

DVAR TORAH on PARASHA LECH L'CHA

KYLA GREENFIELD

What I want to discuss today is the section of the parasha where Abram lies about the status of Sarai when she is his wife, passing her off as his sister.

The question for me is whether it is ever moral or excusable to lie or deceive? Despite the Tenakh's teachings against lying, the Torah rarely offers an evaluation of our forefathers or their conduct and so this leaves the Torah's attitude towards the ethical nature of deception open to interpretation by the reader.

So, 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 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 in the Tenakh.

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. It would seem that, right after receiving God's pledge of safety, the Patriarchs act out of weakness or lack of faith.

So how can we say that Abram, and later Isaac, acted ethically when they identified their wives as their sisters? Could Abram, as he was then, have acted differently? Could he or should he have trusted in God's intervention to save him? How is it that he seemed to be rewarded by Pharaoh initially as a kind of dowry and then again when Pharaoh realised that Sarai was not his sister but his wife. Surely passing your wife off as your sister just doesn't seem like the kind of thing our Patriarchs should be doing. Not only does this happen once, as in Genesis 12: 10-20 the portion that Leah will leyn, but again in Genesis 20: 1-18, and then Isaac does the same thing when he passes Rebekah off as his sister in Genesis 26: 1-16.

Although the reason at first glance appears to be fear, is there something deeper happening here? As Abram says to Sarai: "I know what a beautiful woman you are. So, if the Egyptians see you and think, 'She is my wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say you are my sister that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive...." Furthermore, in our story, it seems that Abram benefits, as the Egyptians, wanting to gain her hand in marriage, shower him with gifts of livestock and servants. Then, this happens once again after Pharaoh is visited by a plague and returns Sarai. Surely the message can't be that deception pays, at least in the short term.

Or was this never a moral dilemma? For Abram himself in Genesis 20:12 suggests that this was never really a lie, as they had the same father but not the same mother, and therefore he was in fact her brother. But is this just an excuse?

Some modern commentators follow this line of thought making a similar type of claim. Nahum Sarna, amongst others, says that there is evidence from Hurrian society, of which Abram and Sarai 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. Abram asked Sarai 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 did its initial theme concern recognition of this special status? However, this theory does not feel compelling and does not explain the three wife-sister motifs in Genesis. I find it difficult to believe that these stories were not about deceit because the kings in each story responded as if they are being deceived, and otherwise Pharaoh would have known this at the start, and Abram and Sarai would have been protected.

Nahmanides is clearer and says directly that Abram was wrong and that he unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife into a stumbling block of sin, presumably on account of knowing that it was certain that she would be at risk of being placed in the harem. He goes on to say that Abram should have trusted in God, and that, by leaving the land of Canaan and going to Egypt, he had failed to trust in God to deliver him and his family from famine. He suggests that it was because of this failure in faith that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children. Abram's deception of Pharaoh was, according to his way of looking at this, like Joseph's deception of his brothers. Looking at this in greater detail, deception seems to be a central motif of the Torah, starting early on in the Garden of Eden with each dishonest event seemingly causing others at a later date, affecting relationships over the generations and within families. If so, could this be the reason behind the repeating motif, telling us something very important about how we should act with others?

Also, if the Torah paints Abram in shades of grey what is this telling us? As I grow older, I realise that basic definitions of right and wrong are more complex. I may feel differently to my parents and teachers, decisions are not easy to make and at times flawed. I have come to understand that leaders, teachers, parents, cannot be perfect, for as it says in Kohelet, "there is none so righteous as do only good and never sin." In our story, perhaps it is Pharaoh, compared to Abram, who comes out of it better. So maybe even our non-heroes have their good points too.

There are times when I, like Abram, have been tempted to lie because it would go better for me, even though Leah says I am a really bad liar, and it is totally obvious. Like Abram, perhaps I should trust in what my parents have said about telling the truth and having faith that this will in the end be better and less likely to cause more problems further down the line. This parasha has taught me that even the greatest have their failings and those that I like or value less also have their good points. Perhaps the message is that little in life and relationships is absolutely clear cut and that, in the end, we need to accept the failings in all of us and learn to trust one another more.

Kyla

Bat Mitzvah

Shabbat, 16 October 2021