in God's word is Yeshua (Jesus), the one who "saves His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

**Cover Artwork:** Isaac blessing Jacob by Govert Flinck (1638). An elderly Isaac sits in his bed and blesses Jacob. To the right of the bed Rebecca is standing.



# News from Netivyah



We are pleased to present this new issue of *Teaching from Zion* which touches on the important heroes of Genesis and the fascinating lives they led. In our current age, one of the profound issues that we face includes relationship troubles, particularly within families.

It is relationships between people that suffer the most due to the swift changes in our societies, especially with the technological revolution and

post-modern desire to create a “new man,” who is detached from history, traditions, and community. By examining the lives of our forefathers, the challenges they faced and the roads they took, we can learn how to better overcome our own problems and how to live in accordance with God’s will.

After settling into our new building, we have decided to direct our focus particularly on spiritual growth. This year we have emphasized on our community and the families within it. A few months ago, Netivyah started a recent tradition of monthly Kabbalat Shabbat meetings; the congregation comes together on Friday evenings to worship our Creator and Savior. Traditional songs and blessings are followed by a communal dinner and fellowship. This allows us to build more intimate relationships, becoming true brothers and sisters to one another. It also puts to practice the following Biblical command: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Netivyah’s Food Distribution Center that was founded over 15 years ago, has now officially been named! We are pleased to introduce you to “Hamotzi,” which comes from the traditional Jewish prayer over bread: “Hamotzi lechem min ha Aretz ...” it means “who brings forth bread from the earth.” It emphasizes our connection to this Land, to our roots, and gives us the privilege to serve those around us. Helping your neighbor is considered one of the most important Biblical values. “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, en-

courage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Another community that we serve is the Messianic Body in Israel. One way in which we do this is by giving gifts to Messianic soldiers currently in the IDF, we typically distribute these packages in the springtime. In order to encourage personal excellence, we also provide yearly scholarships for Messianic students involved with academic institutions in Israel. We believe that helping the body of Messiah in Israel in its intellectual, spiritual, and educational growth is the task of utmost importance. This makes us an authentic and influential part of Israeli society; building up strong and independent congregations both physically and spiritually.

I am currently traveling in the Far East in the company of two young men from Netivyah. We will be teaching and sharing with our dear brothers from the Word of God. The first seminar is dedicated to King David, his personality and the great lessons we can learn from him. The teaching discusses how David was the beloved of God and one of the most prominent prototypes of Messiah. We hope to create a publication that highlights the life of King David in the near future. A second seminar with our brothers in Asia, will be held on the book of Leviticus, a less-familiar book to many Christians.

Fall is approaching quickly, and with it comes the High Holidays. We are looking forward to celebrating these Biblical Feasts together with many friends and visitors from around the world. It is a very special season of self-examination, repentance, renewal, and intimacy with our Creator. It is the time to seek His truth and presence in every aspect of our lives, especially in the relationships we have with those we cherish.

I wish you all, our dear brothers and sisters, a very blessed New Year filled with God’s guidance and grace!

# Relationships Within the Story of Creation



Detail from the Adam and Eve (Lucas Cranach the Elder)

**G**od has made creation fundamentally relational. Even more so, we who are created in the image of God are made to be relational beings, as it is written: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26).

Inherently, we all seek lifelong relationships, such as the kind formed between a man and a woman, as was God’s plan. The next verse that affirms this states, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). It makes the point again, in a more emphatic way, that the relationship between a male and female is in fact the first human relational pair. Going back to the story of Genesis, it starts with a clean slate and later on God creates the first man, Adam. Although very quickly there is a double realization both by God in relation to Adam and by Adam himself, “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (Genesis 2:18). After reading the previous passages, the question that comes to mind concerning God’s plan is whether the creation of the woman was a secondary idea or an after thought. The answer is not simple, but it is actually described in the text itself.

Note that from the beginning God is corporate.<sup>1</sup> He is speaking to someone and He speaks in plurality, “Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness, let *them* have dominion over . . .” Going back to a formerly mentioned verse, we see the logic in this specific language: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and

God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply ...’ (Genesis 1:27–28). As it can be seen in the bolded words, already in the text of chapter 1 we see that the creation of men and women was pre-engineered and pre-planned to be “them” and not only “Him.” It is especially important because God Himself according to His own nature has the essence of a male and female as well. We are in a multi-level relationship with our Creator and with our fellow creatures, however, it is evident that the most basic aspect of all these relationships is that of a male and a female. It is the only relationship that guarantees a future for the human race and reproduces it.

Similarly, in the plant and animal world, just about everything is based on a couple paradigm. For instance, many plants need some means of pollination; one plant plays the female role while the other plays the male. Often there is a type of matchmaker, such as a bug or a bee that brings pollen of the same species to the female plant. Animals also fall into the couple category as they require both a male and female for reproduction. Thus, the paradigm seen with nature affirms how God specifically ordered the relationships amongst males and females. Even with history, it shows that anytime this basic pair is disturbed, it brings moral depravity first, then social decay, and finally it brings the end of civilization. This happened with Greece and Rome, as well as with other, less-familiar chapters of history.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new system of thought has been introduced: humanism. In this example, all concerns, interests, needs, and welfare are embedded only in the human being. The human serves as both the problem and the solution to all his successes and failures. If I had to redefine humanism, I would explain it as the following: man is on his own, for himself and by himself. Humanists emphasize the rights of the individual, the equality of all human beings, and the freedom of choice. However, it ignores the tribe, community responsibilities, and relationships.

### **No Man Is an Island**

Man is a creature of the community, tribe, village, and universe. This is how God Himself designed us as a people. Modern existentialism that is the engine that moves our modern western society has made man more isolated, lonelier, and much more emotionally dysfunctional.<sup>2</sup> Yes, we have better cars, warmer homes, and faster computers, but we have not bothered to improve our inner person. We find an interesting statement by Rabbi Hillel that elaborates on this topic, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14). These words from Hillel in the early First Century Christian Era actually present the issue in rhetorical form, thus it has a correlating answer. The implication of this statement is that if I am living only for myself, I am really nothing. This next Poem by John Donne actually expresses the very basic idea that I am striving to present in this article:

“No man is an island, Entire of  
itself,  
Every man is a piece of the conti-  
nent, A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the  
sea, Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.

## *Relationships between humans are not mere philosophical abstractions in the first book of the Bible.*

As well as if a man or of thy friend's  
or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in  
mankind,  
And therefore never send to know  
for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee."

The family units in the book of Genesis exhibit the joy and the problems of this basic pair called "man and woman" which are joined together to form a family. The first thing to notice is that the family is God-ordained as man and woman, not man with a man nor woman with a woman. Yes, the cynics can scoff at this and question what we can actually learn from this ancient book called the Hebrew Bible/book of Genesis. What the cynics don't realize is that long before man had discovered the internal combustion of engines and the jet airplane, Genesis had not only discovered the basic problem of men and women, but had likewise unveiled the basic problems of society and the family. These are the same issues that cause more than 50 percent of marriages to end in divorce today; the complications that make or break a community and in the end, destroy civilizations and countries.

Relationships between humans are not mere philosophical abstractions in the first book of the Bible. In fact, these relationships are the very structural components of creation. God commands Adam to give names (identity and character) to the animals as seen in the passage from Genesis 2:19. From the very beginning there is a partnership and relationship between God the Creator to Man and Woman, as well

as all the rest of His creatures. One of the most heartfelt scenes in the Bible is God's visit to Adam and Eve after they eat the forbidden fruit. God comes personally (the Voice of God = the Word of God) to visit Adam and Eve, "in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Genesis 3:8). This scene is one of the greatest examples of a warm and personal relationship between the sinful man/woman and the Almighty Creator of the Universe.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were some horrible wars with many millions of victims. However, the greatest victim of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in my opinion, is the family. The family is actually the smallest and most basic pair of society, as was mentioned earlier. When this unit of civilization is damaged and twisted—humankind and the future is in danger. Let us examine this smallest pair within society, the family, and one man and one woman becoming one flesh. This makes the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, the most important and basic cell for building humanity.

### **Relational Religion**

The Bible starts with the creation of the world by One God. Today, not only scientists in the natural sciences realm, but also Bible teachers and Christian University Professors are challenging the veracity of the story of Creation. This is not new! What is original is that the people who are supposed to train men and women to serve God and to minister His Word are casting a shadow on the very first feature of all Biblical accounts; the Creation of this world by the Almighty God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If the story of creation and the paradigm that it presents is not true and if it does not

hold a moral obligation for human beings to follow its rule, man might as well be the descendant of apes.

