Reaching for Greatness: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayhi

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This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the book of Bereishith. During the past months, we have read the magnificent account of the creation of the universe; we learned about Noah and his times. We then were introduced to the lives of individuals who revolutionized human civilization: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his siblings.

These remarkable people laid the foundations not only for the people of Israel but for much of human civilization. The Torah describes these heroes of faith with their strengths and weaknesses, their victories and failures. They are not presented as having super-human talents or genius; rather, they appear to be very fallible human beings striving to fulfill their human potentialities. They are shepherds and seekers of God; they are parents and moral guides; they are courageous and wise…but not always.

These pillars of civilization were, to a great extent, loners. As Abraham himself said, he was a "stranger and a resident" among the people. A stranger—he was not at home within the pagan society in which he lived. A resident—he was a constructive and helpful member of the community. Our spiritual fathers and mothers, while being cooperative and sociable, were not at home in general society. They had different dreams and aspirations. They heard God's voice. They were striving for something beyond their own time and place. They were not afraid to stand alone, to be different, to defy the popular norms.

Human greatness often entails loneliness and alienation. It is nurtured by successes and failures, by trials and errors. It is fostered in an environment of quiet thoughtfulness. The greatest people often are the most humble and self-

effacing.

Dr. Fred Hoyle, a famous English astronomer of the 20th century, made an astute observation. “It seems to be characteristic of all great work, in every field, that it arises spontaneously and unpretentiously, and that its creators wear a cloak of imprecision…The man who voyages strange seas must of necessity be a little unsure of himself. It is the man with the flashy air of knowing everything, who is always on the ball, always with it, that we should beware of. (“Of Men and Galaxies,” Prometheus Books, NY, 2005, p. 28)

Dr. Hoyle expresses concern for the over-specialization characteristic of modern society. To be a “success,” one must increasingly be seen as an “expert,” a member of the in-crowd, a popular team-player. “More and more, the professions will cross over into the entertainment field. Those of us who are not employed directly in industry will come to realize that what we are really in is ‘show biz.’” (p. 52)

What is increasingly valued in our world is entertainment, putting on a show for others, image-making.

Because of this cultural and spiritual degradation, the environment to produce real greatness is diminished. “It is a mistake to imagine that potentially great men are rare. It is the conditions that permit the promise of greatness to be fulfilled that are rare.” (p. 25)

As we read the stories of our Biblical ancestors, we are given a unique opportunity to delve into their world. We can re-focus on spiritual striving, and free ourselves of the glitz and show biz that pervade our lives. We can seek to develop our own personal greatness, even as we are fully conscious of our many weaknesses and failings. Most of all, we can shake off the artificiality and superficiality that attempt to choke our spirits; we can reclaim our own souls, our own essential selves.

Our Biblical ancestors were not flashy know-it-alls with a glib word for everyone. They were not show-people or seekers of popularity. They were able to stand alone, to strive for God and Godliness, to attain human greatness. These are qualities that can transform lives and change the world.

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