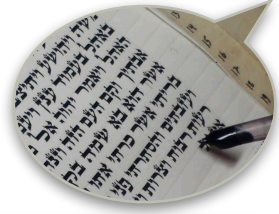




The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Vayera

Cheshvan 5784 / November 2023

Walk Before Me*

By Akiva Katz

The early chapters of the Torah speak of humanity's repeated disappointments. God, having blessed humans with the gift of freedom, watched as they repeatedly squandered it. Starting with the sin of Adam and Eve, followed by the sin of Cain, and ending with the story of Noah, the people we have met to this point in our history have not been the best role models. Yet, amid this sinful beginning, Avraham emerged, radiating hope and change.

What was it that distinguished Avraham from those who came beforehand? To understand this, one must look to the lessons within the previously mentioned stories. In its early narratives, the Torah shows us what happens when people have a complete lack of responsibility. Adam and Eve's choices set the tone. Instead of owning their actions, Adam conveniently shifted the blame to Eve, and she, in turn, passed the responsibility onto the snake.

Cain's actions added a darker shade to this narrative. After committing the heinous act of murdering his brother Abel, instead of expressing remorse or owning up to his dire mistakes, he asked the now famous question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" This was not just the evasion of personal responsibility but a blatant rejection of moral responsibility.

Avraham famously asks: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" This seemingly audacious question posed by a mere mortal to God is really the first actual act of selflessness and the first sign of a truly moral and ethical man that we have in the Torah.

Next, we have Noah, a character often deemed righteous. While he undoubtedly had great character traits, which is why God chose him to build the ark and subsequently rebuild the world from scratch, his story revealed a void of collective responsibility. Presented with the knowledge of an imminent flood intended to wipe out the world, Noah undertook the task of saving his family and the animals. Yet, there's no recorded effort on his part to warn or save the rest of the world from the looming catastrophe.

Then, we are introduced to Avraham in last week's parsha, the forefather of Judaism. When conflict arose between his and Lot's shepherds, Avraham, instead of resorting to blame or confrontation, quickly proposed a peaceful solution. He recognized the bigger picture and aimed for harmony. Furthermore, when Lot was captured by enemies, Avraham, new to his land with no army behind him, did not hesitate.

* The writings of Rabbi Sacks, z"l, helped me develop the theme of this dvar Torah. Today, the 20th of Cheshvan, is the third yearzeit of Rabbi Sacks.

He rallied forces and launched a daring rescue, showcasing personal responsibility and a deep-seated moral duty.

But perhaps the most profound display of Avraham's character unfolds in Vayera. Here, Avraham embarks on a courageous dialogue, challenging God over the fate of the city of Sodom. After God shares his plan of destruction for Sodom, Avraham famously asks: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" This seemingly audacious question posed by a mere mortal to God is really the first actual act of selflessness and the first sign of a truly moral and ethical man that we have in the Torah.

This narrative becomes even more significant when juxtaposed with Noach's. When God shared with Noach the plan to flood the earth, Noach, though obedient, never challenged or interceded on humanity's behalf. But Avraham, upon hearing of Sodom's potential fate, felt compelled to intercede, pioneering a transformative **concept of collective responsibility**.

This raises a compelling question: Why did God seemingly invite Avraham's challenge? It wasn't that God lacked insight, but rather that Avraham was being positioned to pave the way for a revolutionary way of believing in God. This emerging faith would challenge and reshape the world, urging its followers not to accept passively but actively shape the world in the vision of how it should be. Avraham's ability to challenge God Himself, an act that seems pretty scary and almost disrespectful, laid the foundation for his nation—for all of us—to **question, challenge, and transform human constructs, pushing for justice and righteousness**.

Avraham's style of leadership was a paradigm shift. He didn't fit the mold of traditional leaders of his time. He didn't have vast territories or a massive following. Yet, in his journey, he epitomized what leadership, as understood by Judaism, truly means. While Noach is described as someone who "walked with God," God urges Avraham to "Walk before Me." This encapsulates the essence of Avraham's legacy: an embodiment of personal, moral, and collective responsibility.

In these times of unprecedented uncertainty, I extend a heartfelt bracha to our community: may we always strive to do what is intrinsically right rather than merely adhering to societal norms or the status quo. Should you witness someone disrespecting the memory of the 200+ hostages by tearing down their pictures, raise your voice. This is more than just doing the right thing; it's upholding the legacy of responsibility our pioneering leader, Avraham, imparted to us. If we each champion justice, stand firm in our convictions, and emulate the Divine's image in our actions, perhaps we, too, will be told to walk in God's presence.

Akiva Katz, husband of Samantha and father to Raquel, is looking for serious tennis players to play with this winter!

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