The story of Creation in Genesis is indeed the very matrix of relationships that is basic to our human character and existence. Men and women in the book of Genesis are not perfect from the beginning. They are presented with two choices, one in which there is a promise of improvement based on disobedience and a relationship of free-will and freedom. It is exactly this freedom of choice that is set before us as children of God that makes our relationship both with God and with each other a living dynamic that is all dependent on our families. Genesis continues to present every family in the book with full disclosure of the blemishes, sins, and imperfections of character. At the same time it presents the Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, as a creator who knows the faults and weaknesses of His own creation and therefore is patient with His creatures.

This kind of relationship is actually unique in the spectrum of world religions. In many other religions, the gods demand worship and obedience to their cause and benefit; they either don't have a high standard of morals themselves and therefore don't demand that kind of high moral standard from their worshipers, or use harsh and immediate judgment on their practitioners. Of course the ones who carry out God's judgment are normally the priests who are also servants of the one who is sitting on the throne at that time.

Throughout the entire Bible, the leaders are not perfect nor their families. They are all fallible and frail people who make some grave mistakes with consequences for many generations to come.<sup>3</sup> We all fall short of our own ideals, just as our forefathers, but this is not an excuse or a license to ignore and deny the relational obligations that we have toward each other in the basic unit of life and in the larger community, tribe,

country, or universe. Going back to the words of John Donne, “No man is an island, Entire of itself ... [we are all] a part of the main.”

Just about every hero and main figure in God’s Word is exposed in his failure and shame before all readers. Adam and Eve sin blatantly in disobedience to God’s one and only command. The children of Adam and Eve kill each other over what seems to be a senseless religious controversy. Noah after being saved from the flood and experiencing the grace of God exclusively for his family, got drunk with wine and commits a grievous sin with one of his sons. Abraham the father of the faithful, is reported to have lied to Pharaoh about Sarah his wife, saying that she is his sister. Abraham did this twice, once to Pharaoh and again to Abimelech. Isaac, Abraham’s son, did not learn from his father’s mistake and did the same thing with Rebecca, saying she is his sister. Rebecca, conspired to deceive her husband in favor of Jacob her beloved son. Likewise, Jacob deceived Esau his brother and Isaac his father with the help of his mother Rebecca. Rachel and Leah, the two sisters and daughters of Laban, deceived Jacob and their father on the way back from Haran to the Land of Canaan. In the family of Jacob, the relationships between his sons are scandalous from the very beginning. The sons of Jacob are infected with major degrees of jealousy and hate against Joseph their younger brother which leads to a plot to kill him. Amongst themselves, the brothers act as a band of hoosligans against the citizens of Shechem. Although Joseph seems innocent in most of the story, there are some stains on his character, especially in his attitude towards the brothers and the insertion of the silver cup inside their sack of grain later on.

I mention these dark spots in the characters of the book of Genesis not to cast a dark shadow or to defame these characters, but in order to say two things:

1. The Word of God tells us these stories in order to encourage us, knowing our weakness in the Body. We understand that we are sinners and have all fallen short of the Glory and perfection of God.
2. To see the grace of God functioning in the reality of this World and the great patience that God has for His children.

God knows who we are and all of our weaknesses, but in this He is still faithful to use us as His extension in this World and as instruments of salvation and redemption for the next generations of human beings. This is true even if our families are not perfect in the flesh and spirit.

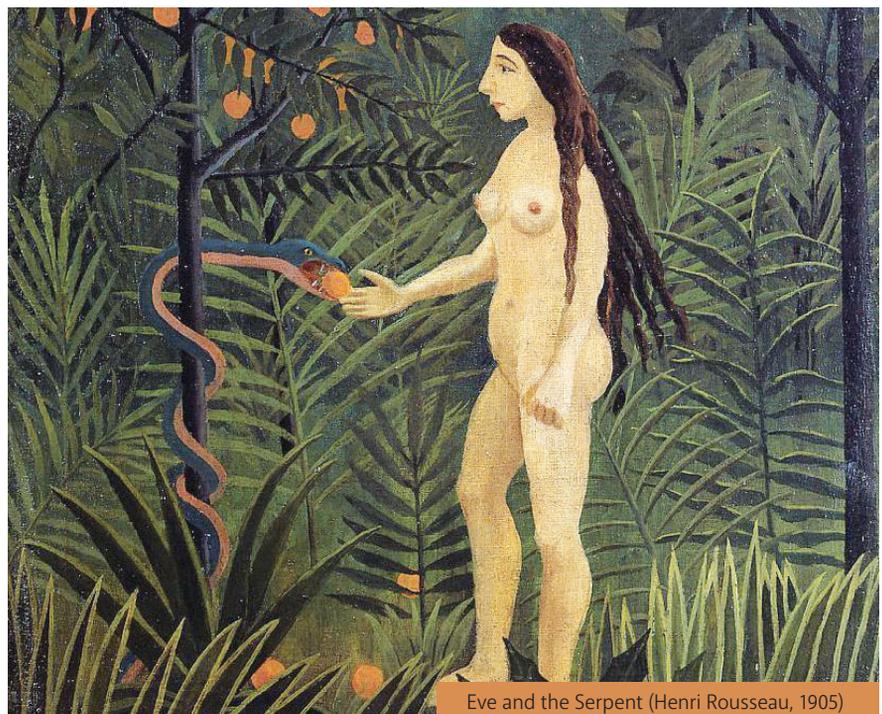
## Family Matters

I believe that these failures and sins of our forefathers are there to teach and give us examples of how strong the family ought to be even in the face of problems and conspiracies—God can and does use us as His imperfect creatures.

The purpose of this article is to actually learn from the mistakes and sins

of our forefathers; the focus is not to follow their weaknesses but to choose to follow their strengths. Realistically speaking, there has never been a perfect family nor will there ever be one. The Bible purposefully exposes their mistakes and shows us a very relatable picture of the greatest heroes of our faith, by doing this it presents the Grace of God that passes all understanding and the examples for our lives to see and not follow. It is like eating an avocado, you have to eat the fruit and cast out the pit. We too, ought to learn to eat the fruit and cast out the hard and damaging seed. The weaknesses of these great men and heroes of faith is an example of how God’s mercy and loving-kindness works to keep us from becoming depressed and despondent about our own problems. Further, the Word of God demonstrates how He can use imperfect people to do His perfect will and carry out His program for the salvation of humanity.

Right off the bat, the Word of God jumped into the deepest of problems of humanity and the seedbed of these problems is almost always related to the family. The first major story outside



Eve and the Serpent (Henri Rousseau, 1905)

WIKIMEDIA/PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Yes, I believe that all humans have descended from one seed. We are created to live in relationships and these relationships were designed and ordained by the Creator Himself.*

the Garden of Eden is the death of one of the two sons of Adam and Eve, Abel. This tragedy is compounded by the fact that Cain, Abel's brother, perpetrates his death. The first family between a man and woman is shattered by the death of their son Abel. I have often asked myself why does the Bible start with such a morose story and not with some wonderful type of spring and sunshine story? The only answer that I can give myself is that the Torah is our schoolmaster<sup>4</sup>, not about some unrealistic fairytale, but a tutor for living our lives according to the designer's program. Living a life that is against the design for which we were engineered brings to the abuse of life and damage to ourselves as well as the whole human race.<sup>5</sup>

### Created for Relationship

Let us learn from Adam and Eve about how a person deals with one of the greatest tragedies that can befall a family: The death of a son murdered by his own brother! What could be a greater tragedy? The family had two sons and one killed his brother and was banished and banned from society. How does one pick up the broken pieces of the family and continue living and fulfilling his responsibility as a human being? Adam and Eve just started over and had another son which they named Seth. They don't give up and they don't turn against God. He is still there after the tragedy and continued to bless and give them another seed. "And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, 'For God has appointed an-

other seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed.' And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 4:25-26). Notice, my dear brothers, that in Hebrew, the word "Enosh" means "Human." Yes, I believe that all humans have descended from one seed. We are created to live in relationships and these relationships were designed and ordained by the Creator Himself.

The *Teaching from Zion* magazine is too short to tell the story of every family in Genesis. However, we can still give the principle that is exhibited in the Shema, "Hear O Israel." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) In this holiest piece of scripture for Jewish people and for Yeshua Himself, immediately after the proclamation of the ONE God comes the command to teach our children and make a clear presentation of who we are and to whom we belong. By speaking of One God to our children and writing God's Oneness on our doorposts and on our arms and between our eyes, we affirm that we are living in a relationship with God and our family as well as the rest of His creatures. This in fact is the basis of our sociability, community, and the relationships that we have. The care God has for us and our family and all the families of the human race continues and flows first through us and from there to the next generations. If we destroy the family relations we have destroyed the link for the future of humanity and all of human civilization. Some would have you to believe that the most important thing in your

life is your happiness, however, that formula is the most assured way to end your life unhappy, unfulfilled, alone, and in misery. To destroy the family is to destroy our relationship with God and to weaken the very fiber that makes us able to build the future without selfishness and in good relationship with both God Himself and with our fellow man.

