

Stollen Moments – Lech Lecha – November 9, 2024

PARASHA SUMMARY FROM WWW. REFORMJUDAISM.ORG

- Abram, Sarai, and Lot go to Canaan. (12:1-9)
- Famine takes them to Egypt, where Abram identifies Sarai as his sister in order to save his life. (12:10-20)
- Abram and Lot separate. Lot is taken captive, and Abram rescues him. (13:1-14:24)
- Abram has a son, Ishmael, with his Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. (16:1-16)
- God establishes a covenant with Abram. The sign of this covenant is circumcision on the eighth day following a male baby's birth. (17:1-27)

Genesis 12

וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֵּרֶד אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם לְגֹרֹם שָׁם כִּי-כָבֵד הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֵּהִי כְּבֹא מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה-נָא יוֹדְעֵתִי כִּי אִשָּׁה יִפְתַּח-מְרֹאֵה אֹתָהּ וְהָיָה כִּי-יִרְאוּ אֹתָהּ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְאָמְרוּ אִשְׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהָרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאֹתָהּ יִסְּיוּ: אָמַר-יְנָא אֶחְתִּיתִי אִתָּךְ לְמַעַן יִיטַב-לִי בְעַבְדוֹתָי וְחַיִּיתָה נַפְשִׁי בְגִלְגָּל: וַיְהִי כְּבֹא אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְאוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה כִּי-יָפָה הִוא מְאֹד: וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתָהּ שָׂרַי פְּרֻעָה וַיְהַלְלוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל-פְּרֻעָה וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פְּרֻעָה: וּלְאַבְרָם הֵיטִיב בְּעַבְדוּתָהּ וַיְהִי-לּוֹ צֹאן-וּבָקָר וְחֲמֹרִים וְעַבְדִּים וְשֹׁפְחֹת וְאֹתָנֹת וְגַמְלִים: וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה אֶת-פְּרֻעָה נְגַעִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ עַל-דְּבַר שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם: וַיִּקְרָא פְּרֻעָה לְאַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר מַה-זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לָמָּה לֹא-הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי כִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ הִוא: לָמָּה אָמַרְתָּ אֶחְתִּיתִי הִוא וְאָקַח אֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אִשְׁתְּךָ קַח וְלֵךְ: וַיֵּצֵאוּ עָלָיו פְּרֻעָה אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ:

10 There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. 13 Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.” 14 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. 15 Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s palace. 16 And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. 17 But יהוה afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. 18 Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!” 20 And Pharaoh put agents in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.

Questions for Discussion

- What in the world???????

The Sister-Wife Motif (from "My Jewish Learning")

It is just weird, really. Passing off your wife as your sister just doesn't seem like the type of thing that the patriarchs of Judaism should be doing. And not only does it happen once in the Torah, it happens three times. Twice Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister [Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18] and once Isaac passes off Rebekah as his sister [Genesis 26:1-16].

The motivation for this rather odd act is fear. As Abram says to Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you" [Genesis 12:12-13].

Why are the patriarchs passing off their wives as their sisters? The explicit reason given in the text is fear for their own lives, but the deeper question remains of why the Torah includes such an unflattering portrayal of our patriarchs. A second and perhaps more challenging question is why the motif repeats itself three times.

The location of the stories in the Torah makes the question of motivation even more problematic. Each wife-as-sister scene occurs directly after God has made some pledge of prosperity to the patriarch. Right after receiving God's pledge of safety, the patriarchs commit this rather scandalous act of weakness.

Traditional Commentators

Abraham himself offers an interesting reason for his actions; he claims that he was in fact Sarah's brother, that they had the same father but not the same mother (Gen 20:12). While this claim may provide a hint for how Abraham came to this ruse, it does nothing to explain Isaac's calling Rebekah his sister.

Modern Commentators

Some modern commentators have made a similar type of claim, though. Nahum Sarna, amongst others, says that there is evidence from Hurrian society, of which Abraham and Sarah might have participated, that there was a status known as "wife-sistership." A Hurrian could adopt his wife as his sister and give her special status and she would be treated as a blood relative of the husband's family. Abraham asked Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was of this special class, and the Egyptians understood this legality and did not harm the couple. As knowledge of this custom faded, the story is now understood to be about the patriarch's lying but its initial theme concerned recognition of this special status. This theory does not explain the wife-sister motif. It strains credulity to believe that these stories were initially not about deceit because the kings in each story respond as if they are being deceived.

