

Abraham & Sarah and the Sibling Bond

Parashat Lech Lecha

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If I were to burst out in song right now, and start belting out the lines of Psalm 133, you would all be able to sing along. You may not realize it, but I would bet that nearly everyone in this room can recite the first verse of Psalm 133 by heart; blindfolded; in your sleep, and in the original Hebrew! The words are...

Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet achim gam yachad.

You sang it around the camp fire; you sang it at Hebrew school; you sang it back in your youth group days...

These are some of the most popular words in the Jewish songbook:

Behold! How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together as one.

Of course the word *achim*, brothers, does not only describe actual, blood related siblings. *Achim* is a word that implies a deeply close relationship; an intimate, unwavering, visceral connection with another human being. That's why brother and sister are colloquial expressions between dear friends who feel more like family to each other than friends. How many of you, when you were a kid, pricked the tip of your finger along with a friend, intermingled the droplets, and became each other's blood brother? How many of you have referred to a treasured friend as your sister? What is it about the sibling bond in particular that has lifted brother and sister out of their literal meanings and turned them into terms of such endearment, even for non-relatives?

I want you to think about that as we consider an episode in the life of our patriarch Abraham that is extremely troubling. Having discovered that *Eretz Canaan*, the Promised Land, the new home where God has led Abraham and Sarah to settle, and where their descendants will become a great nation is actually ravaged by severe famine, Abraham and Sarah head south to Egypt for relief. Somewhere along the way, Abraham realizes that his wife is so astonishingly beautiful that the Egyptians will attempt to kill him in order to marry her. In order to avoid being executed so that

the Egyptians can have their way with her, Abraham instructs Sarah to tell everyone that she is his sister, not his wife. Abraham will make this request of Sarah a second time when they pass through the land of King Avimelech, and Isaac will ask Rebekka to do the same years later. The problem is that while this ruse protects Abraham, it still puts Sarah in a vulnerable position.

According to the Torah, Pharaoh was still planning to take her into his harem, when God intervened plagues so terrifying that Pharaoh drives both of them out of Egypt the very next day, but not before he loaded them up with sheep, cattle, camels, and slaves. So again, for Abraham, things go pretty well. Not only was he not killed, but he left Egypt a much wealthier man than when he arrived. Sarah was rescued from Pharaoh's advances, but I can't help but wonder what she must have experienced, entering into Pharaoh's palace, being placed among countless other women who were there only to please the Egyptian king, not knowing when or how she would get out of that predicament.

The traditional commentators are all over the map on this...Some say that Abraham was crazy to have put Sarah in this situation. The Ramban, for example, in no uncertain terms, calls this a *cheit'a gedola*, a grave sin. The 16th century Portuguese philosopher Isaac Abarbanel was even more explicit:

He said: *Ain safek she'rau-i l'me-u'leh she'yivchar ha'mavet yoter mei'asoto han'valah!* There is no doubt in my mind, he says, that an upstanding man like Abraham should have chosen death over such outrageous behavior!

Others, however like the Radak, the 13th Century French commentator Rabbi David Kimchi argued that Abraham acted wisely under the circumstances. What else could he have done?

Whatever these and other sages may have felt, and whatever unease we feel over Abraham's strategy, the Torah doesn't seem to have the slightest problem with it at all! As I mentioned before it is repeated three times in almost the exact same detail, and without any judgment or stigma whatsoever! You'd think if what Abraham did was as bad as Ramban or Abarbanel said it was, that the Torah would have some editorial comment about it. But that's just not the case.

It was this conundrum that led me to a very obscure, but beautiful explanation. Rabbi Ya'akov Leiner also known as the *Beit Ya'akov*, was the second Rebbe of the Chasidic dynasty of Izbitcha in eastern Poland in the late 19th Century. In his commentary on the parasha he says something

truly extraordinary. He says that when Abraham asks Sarah to consider their relationship as siblings rather than spouses, he is articulating *ahava sh'leima*...a love that is complete and total. He says that the relationship between siblings is "*bilti shum sibah*." It is independent of any reason or explanation. Siblings, in other words, are born into relationship with one another; it is intrinsic and inseparable. Spouses can divorce (God-forbid), and they can go their separate ways having completely severed their relationship. But a sibling is a sibling forever; no matter what. *Lo mitparshin ahavatan le'olam*, he says. The love of siblings, the attachment of siblings can never be divorced. According to the Rebbe, Abraham was articulating something very reassuring and powerful to Sarah. They were entering dangerous territory. They were undoubtedly frightened and disoriented in Egypt. They didn't know how long they would have to stay there to wait out the famine, or how they would be received as foreigners. So what does Abraham say to Sarah? He says, take heart, our relationship is like siblings who can never be separated. No matter what happens here in Egypt, even more than we are husband and wife, we are brother and sister. We are connected in a way that nothing and no one can intrude upon us. Our *achava*, our kinship, our relation is that deep. I am frankly so moved by this explanation.

For the first 12 years and six months of my life, I was an only child. And more than any single possession in the world, I wanted to have a sibling. Then, as if my prayers were answered, in the summer of 1986 I became a big brother. I adored my little brother Max, and I learned a lot of skills that years later would really benefit me as a parent by feeding him bottles, changing his diapers, and being his playmate. The only downside of this dream come true is that for so long Max and I were living such different lives. At my bar mitzvah, my brother was a barely a year old. When I went to college, he was six. When I got married, he was 11. Sometimes I felt more like an uncle than a brother because we didn't have a whole lot of time to live together as two kids under the same roof. There were times when I wondered, when I really, truly hoped that we would grow closer someday when our lives were more similar. And, in fact, now more than ever I feel such incredible affection and appreciation for my brother, who is now in his 30's, and married to a wonderful woman, and a terrific father to my very sweet and adorable nephew. When I came across the commentary of Rabbi Ya'akov Leiner I immediately resonated with the argument that a sibling is ideally a forever relationship; one that transcends the specifics of age and circumstance. Siblings may go through ups and downs, times of closeness and distance, but there is a resilience in siblings that is truly unique and timeless. That's why we refer to our

closest friends as our “brother from another mother,” or our “sister from another mister.” That’s why we become blood brothers, not blood cousins. That’s why when Abraham sought to reassure Sarah that this uncertain sojourn in Egypt would not and could not tear them apart he told her, don’t worry, you are my sister. And that, my Sarah, is forever. May you too be blessed by forever relationships, be they siblings of blood or friendship. And may the entire Jewish people be bound together as brothers and sisters as well...sharing in a loving and eternal bond.

Shabbat Shalom.