Let us stand in the gap in our own day and care for our families without selfishness and insure that our children will be trained, educated, and nourished to have normal, healthy families with many children that will walk in the ways of the Lord and be a light to those who are walking in darkness. ❏

### Endnotes

- 1 By saying that God is corporate there is no implication that God is numerous or that there is more than one God. God partners with humans to accomplish His will. For this very reason there is the incarnation so that the Messiah and the Almighty work together in full equality and partnership.
- 2 As can be seen in the novels: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea, Being and Nothingness* (1943); Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), *A Happy Death* (1971); Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Irrational Man* (1958); Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*; J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye, Franny and Zooey, Nine Stories, Raise High the Roof Beam*; Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1943), *We the Living* (1936), *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).
- 3 See what happened from the impatience of Abraham and Sarah, which led to the birth of Ishmael and to the deceitful purchase of Esau's birthright by Jacob.
- 4 "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24)
- 5 Some might say, "Who is this Joseph Shulam?" The answer for this is very simple. I am a person who has seen the great wisdom and healthy logic that is embedded in truth and bound in the book between Genesis and Revelation. It is really that simple. I have seen the words of man who spoke in God's name 2800 years ago being fulfilled in my own day. This in fact is the source of my authority and courage to write and to say these things.

# Am I My Brother's Keeper?

WIKIMEDIA/PUBLIC DOMAIN



Cain Slaying Abel (Peter Paul Rubens, 1608–1609)

**T**he book of Genesis is a history of one family; it speaks of the relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and children, the group of people that are called to become the main building blocks in the history of Salvation. They are the Chosen Ones, hand-picked by the Creator himself to be used as an example and to be a lighthouse to others, leading us all to the truth and life.

Nevertheless, none of the characters of the Bible are portrayed as “perfect” or without fault as they go through struggles and shortcomings, scandals and tragedies.

One of the initial features of Genesis that caught my attention was the deep jealousy and hatred that defines the relationships between numerous sets of brothers: Cain and Abel, Isaac

## *Jacob believed in the invisible promise given by God Almighty to his grandfather: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 25:2).*

and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, as well as Joseph and his brothers. Furthermore, Rachel and Leah, the mothers of the Jewish nation, are mostly described as rivals, rather than loving and supporting one another.

In this article, I would like to dive into greater detail and better the understanding of these relationships amongst the siblings in the book of Genesis.

### **Cain and Abel**

The first siblings in the history of mankind began their journey of life on Earth by bringing the first fruit of their labor to God. “And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell” (Genesis 4:4–5).

We will probably never know why God accepted the offering of one brother and rejected the other. The only hint that is found in the Biblical text is that Cain offered to God “some of the fruit,” while Abel brought “the best of the firstborn.” In any case, instead of repenting, improving, and fixing the wrong, Cain was taken by the deep jealousy that very soon grew into a pure hatred which led to the first murder in human history. God’s rejection of Cain’s offering may have been the trigger, but the true reason for such hate and jealousy must be rooted much deeper.

RASHI, a famous Jewish Commentator, explained it in these words: “Two sons had the first man. One killed the other for the inheritance of the world” (for Genesis 9, 25). It was the struggle over inheritance that led to the first murder in human history as well as the

lie and the cover up attempt, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The subsequent punishment of Cain and the birth of Seth, who was the third son of Adam and Eve, didn’t bring any relief nor fix the tragedy of the first human family. Jealousy, hatred, and rivalry over God’s inheritance continued to shake Abraham’s household until hatred was healed, the lesson of reconciliation was learned, and brothers were finally able to work together.

### **Isaac and Ishmael**

Although the relationship between Abraham’s sons never reached the stage of open conflict, the Biblical story hints that, without Sarah’s brutal intervention of convincing Abraham to send their servant Hagar and her son away, the disaster could have occurred. “And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac’” (Genesis 21:8–10).

The separation of Isaac and Ishmael is seemingly unethical and unfair to our modern mind; however, it was a necessary act that was in place to prevent tragedy as was part of God’s plan. “For in Isaac your seed shall be called” (Genesis 21:12). God himself provided for Hagar and her son. He blessed Ishmael in the wilderness of Paran and his descendants grew into a great nation. However, Abraham’s calling and blessing was passed to his son of promise—Isaac.

The Bible is very laconic in its description of the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael, the only other mention of the two together is found in the story of Abraham’s death. “Then Abraham breathed his last and died a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre.” (Genesis 25:8–9)

The very fact that Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together shows their ability to handle hostility and jealousy, at least in the face of Abraham’s death. It gives us hope for future generations of brothers to work out their differences, in spite of a present competition and rivalry.

### **Jacob and Esau**

The struggle between the twin-brothers began early inside their mother’s womb. It is an understandable conflict, as indeed the two were opposite of one another. Esau was a man of the open country, whereas Jacob was a quiet man who dwelled in the tents. Due to being a worldly man, Esau didn’t think much of his father and grandfather’s calling; in his eyes life was supposed to be lived in the present. He was a skillful hunter and he knew how to appreciate all the good aspects of life in the moment, always looking for instant solutions. So, when coming from the field hungry and famished, he didn’t hesitate to sell his birthright for the plate of red stew which was prepared by his brother Jacob. Satisfying his hunger was an immediate need, while the birthright—an abstract future term, meant nothing for him at that moment. Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, ‘Swear to me now.’ So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright” (Genesis 25:32–35).

When reading this story most of us

naturally feel sympathy towards the strong, yet simple-minded Esau and we tend to dislike the cunning attitude of Jacob, who took advantage of his brother's lack of discipline and impatience. However, the Bible doesn't criticize Jacob's actions at all. Let's discover why.

It is easy to imagine that gentle and delicate Jacob spent much of his time in the tent with his elderly parents, listening to the stories about Abraham and Isaac's encounters with God. He probably heard of a prophetic promise, given to his mother Rebecca, while the boys were still in her womb. "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:2).

There was nothing Jacob wanted more than to be the one who carries the torch of Abraham's faith further on.

Jacob believed in the invisible promise given by God Almighty to his grandfather: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Once the opportunity presented itself, he took it without hesitation. This doesn't change the fact that the proposed deal was clearly unfair and later on, Jacob would have to repay his brother tenfold.

Further on, the story tells us that when Isaac grew old and wished to pass the blessing to his beloved Esau, that Jacob, encouraged by his mother, didn't hesitate to deceive his father by pretending to be Esau, thus stealing his brother's blessing. "Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, 'Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.' As soon as Esau heard the

words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, 'Bless me, even me also, O my father!' But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing'" (Genesis 27:33-35).

Esau, who probably already held grudge against Jacob for tricking him to sell the birthright for a bowl of stew, was now furious. The struggle for the rule over the family had begun. "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27:41).

The only way to save Jacob was to send him away, physically separating the two. Under the pretext of finding a wife from Rebecca's family, Jacob fled to the house of Laban in Haran.

The next 28 years of Jacob's life would be full of challenges and struggles. He had to leave his house only with



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Jacob and Esau reconcile (Francesco Hayez, 1844)



Joseph Reveals his Dream to his Brethren (James Tissot, 1896–1902)

the clothes on his back. Not a penny from Abraham's riches would become his. He would have to work seven years for Rachel, only to receive Leah instead. He then agreed to work another seven years for his beloved Rachel. He would be cheated by his uncle Laban again and again, overcome it all and finally become a new man, Israel. It will be a new Jacob, coming back to his promised land. Everything he had, he earned by his own sweat. He had experienced God's revelation in Bethel, he struggled with the mysterious figure at banks of Jabok river. It is interesting that here as well, Jacob is looking for a blessing. He knows that the spiritual and the invisible are what really matter, and that what was impossible for Jacob, Israel can do. After all these events, he was ready to face his brother Esau, was willing to pay in full for what he had stolen before, and was confident enough to call himself Esau's servant.

The Bible is awfully quiet about what happened to Esau in those years. We know that he had many children by his wives and we can assume that he inherited the physical household of Abraham and Isaac. His life was consid-

ered good, however, the old grudge and pain left behind from Jacob's betrayal was not ready to go away yet. When he heard that Jacob returned home, Esau advanced to meet his brother with 400 armed men. You don't bring 400 men just for a welcome party; Esau was ready for a war! He was ready to protect what was his. Nevertheless, when he saw that Jacob came in humility with generous gifts and a humbled spirit, Esau's simple heart was ready to forgive his twin-brother. "And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:1-4).