There are some commentators, however, who do not defend Abraham and Isaac's actions. Nahmanides says directly that the patriarchs simply erred: "Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children."

Literary Approach

An alternative approach builds upon the literary analysis of Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*); these three repeated episodes should be understood as "type scenes." For an example of what constitutes a type scene, Alter uses the three scenes where people meet their wives at the well. Because the scenes appear so repetitive, one could say the biblical author is resorting to a formulaic motif to show couples getting married, but in fact far from formulaic, the biblical author is showing a nuanced literary sensibility.

Alter claims that the way to interpret these scenes is to determine how the scenes differ from each other; this may give some insight about the biblical character. When Moses meets Zipporah, he gets into a fight with the other shepherds, the only scene where there is a fight. Alter points out that this is emblematic of Moses' character; he is quick to anger, having killed the Egyptian taskmaster. When Isaac's servant meets Rebekah, Alter notes that Rebekah is the only woman in the scenes to deliver water to the man, emblematic of her role as the woman who manipulates the situation regarding her sons Jacob and Esau.

Utilizing this same literary technique in viewing the wife-as-sister scenes offers some intriguing insights. The scene where Isaac passes Rebekah off is perhaps the most difficult of the scenes because it directly interrupts the flow of the biblical narrative. It occurs in the middle of the stories about Jacob and Esau and seems to be completely out of place. The narrative seems to move back in time, because there is no mention of Jacob and Esau and yet we have just had the scene where Esau sells his birthright.

Differences in the Three Scenes

Looking at all three scenes, as Alter suggests, we see that the dramatic difference between the Isaac-Rebekah scene and the other two scenes is that God does not intervene at all. It is the only scene where the king discovers the real nature of the relationship by seeing Isaac and Rebekah being intimate with each other [the biblical text uses the euphemism of "playing" with each other]. Why does this scene in particular not have God in the scene? Each of these scenes is about deception.

In the other two scenes God reveals the deception. In the Isaac scene, God is not present because the text is a foretelling of what is about to happen in Isaac's life. He is about to be deceived by his son Jacob dressing up as his son Esau. God will similarly not be present in his life to tell him the real identities of his sons.

In the second scene with Abraham, Genesis 20, the significant differences are God's appearance in a dream to tell Abimelech the true situation, and Abimelech's gifts to Abraham as he depart from Gerar. This scene appears just before the akedah, the aborted command to sacrifice Isaac, which is another scene of deception. God intervenes here through Abimelech, just as God will, in short order, intervene through an angel and a ram. Abraham's reward in the wife-sister scene is rather odd, because he certainly did not do anything worthy of reward.

To the contrary, one might assume that he should have been held accountable for his deception. Similarly we find in the akedah that Abraham is rewarded for deceiving Isaac; he receives no chastisement as much as the reader would like to know how he could not have told his son the truth. But we are reminded here that a divinely ordained deception will work out with divine rewards.

Working back to the first wife-as-sister scene (Genesis 12), the outstanding difference is its setting; this scene takes place in Egypt while the other scenes take place in Gerar. Abraham in fact goes down to Egypt when he has just been told that the land of Canaan was going to be his inheritance. God intervenes to show Abraham that his rightful place is back in Canaan. Nahmanides saw that Abraham's deception was tied to the future punishment of having Abraham's descendants become slaves in Egypt. Abraham's deception of Pharaoh in his generation foreshadows many future deceptions in Egypt, like Joseph deceiving his brothers; there will, of course, be future plagues in Egypt as Pharaoh is plagued here, and Israel will leave with property in hand. Egypt is a dangerous place, but, as Abraham's first experience shows and foreshadows, God will redeem his people from Egypt.

The power of Alter's technique is to show the coherence and artistry of the biblical text. On first blush the scenes seem obscure, but in viewing them from a literary perspective, we know that the biblical author repeatedly comes back to the theme of deception—Joseph deceiving his brothers, Joseph's brothers deceiving Jacob, Jacob deceiving Isaac, etc. The wife-sister acts of deception fit into this general motif and each scene uniquely foreshadows the future deceptions which befall the biblical characters.