Biblical Heroes, Imperfections, Truth: Thoughts on Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Some years ago, I had a conversation with a Hassidic Jew who assured me that his Rebbe never committed any sins. He stated with certainty that his Rebbe was endowed with a grand and holy soul, far superior to the soul of any other people.

When I pointed out to him that even Moses committed sins, he flatly denied that this was so. I reminded him that the Torah itself reports Moses's shortcomings. He said: You do not understand the Torah! It is impossible that Moses could have done anything wrong. He was perfect in every way.

The conversation came to an end, with both of us unhappy with the result. He felt I did not demonstrate enough faith in the perfection of saintly personalities, and I felt he was guilty of distorting the Torah's words and distorting the reality of the human condition.

This conversation came to mind recently when I received an email from a colleague, in which he included some important passages by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The comments related specifically to stories reported in Parashat Lekh Lekha—but Rabbi Hirsch's point is of general relevance to our study of Torah...and to our evaluation of saintly individuals.

The Torah relates various problematic narratives about Abraham. For example, when going to Egypt, Abraham feared that the Egyptians would murder him and take his wife Sarah. Abraham told Sarah to say she was his sister, rather than his wife. In spite of (or because of!) this deception, Sarah was taken to Pharaoh. Abraham was given rewards and he thrived in Egypt. When God punished Pharaoh and when Pharaoh realized that Sarah was really Abraham's wife, Pharaoh expressed outrage to Abraham over the deception. Pharaoh expelled Abraham and Sarah, who left Pharaoh's domain with much wealth.

This story surely does not cast Abraham in a good light. He asked his wife to participate in a deception. He let his wife be taken by the Egyptians. He reaped financial rewards while his wife was in captivity in Pharaoh's house.

Rabbi Hirsch makes a profoundly important point: "The Torah does not attempt to hide from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men, and precisely thereby it places the stamp of credibility upon the happenings it relates. The fact that we are told about their faults and weaknesses does not detract from our great men. Indeed, it adds to their stature and makes their life stories even more instructive. Had they all been portrayed to us as models of perfection we would have believed that they had been endowed with a higher nature not give to us to attain. Had they been presented to us free of human passions and inner conflicts, their nature would seem to us merely the result of a loftier predisposition, not a product of their personal merit, and certainly no model we could ever hope to emulate."

Rabbi Hirsch goes on to say that "we must never attempt to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past. They are not in need of our apologetics, nor would they tolerate such attempts on our part. Truth is the seal of our Word of God, and truthfulness is the distinctive characteristic also of all its genuinely great teachers and commentators."

Our great biblical heroes, as well as our great spiritual heroes of all generations, were real human beings, not plaster saints. They had real feelings, real conflicts. Many times they performed admirably; on some occasions they fell short. To suggest that anyone is "perfect"—totally devoid of sin and error—is to misrepresent that person and to misrepresent truth.

There is a popular genre of "religious literature" that presents biographies of biblical and later religious luminaries as paragons of virtue, totally devoid of sin and inner conflict. In fact, such books are not authentic biographies, because they describe their heroes in an untruthful way. These personalities are drawn in such superlative terms, that readers will find it exceedingly difficult to identify with them or to emulate them.

There is an opposite tendency in some circles to point to every flaw and sin of our spiritual heroes, and to undermine their credibility as religious models. Our prophets and teachers are presented as though devoid of higher spiritual and moral qualities.

Just as it is false to overstate the perfection of our heroes, so it is false to undervalue their spiritual achievements. Rather, we must study their lives honestly, recognizing that these are remarkable individuals who reached great heights—and who had to struggle mightily to attain their levels of religious insight and righteousness. Their failings can be as instructive to us as their successes.

Just as Truth is the seal of the Word of God, so is the pursuit of Truth the proper objective of all students of Torah and Jewish tradition.

Angel for Shabbat