Being a man who liked to live in the moment, Esau was genuinely happy to meet his lost brother and his family. He honestly refused to accept Jacob's gifts

as he already had plenty. Indeed, he had essentially inherited all that of Abraham and Isaac. Only after Jacob insisted did Esau agree to accept Jacob's livestock. The Biblical text revealed to us sincere reconciliation between the two brothers. Forgiveness came in place of hatred, brotherly love instead of jealousy. Unlike the partial peace made over Abraham's grave between Isaac and Ishmael, the reunion between Jacob and Esau was genuine and true.

Peace in the family had been restored, although, in order to keep it this way, the two brothers had to go their own ways. Jacob, who was well aware of Esau's character, found a good excuse not to travel with him. He knew that even when they managed to overcome the past betrayal and hatred, that the distance between the two would be essential to maintaining this fragile peace.

Yet another reason for such separation is the fact that God's calling of Abraham's seed was to be passed through Jacob alone. Esau, who inherited the physical wealth of Abraham, was not the heir of the spiritual blessings and promises. In fact, by accepting Jacob's gifts of reconciliation, Esau agreed, that both Isaac's blessing and the birthright was now rightfully Jacob's. Jacob paid with physical wealth to obtain something much more important, the treasure which is in heaven and the covenant with God Almighty. In this perspective, he was fulfilling Yeshua's command: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

## Joseph and His Brothers

Nearly one quarter of the book of Genesis is dedicated to Joseph's adventures in Egypt. His story concluded the "family" part of the Jewish History, which was

picked up again 400 years later as the history of the nation.

We see that Jacob's children maintained the unfortunate family tradition of sibling rivalry. The sons of Rachel and Leah carried on their mother's struggle for Jacob's affection, who also proceeded to make the same mistakes as his parents by favoring one son over the others. Young Joseph reminded Jacob of his beloved Rachel, thus he was his father's favorite. "Now, Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him" (Genesis 37:3-4).

To make the situation even worse, Joseph added to the conflict by telling on his brothers and bragging about his dreams. "His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (Genesis 37:8).

Here again, the story ultimately brings us to the same question of who will be the ruler of the family, who will inherit the birthright as well as all of Abraham's blessings?

Later on, when the older brothers were pasturing their flocks near Shechem, Israel sent Joseph to check up on them. The Hebrew text actually says "to check upon your brothers' peace," the same brothers who couldn't even speak peacefully with him. Many Jewish commentators noticed this controversy between the two opposites and the deep spiritual meaning that it gives to the story.

Joseph followed his father's command and traveled to Shechem and then to the valley of Dothan. In spite of the strained relationships in the family, Joseph did all he could to find his brothers, even though his brothers were so blinded by hate that they were willing to murder their own flesh and blood.

"They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him" (Genesis 37:18). Both Judah and Reuben, who were not comfortable with fratricide, looked for different ways in which to get rid of Joseph. "Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28). The brothers tore and stained Joseph's special colorful coat with blood and presented it to Jacob as evidence of his son being devoured by a wild beast.

Years passed by, however, the wound forged in Jacob's family would refuse to heal. We don't know how the brothers were able to cope with the lie they told to their father, especially with the hypocrisy of trying to comfort him when they knew that they were the ultimate source of his grief.

Meanwhile in Egypt, slavery, deceit, temptation, and prison transformed a naïve and self-righteous Joseph into the wise and patient man who was filled

with God's spirit. His ability to excel in everything he did and the miraculous interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams brought Joseph to the top of Egyptian social hierarchy. However, Joseph made no attempt to contact his family, to comfort his grieving father, or to punish his evil brothers. In the days when Canaan was an Egyptian province, it would have been a fairly easy task for someone in his position. What exactly stopped him from doing this? Was it the fear to face the hatred of his own family, or perhaps the desire to start with a completely clean slate? Is it also possible that God revealed to Joseph the Dreamer what would happen in the future as he waited patiently for God's plan to come true. From this point, the story of Joseph and his brothers is focused on only one theme—achievement of the true reconciliation and peace between the sons of Israel, as without it, the future of the nation would be impossible.

When hunger became severe in Canaan, the brothers went down to Egypt to purchase some food for their families.



Hagar in the Wilderness (Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, 1835)

*The Bible takes us from the murder and curse in the story of Cain and Abel, to coexistence between Isaac and Ishmael, through forgiveness and separation between Jacob and Esau to, finally, true repentance.*

“Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. ‘Where do you come from?’ he said. They relied, ‘From the land of Canaan, to buy food’” (Genesis 42:7).

Before revealing his true identity, Joseph had to test his brothers to see if they remained the same (hateful and deceitful) or if they had changed and felt remorse for their past actions. He remembered the dreams of his youth and began to grasp an understanding of the great plan of God.

The accusations of being spies and thieves compelled the brothers into admitting their guilt. “Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us’” (Genesis 42:21).

The plot thickened when Joseph accused his younger brother Benjamin of stealing his silver cup and then threatened to throw him in jail. He tested his brothers in this fashion in order to see if they would take the easy path, and leave Benjamin in jail, or if they had truly repented and changed their hearts towards the sons of Rachel. According to Maimonides, true repentance is “... when an opportunity presents itself for repeating an offense once commit-

ted, and the offender, while able to commit the offense, nevertheless refrains from doing so because he has repented and not out of fear or failure of vigor.” (Tractate on the Regulations of the Repentance, Chapter 2).

Judah, who assumed the leadership role in the family, chose to offer himself instead of his younger brother. At the moment, when the brothers openly admitted their past sin against Joseph and were even ready to accept a punishment because of it, Joseph couldn’t contain himself any longer. The family was once again reunited and saved from hunger. The children of Israel moved to Egypt and settled in the land of Goshen.

The last spark of fear and distrust came up again after Jacob’s death. The brothers were fearful that Joseph would now seek his revenge and created a fake dying wish from their father so that Joseph would indeed still forgive them. “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.’ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this command before he died: Say to Joseph, ‘Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.’

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants.’ But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Genesis 50:15–19).

## Conclusion

Every family story in the book of Genesis depicts the same narrative of sibling rivalry over the question of who will rule and who will inherit the spiritual heritage. Continually, we see something that differs from the natural order of things, the youngest amongst the siblings being chosen by God to carry on the family blessing. This led to hatred and even murder, as seen with Cain and Abel.

However, from one story to another, we also see the process of resolving and healing the issues of hate and jealousy. “... sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:7). Abraham’s decedents learned how to rule and to control their sinful inclinations as well as how to be worthy of God’s election. The Bible takes us from the murder and curse in the story of Cain and Abel, to coexistence between Isaac and Ishmael, through forgiveness and separation between Jacob and Esau to, finally, the true repentance, reconciliation, and blessing in the story of Joseph. Although the tension between different tribes of Israel would reappear in the future, Jacob’s family was now united and ready to become a nation of God, prepared to face any outside threat and to overcome it. ■

# Upon the Ark: Noah and His Family

BY ELHANAN BEN-AVRAHAM



MIKE\_KIEV/ISTOCK

**T**hough the name Noah in Hebrew means “comfort,” I am not certain that the call that the prophet Noah received was all that comfortable or even comforting to him. Likewise, that of Yeshua, which is the Hebrew word for “salvation,” was similar. Both were called to warn, to publish what would be an unpopular message, and to build an ark of salvation for the remnant faithful who would be preserved for a New World.

Life on the ark was challenging; Noah was to build a large ship with no sails, rudder, steering device, nor a fore or aft. Without any modern carpentry tools, it was surely a long and difficult task to construct, especially with a small family as the crew of workers. There were no navigating devices or even a decent window to chart direction. When the waters rose, they were entirely at the mercy of the drift and would land only where destiny would take them. Their only navigator was the Creator of the universe.

It was for a very long spell that they would be at sea, requiring a great deal of patience as well as faith in the unseen. They could count only upon the promise of the Creator. Furthermore, they were called upon only to complete the job, follow directions, and take care of those living within the ark. Everything occurring outside the ark was beyond their control and remained only in the hands of God.

For almost a year at sea they would go about their daily tasks of feeding the collected animals and themselves, cleaning up messes, keeping the lions from eating the lambs, and

keeping the family together in what was most likely a tight and stressful environment. They may have had to work at getting along with each other during their wait for their coming fate, yet a mystery to them. Their job was to be good stewards of the world within the ark, while the world outside them was utterly beyond their control. A year was a long time for waiting and wondering, however, the Navigator eventually fulfilled His promise to the drifting sailors and directed them to a world purged and renewed.

The ark that is founded by the Messiah is similar to that of Noah's. Constructing that ark was fraught with challenges, the unpopular message, and warning is not without peril. Gathering the creatures onto the ark is God's business, but the ark is a sign to our generation and still remains available to those who seek it.

Upon the ark, our call is the same as Noah's, which is to get along with each other under trying circumstances, to raise our families well and faithfully, and to keep the lions from eating the lambs. There are messes to clean up and an abundance of daily work that we are commissioned to faithfully perform in this festering world. Indeed, there are many odd creatures gathered onto the ark. However, our challenge is to maintain as much harmony as possible and to wait with patience and faith in the unseen, as it is only the Navigator who can guide the ark and deliver us to our final destination in the New World. As He was faithful to Noah and His own, He will be faithful to fulfill His promises to us. ■

# Abraham Our Father: A Family Man

## The Man God Chose to Father a Nation

**W**hen one thinks of Abraham, they think of his faith in God and all His promises. It is seldom that Abraham is viewed as a family man and as a loving husband. To better grasp this idea, we must first put ourselves into Abraham's world and position.

In his realm, it was normal to have more than one wife. Due to this, Abraham took another one in his old age, as it is written in Genesis 25:1–2, “Abraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah ...” Right from the beginning we see the importance placed by God on Abraham's family and offspring. Further on, God tells him, “Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1) Immediately we find out that Abraham is not going to the Land of Canaan alone, he is taking his kin with him on the journey. This verse from Genesis 12:4 elaborates on it, “So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan.”

Abram (Abraham) receives a great promise from God—to have numerous descendants: “Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him” (Genesis 12:7). This promise is to guarantee that his primary wife Sarah, the matron of his household, will conceive a son. This affirmation became the foundation of Abraham's life; his glory and mistakes are all events that happen around this desire and even obsession to have a son from Sarah. Almost all of Abraham's story revolves around this desire and expectation for God to fulfill His promises to him.

Sarah initially tries to satisfy Abraham's wish for a son by giving him her handmaid Hagar as a wife. Genesis 16:1–4 says, “Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, ‘See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go into my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.”

### The Path of Peace

So what can we learn about Abraham and his family from this strange story? It is evident that Sarah felt much pain and anxiety because she thought that her husband was suffering over the fact that she couldn't have children. She empathized with Abraham and his obsessive desire to have a son. Notice that the Bible never tells us anything about Abra-

ham and his daughters. In fact, we don't even know if he ever had a daughter. It is as if the expectation for a son just overshadows every other issue in the whole narrative of Abraham within the Bible. This anxiety he had is the cause of one of the major problems in the history of Israel, even until this very day. We are still dealing with the "Ishmaelite" issue when we face the sons of Ishmael, also known as the Arab nation.

Abraham takes Lot, his brother's son, with his family to the land of Canaan. It does not take long for a confrontation between the shepherds of Abraham and the shepherds who are working with Lot's flocks to have a conflict. First off, Abraham is older and is the head of the family. Further, Lot came along with his uncle Abraham and became richer under the auspices of his relative. In Middle Eastern context, the most honorable thing Lot could have done in this situation was allow Abraham to make the decision about what to do with the conflict. The passage that discusses this states, "So Abram said to Lot, 'Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left'" (Genesis 13:8-9).

Abraham's attitude towards the family is so clearly seen in this story. He is not willing to fight with a family member, nor is he willing to give up his honor for the sake of peace either. He is prepared to suffer economically just so there won't be strife with his nephew. He gives Lot the right of first choice which he is not shy to choose the best part of the land with the richest pasture. This event is a demonstration of Abraham's magnanimity for his family. Naturally, most people don't pay attention to this aspect of Abraham's story. Nevertheless, Abraham as a husband and father is not without his dark spots. Let us take

*Abraham is not willing to fight with a family member, nor is he willing to give up his honor for the sake of peace either. He is prepared to suffer economically just so there won't be strife with his nephew.*

a look at some of these problematic errors in Abraham's docket.

It says in Genesis 12:12-16, "Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.' So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels."

Abraham knew according to this text that if he speaks the truth and tells the Egyptians that Sarah is his wife that indeed his life will be in danger. He allows Sarah to be taken to Pharaoh's house, which makes the Egyptians treat Abraham well for her sake. He receives grain and other spoils in return for his deed of abandoning his wife into the hands of Pharaoh. There does not seem to be any remorse from this event nor a hint of what happened to Sarah in Pharaoh's house.

### **Saving a Life**

The rabbis have a rule that "preservation of life" (Pikuach Nefesh) puts aside all the commandments or almost all. They believe what Abraham did once with Pharaoh in Egypt and again with Abimelech King of Gerar in the northern

Negev was just an act of preservation, thus his actions are justified.

Genesis 20:2-6 continues, "Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.' And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.' But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, 'Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister?'' And she, even she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this.' And God said to him in a dream, 'Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.'"

There is a rule in the interpretation of the Word of God that even Yeshua used when He was accused by the Pharisees; this was brought up when he allows His disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. Yeshua used the case of David who took the bread baked on the Sabbath to be placed on the table of the Lord inside the Tabernacle. This bread was not allowed to be eaten fresh (baked on the Sabbath) and likewise was permitted only to be eaten by the priests. There is no condemnation of David for taking this bread and for not speaking the truth to the priest. This principle is also applied to these indiscretions of Abraham when he inevitably abandoned his wife twice.



Abraham's Journey from Ur to Canaan (Jozsef Molnar, 1850)

This similar type of action by Abraham is later used by Lot when he is willing to hand his daughters into a crowd of lustful perverts from the city of Sodom. In the end, the daughters raped their own father because they thought they were the last survivors of the human race and wanted to preserve it by having intercourse with their drunk father. Again, we see what goes around comes around and how Abraham's example influenced his nephew Lot and his family.

In a similar fashion comes Abraham's willingness to send Hagar and Ishmael out to the desert with a high probability that they will not survive the desert journey. Of course this decision can be attributed to Sarah and also to God himself who instructs Abraham to listen to Sarah his wife. In the end, it is God who saves Hagar and Ishmael from certain death. All these events are just a window in which to try and understand the complexity of Abraham's character and family relationships.

A story that further illustrates how caring Abraham was for his family is

seen when he hears that Lot and his kin are taken captive by the kings of the north. Abraham takes the men of his camp and goes chasing after these powerful kings; later he recaptures Lot and saves them all.

We learn from this event, which can be found in Genesis chapter 14, that Abraham felt responsible for Lot and his family and was willing to go to war and bring about a major military campaign just to save them from captivity. Although Lot acted selfishly with his uncle, Abraham did just the opposite and was willing to make significant sacrifices for him. The crowning acts of Abraham toward his family will forever remain a conundrum!

The sacrifice of Isaac is an act that perhaps under a different circumstance, would be considered criminal. Abraham, a man who had waited, dreamed, and wished for a son from his beloved Sarah was on the very edge and verge of sacrificing and killing the son that was the embodiment of all his hopes and desires.

This man, who holds the blessing

for all the families of the earth and also many wonderful promises from God that his seed will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand in the seashore, now has to kill the very object and subject of these promises. What can possibly compromise Abraham's devotion to his family?

We must note that the sacrifice of Isaac is actually a test administered by God as seen in Genesis 22:1-2, "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'"

A series of questions arise after reading this passage. First of all, why would God need to test Abraham? How could Abraham pass such a test that puts all of God's promises in jeopardy? How could Isaac be so sure that his future is secure in the face of Abraham's action?

These questions are key to understand the personality and faith of Abraham and his attitude towards God and his family.

## Ramban (Nachmanides) on Genesis 22

"And God tested Avraham: The issue of this test is, in my opinion, shows that a person has the absolute authority to perform an action; one can do what they want, and not do what one doesn't want. It is called a *nissayon* (test) for the individual being tested (e.g., Avraham), but the blessed Tester will command him to bring out the thing from ability to actuality, giving a reward for a good action and not just a reward for a good heart. Know that "Hashem tests the righteous" (Psalms 11:5): when He knows that a righteous person will act according to His will, but still seeks [that person to act with] their righteousness, He will command him to a test. But He does not test the wicked, since they would any-

ways not hear. And behold, every test in the Torah is for the good of the one being tested.”

Commentators often question what the following verse means: “Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham.” The answer that is given by most Jewish Rabbinical commentators is that the phrase “after these things” means after these events. The events are interpreted as those of chapter 20 between Abraham and Sarah and Abimelech. Abraham repeating the same behavior that already endangered Sarah in the hands of Pharaoh and caused God to question Abraham’s sincerity and dedication.

There is an interesting Midrash that has the following narrative:

And while Abraham and Isaac were proceeding along the road, Satan came and appeared to Abraham in the figure of a very aged man, humble and of contrite spirit, and said to him: ‘Are you silly or foolish old man, that you are going to do such a evil thing to your only son? God gave you a son in your old age, and you are going to slaughter him, who did not commit any violence, and you will cause the soul of your only son to perish from the earth? Do you not know and understand that this thing cannot be from the Lord? For the Lord would never do such an evil and command a person to sacrifice his only son.’

Abraham, hearing these words, knew that it was Satan, who endeavors to turn him astray from the way of the Lord, and he rebuked him that he went away. Satan returned this time and came to Isaac, and he appeared to him in the figure of a young, handsome man and speaking in good manner said: “Do you not know that your silly old father is

bringing you in order to kill you for no good reason? Now, my son, don’t listen to your silly old man, and don’t allow your soul and your beautiful body be lost forever from the Earth.”

Isaac told his father what Satan said to him. “Take care and don’t listen to Satan’s words, for he is endeavors get to lead us astray from the commands of our God.” Abraham rebuked Satan and he went away from them seeing that he cannot prevail over them. Satan transformed himself into a large brook of water in the road. When Abraham and Isaac and the two servants reached the brook, they saw a large and powerful river with mighty waters. They entered the brook, trying to pass it, but the further they went, the deeper the brook, so that the water reached up to their necks and they were all terrified on account of the water. But, Abraham recognized the place, knew that there had been no water there before, and he said to his son: “I know this place on which there was no brook of water. Now, surely, it is Satan who had done this to us, to make it difficult for us to obey the Lord.”

Abraham said to Satan: “The Lord rebuke you, O Satan. Be gone from us, for we go by the command of God.” Satan was terrified at the voice of Abraham and he went away from them and the place became dry land again as it was at first. And Abraham went with Isaac toward the place that God had told him.”

This Midrash is of course not a real Bible story. It is an attempt from the rabbis to explain the absurdity of this event. The importance of it is to show the faithfulness of God and likewise the devotion of Abraham and Isaac. Everyone in this

story is dedicated and keeps his integrity no matter what situation arises.

In fact, the dedication of Abraham to God is the same level of devotion that he has towards his family. Abraham is not a perfect human being, but he is pure in his relationship to God and his household.

The final thing that I wish to share about Abraham is that his faithfulness led him not only to believe in God, but also to obey His laws and commandments. Consider the following text:

“Then the LORD appeared to him (Isaac) and said: ‘Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.’” (Genesis 26:2–5)

Keep in mind the faith of Abraham to all the people in his life. Remember how he was as loyal to Lot, his nephew, as he was to his wife Sarah and likewise to Ephron the Hittite, the man from whom he purchased the cave of Machpela which he buried Sarah in. This was only possible because Abraham trusted God and His promises, even with the most absurd of demands. Abraham trusted God’s promises and that gave him the strength to make himself vulnerable and trusting of men. We too can learn a few more things about our own families if we trust in the Lord and His promises for us. ■

# Life of Jacob: Jealousy and Revelation

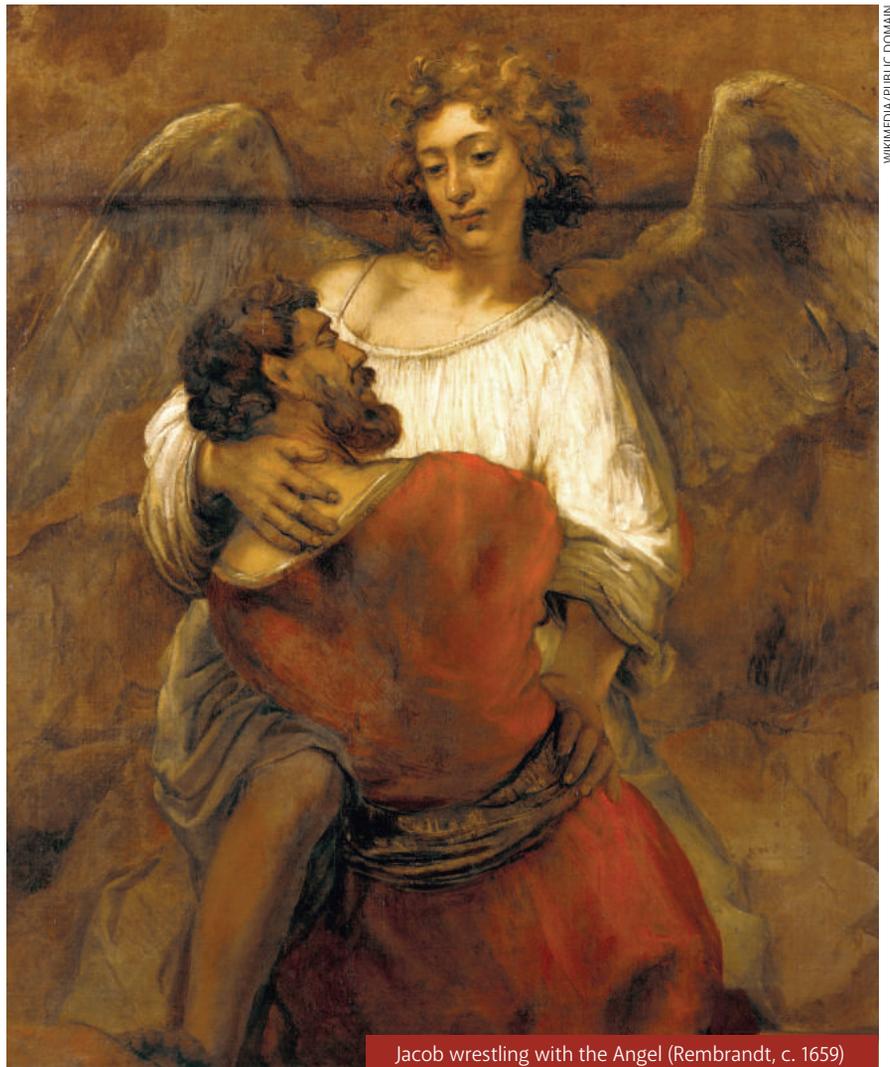
**W**hen I read through the overwhelming chapters surrounding Jacob in the book of Genesis, the virtues that left a deep impression in me include Jealousy and Revelation.

## Jealousy

Jealousy is a virtue; The LORD God described Himself as a jealous God. What might we assume regarding this nature of character? It is a passionate, subjective love that will dare to break rules and cross boundaries of common justice in order to obtain the desired object.

Jacob was quite the jealous individual; he desired the favor and love of his father, despite the fact that Isaac was devoted to Esau. Even while in the womb and after birth, he grasped the heel of his elder brother. On a more spiritual level, Jacob was jealous for the promise of God—the divine blessing he believed rightfully belonged to his life and legacy.

Such jealousy, often misleadingly translated as “zeal,” possessed Jesus of



Jacob wrestling with the Angel (Rembrandt, c. 1659)

Nazareth. According to the Gospel of John, after the Master violently drove out the merchants from the Temple, the disciples were mindful of the powerful verse in Psalms, "Jealousy for your house consumes me ..." (Psalms 69:9).

The Song of Songs written by Solomon famously states, "Love is as strong as death, jealousy as hard as Sheol" (Song of Songs 8:6). In other words, love and jealousy are parallel to each other and equated to great force, death or Sheol. We are reminded of Jacob's fear and misery upon hearing that Joseph, his favorite son, was killed. He said the following when he refused to be comforted, "I will continue to mourn until I die and descend to Sheol to my son" (Genesis 37:35).

As an old man, Jacob had many previous experiences with death and risking death for the sake of what must be done. He risked his life intercepting Esau's blessing from Isaac and fled to survive as a result. When his son Joseph was born to his true love Rachel, he realized he must return to fulfill the promise of blessing and legacy in Canaan and he had to flee Laban in a cross with death. Jacob reentered the territory of Esau fearing death. They were well aware that they might die, but they crossed into the land anyway only to discover that there was no danger. When Simeon and Levi murdered the inhabitants of the land, again, Jacob feared for the life of his family.

Rachel died giving birth and perhaps this was the tragic result of Jacob's own curse, ignorant that it was she that had stolen Laban's idols: "Whoever you find your gods with, will not live" (Genesis 31:32). Finally, when there was famine and his ten sons went to Egypt seeking food, the undisclosed Joseph demanded to see the last brother, Benjamin. Jacob initially refused to let him go because he was so attached to the boy, the only remaining son of his wife Rachel. However, when he realized that it was a trial of life and faith, Jacob agreed de-

*It was the knowledge of God's vision and words that created the circumstances in which Jacob and those around him practiced jealousy and strife.*

claring, "... and if I be bereaved, I will be bereaved," ואני, כאשר שכלתי שכלתי (Genesis 43:14).

## Revelation

The second thread I wish to mention is revelation. Revelations of God's character, His historical plans, promises, visitations, and love are foreshadowed in Jacob's life and throughout the Torah and Bible. These are the most significant pieces of knowledge that are passed on to us from generation to generation. If we read the Bible with any other hermeneutic, we fail to be mindful that this is both a story and testimony all in one and that this is the essence and the very reason for the textual tradition. Likewise, we should not read Jacob's life, or any of the other biblical fathers, without identifying the centrality of revelation.

I imagined Jacob as a youth, hearing of the divine revelations and experiences of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Even more so, learning of the LORD speaking, visiting, challenging, and blessing them. Perhaps this is what made him jealous to experience the LORD God firsthand. It was the knowledge of God's vision and words that created the circumstances in which Jacob and those around him practiced jealousy and strife. Jacob surely knew that his mother was spoken to by God, proclaiming that the younger would be greater, thus implying that the birthright and blessing belonged to him.

When Joseph the son of Jacob had spiritual dreams from the LORD God, his brothers became jealous. They hated him, not only because he was the favorite son of their father and the son of the

woman their father loved more than theirs, but he was also the one experiencing God. They knew this was the specific heritage that dated back a few generations. However, unlike their father Jacob, jealousy led them to hate and violence with no particular purpose. Jacob did not hate his brother Esau nor his father Isaac. He did not hate his uncle Laban either; he was jealous for God's promises and blessing, despite having a rough relationship with some of his relatives.

The text subtly notes that when Joseph had his dreams and the brothers started hating him for it, that Jacob himself reprimanded him, advising him to keep the words in his heart. For Jacob knew the significance of revelation and risked his life based upon the revealed knowledge and the knowledge from the Revealer. For Jacob, his jealousy and heritage went hand-in-hand with revelation and blessing. When he died, he blessed his children, the tribes that would develop and the nations that would be blessed through them as carriers of revelation.

Any religion that claims affinity to the biblical tradition yet focuses on doctrine is not genuine. Tradition is the passing on of knowledge and hope for revelation. Orthodoxy without faith and experience is hopeless. In this respect, controlled jealousy is an asset, though risky. Even Jesus' disciples struggled at times with jealousy in their confused piety.

May we find the right balance: cherishing wisdom, community, and tradition without quenching our lust to experience the LORD God in mystical love and existential revelation. ■

# The House of Joseph

## Genesis 45

Stories are Powerful



Joseph in Egypt (James Tissot, c. 1896–1902)

As Paul wrestled with the mystery of the gospel, trying to come to terms with the Gentile inclusion, he might have rolled the scroll to the stories of Joseph. In Paul’s day, other voices were already retelling the stories of Joseph as metaphors for Gentile inclusion and exclusion.

During Joseph’s time of estrangement from his family, he took an Egyptian bride. Her name was Asenath. She was the daughter of a pagan priest. We are told nothing else about her except that she bore Joseph two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh. Her two sons went on to be patriarchs of two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Joseph’s Egyptian wife was something of an embarrassment to the sages. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was a Hebrew like himself. When Abraham sought a wife for

his son Isaac, he sent his servant on a quest to find a girl from his own people. He wanted a Hebrew, Shemite bride for his son. Abraham’s servant procured Rebecca for Isaac, and they had two sons. They grieved over Esau because he took wives from among the local girls. Jacob’s wives, on the other hand, were Hebrew Shemites like his mother and grandmother. But in Joseph’s case, Asenath was the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and hence a Hamite. Joseph’s marriage to her appears to be a breach of ethnic fealty. One can almost hear Grandma Rebecca’s disapproving “tsk-tsk” echoing from inside the Machphelah tomb in Hebron.

### Daughter of Dinah

The embarrassment over Asenath comes from the implication that two of the Israelite tribes had Egyptian blood in their veins from the outset. In response to this uncomfortable moment in the Torah, the sages supplied a midrashic explanation for Joseph’s marriage to Asenath. According to this explanation, Asenath was Joseph’s niece, the daughter of his sister Dinah. Of course Joseph did not realize this, but through miraculous circumstances, his niece had been adopted

by Potiphera and raised as an Egyptian. Therefore, Asenath, the bride of Joseph, was not an Egyptian at all; she was really an Israelite in disguise. The happy result of this retelling of the story is that Ephraim and Manasseh (and hence the tribes that bear their names) are full-blooded sons of Jacob.

The midrash says, “When Shechem son of Hamor violated Dinah, she conceived and bore Asenath. Jacob’s sons wished to kill the child. What did Jacob do? He inscribed the Divine Name on a gold foil, hung it about her neck, and sent her away. The angel Michael descended and brought her down to Egypt into the house of Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife, being barren, raised Asenath as a daughter.”<sup>1</sup> In the story, Jacob’s gold-foil dog-tag with the ineffable Name inscribed on it serves to identify her later. This assures us that she is indeed Dinah’s daughter and not a horrid Egyptian woman after all.

The revision of the story is primarily concerned with the purity of bloodlines. We can imagine the sage who created this explanation for Asenath. He is a respected teacher in his community, perhaps with his own school of disciples. As the Torah authority of the local *Beit Midrash* and synagogue, he feels responsible for safeguarding the community. What’s more, he is not particularly fond of proselytes.

He has seen both converts to Judaism and Christians turn against the Jewish community when the political pressure to do so was applied. He has seen the deleterious effects of Gentile worldviews in the Torah community. He has had to deal with the legal problems raised by mixed marriages. Further, he has seen more than enough Jewish blood spilled by Gentile hands.

His disciples come to him with a question. “Master,” they ask, “how is it that Joseph, who proved his purity and devotion to his father’s family when tempted by the Egyptian woman, succumbed to be married to the heathen

*Asenath must be Israelite because the alternative is unthinkable. It cannot be proven and it need not be proven, because it is a matter of identity. It is a story, not a history.*

daughter of an Egyptian priest?”

The old sage considers the question. How should he answer? He might answer, “Asenath was a proselyte that converted to Judaism, thus Joseph was free to marry her.” But such an answer would seem to sanction mixed marriages. It might even encourage his disciples to consider Gentile women for themselves, Heaven forbid. What would prevent one of his disciples from marrying a Gentile woman whom he had convinced to make a similar conversion? Furthermore, such an answer would imply that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were not pure descendants of Shem—an unconscionable conclusion to reach. The sage understands that his telling of the story of Asenath will shape the identity of the Jewish community for better or for worse.

He considers it a moment more and answers with a question. “What of the other eleven brothers? From where did they obtain their wives?”

His disciples have no answer. This question had not previously occurred to them. From where indeed? Aside from the ill-fated marriage of Judah, the Torah does not say.

“I will tell you from whence they found wives,” the sage says. “The wives of all the tribes were born along with them, from the same womb even. Each of Jacob’s sons was born as a fraternal twin with his wife. Thus, God provided good Israelite wives for each of our fathers. Except for Joseph.”

Now the sage has a smile on his face. He has his disciples hanging on his every word. Their mouths are agape. Their eyes are riveted on him. He chuckles as

he asks, “And from where was Joseph to obtain a wife? Why did God provide an Israelite bride for each of his brothers but not for him?”

The disciples shake their heads. They do not know why.

“I’ll tell you why,” the sage says. “Because Dinah’s daughter Asenath was fitting for him as a wife.”<sup>2</sup> As his explanation grows, the story of Asenath’s birth, her abandonment, her angelic transportation to Egypt, and her adoption by Potiphera are all supplied as necessary details to support the premise.

By imagining sibling-spouses for the sons of Jacob and by reinventing Asenath as a granddaughter of Jacob, our sage has avoided the unpleasant implications of mixed bloodlines. In addition, he has protected his ethnocentric worldview, which places Gentiles outside of the people of God. Nevermind that Dinah’s own daughter, child of a Canaanite rape, could hardly have been of a pure bloodline herself. It is enough that the reproach of Joseph has been removed.

He has reinvented Asenath. He has made her into a symbol and confirmation of the exclusion of the Gentiles. She may at first appear to be a Gentile convert, but on closer examination, she proves to be a lost daughter of Israel. Objections to his interpretation are waved away by fanciful claims and a creative retelling of the story. Asenath must be Israelite because the alternative is unthinkable. It cannot be proven and it need not be proven, because it is a matter of identity. It is a story, not a history.

However, his fanciful retelling is contrary to the literal reading of the

Torah. In the Torah's account, Asenath is Egyptian. She is the blood-daughter of an Egyptian, and Joseph marries her because he has no hope of ever being reunited with his family. His marriage to her results in two sons. Joseph names the elder Manasseh ("forgetful") because he has forgotten his father's family. He names the second son Ephraim ("doubly fruitful") because God has made him twice fruitful with two his sons.

The midrash wants to adjust the plain meaning of the text in order to avoid the unpleasant implication that two of the tribes of Israel have an Egyptian mother. By trying to control the story, the midrash hopes to control Jewish identity.

## Daughter of Egypt

But there exists another, perhaps older, answer to the question about Joseph's bride. This interpretation of the Asenath character comes from the pen of a Greek-speaking Jewish author living sometime in the first century of the common era. We don't know his name or where he came from, but we can infer some things about him from his writing. He wrote in Greek, had an interest in things Egyptian, and seemed to have firsthand knowledge of Egyptian geography. Also, he may have been an Egyptian Jew living in Alexandria.

In his community, he had probably seen scores of Gentiles turn from their idolatrous worship systems and attach themselves to the God of Abraham. The great port city of Alexandria afforded him plenty of occasions to rub shoulders with all manner of men. He met people from all nations who had joined themselves to Israel as proselytes and converts. They were Greek speakers for the most part, but they possessed a deep passion for the God of the Hebrews. They were God fearers, converts, and Christians. They crowded themselves into the Great Synagogue; they pressed themselves in among Israel. From the Egyptian writer's perspective, the pres-

ence of those Gentiles enriched the family of God.

As a result, he took a very positive view of converts; perhaps he himself was a convert to Judaism. In his book, *Joseph and Asenath*, his interpretation of the Asenath character is considerably friendlier toward Gentiles than that of the midrash cited above.

*Joseph and Asenath* is a suggestively erotic love story about Joseph and his Egyptian bride. In the story, Asenath is portrayed as a breathtakingly beautiful, virgin daughter of an Egyptian priest. Despite her great beauty, she is completely devoted to idolatry and worships all the gods of Egypt. Yet when she lays eyes on Joseph, she is so smitten that she says, "I did not know that Joseph is a son of God."<sup>3</sup>

She tries to woo him, but he is not interested. He rebukes her for her idolatry and she is filled with shame. Having fallen utterly in love with Joseph, she destroys all of her idols, repents for seven days in sackcloth and ashes, and calls upon the God of Joseph. During her seven days of repentance, a heavenly man appears to her. He is described as "a man in every respect similar to Joseph ... except that his face was like lightning and his eyes like sunshine and the hairs of his head like a flame of fire of a burning torch, and hands and feet like iron shining forth from a fire."<sup>4</sup> The heavenly Joseph-Man is similar to the Son of Man descriptions in the books of Daniel and Enoch.

The Joseph-Man speaks to Asenath, saying, "Take courage, for behold your name was written in the book of the living in heaven in the beginning of the book, as the very first of all, your name was written by my finger and it will not be erased forever. Behold, from today, you will be renewed and formed anew and made alive again and you will eat the blessed bread of life, and drink a blessed cup of immortality, and anoint yourself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility. And your name shall no longer be called Asenath, but your name

shall be 'City of Refuge,' because in you many nations will take refuge with the LORD God, the Most High, and under your wings many peoples will be sheltered and behind your walls will be guarded those who attach themselves to the Most High God in the name of repentance."<sup>5</sup>

After her encounter with the divine Joseph-Man, Asenath converts into a worshipper of the LORD God Most High. She confesses her sins and washes herself from the ashes of her repentance. She dresses herself in a wedding garment and waits for her beloved to return.

The Pharaoh of Egypt informs her, "The LORD, the God of Joseph, has chosen you as a bride for Joseph, because he is the firstborn son of God. And you shall be called a daughter of the Most High."<sup>6</sup> At last, Joseph and Asenath are married, after which Asenath says to Joseph, "Your father Israel is like a father to me."

## City of Refuge

*Joseph and Asenath* is an important work because it presents a first-century typology of both the Joseph character and the Asenath character. In the mind of the writer of *Joseph and Asenath*, Joseph represents a messianic figure. He is even called "the firstborn son of God." The divine Joseph-Man gives Asenath to eat from the "blessed bread of life" and to drink from the "blessed cup of immortality." These seem to be clear allusions to the rites of the Last Seder. Through the agency of this messianic Joseph character (who is represented as both divine and earthly), Asenath is converted from paganism to the worship of the one true God. The imagery seems pointedly Christian, and it may be that our Alexandrian Jewish author was also a believer.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the midrashic explanation of Asenath, our unknown author revels in Asenath's Gentile roots and pagan origin. It is her Gentile and pagan na-

ture that intrigues him. In her he sees a model for all future converts to Judaism. She is a “City of Refuge” for all nations and peoples who attach themselves to the Most High God.

By creating this charming story, our unknown Jewish author lends us an important alternative interpretation of the Asenath character and the Gentile question. His readership was probably composed of Gentile converts to Judaism (or the sect of Judaism called “The Way”). Asenath is offered to them as a sort of patron saint. She is the Torah matriarch for Gentiles seeking legitimacy in Israel.

In this respect, Asenath’s character is a proto-Ruth. Like Ruth, Asenath is a Gentile daughter of a people forbidden to intermarry with Israel. She also makes a dramatic declaration of conversion. Even more so, Asenath is ultimately brought into Israel through marriage to a Redeemer-Messiah character.

Through her attachment to Joseph, Asenath becomes the bride of a son of God and a daughter of the Most High.

## Will the Real Asenath Please Stand Up?

These two interpretations of Asenath are roughly contemporary. Yet they could not be more opposite in orientation. The midrashic view rises from a defensive and ethnocentric Judaism that views Gentile converts as a threat to the integrity of the Jewish race and religion. The *Joseph and Asenath* view rises from a confident and expansive Judaism that views Gentile converts as a complement to Israel and a testimony to the universal validity of faith in God.

Which view is correct? It depends on whom you ask; neither story is historical. Rather, they are stories written to shape a people’s corporate self-consciousness. Whoever controls the stories of a people controls the identity of the people.

The two versions of Asenath have striking similarities to the questions

## Which Asenath better represents Messianic Gentiles?

posed by many Gentile believers in Messianic Judaism today. Which Asenath better represents Messianic Gentiles? Are Gentile believers like the daughter of Dinah, lost and forgotten Israelites raised in a Gentile environment, ignorant of our own true identity as Israel, until it is revealed to them through their salvation and the teaching of the Two-House theology? Or are Gentile believers like the daughter of the Egyptian priest, a real Gentile fallen head-over-heels in love with Joseph the Israelite, forsaking pagan identity and clinging to Joseph and his God? I would opt for the latter.

The author of *Joseph and Asenath* definitely would place us in the latter camp. His messianic treatment of Joseph creates a typology into which Yeshua fits very well. As the bride of Yeshua, we are his Asenath. And like Asenath, we are brought into the family of Israel through our husband. As Asenath tells Joseph in the story, “Your father Israel is like a father to me.” Asenath is a City of Refuge in Israel for those of us who have attached ourselves to the Most High God, the God of Israel.

### A Prayer for Asenath

In the story *Joseph and Asenath*, Joseph prays for his beautiful Egyptian princess prior to her conversion. The prayer eloquently expresses the hope of our faith, our desire to be born again, to be remade and renewed and brought into the family of the God of Israel. Listen to the words of Joseph as he prays for his Gentile bride:

LORD God of my father Israel  
The Most High, the Powerful One  
of Jacob  
Who gave life to all

And called from the darkness  
to the light  
And from the error to the truth  
And from the death to the life.  
May you, LORD, bless this virgin,  
And renew her by your spirit,  
And form her anew by your hidden  
hand,  
And make her alive again by  
your life,  
And drink your cup of blessing,  
And number her among your  
people  
That you have chosen before all  
came into being,  
And let her enter your rest  
Which you have prepared for your  
chosen ones,  
And live in your eternal life forever  
and ever.<sup>8</sup> ■

### Endnotes

- 1 Yishai Chasidah, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities* (Jerusalem: Shaar Press, 1994), 97-98, citing Midrash Aggadah, Bereishit 41:45; Yalkut Shimoni, Vayishlach 134.
- 2 *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 36.
- 3 *Joseph and Asenath* 6:5 (James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [2 vols.; trans. C. Bruchard; New York: Doubleday, 1983], 2:209).
- 4 *Joseph and Asenath* 14:9 (Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:225).
- 5 *Joseph and Asenath* 15:2-7 (Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:226).
- 6 *Joseph and Asenath* 21:4 (Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:235).
- 7 However, Burchard’s introduction to the work claims that “every competent scholar has confirmed that *Joseph and Asenath* is Jewish” (Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:186). The majority of scholars maintain that *Joseph and Asenath* is a Jewish work, too Jewish to be written by a Christian. But the rigid distinction we assume between Judaism and Christianity did not exist through most of the first century. It is possible that the author of *Joseph and Asenath* was a Jewish believer.
- 8 *Joseph and Asenath* 8:9 (Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:212).

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