The Rabbi, the Professor and the Pope on Family Values in the Book of Genesis

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Introduction

The unique dignity of humanity lies at the root of all Western morality. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks considers this concept to be one of the greatest transformational ideas of the Torah.[1]

Sadly, this foundational premise of Western culture is under assault. Some contemporary ideologies assail God, the Bible, family, morality, merit-based opportunity, and human equality. With these assaults comes the erosion of biblical family values.

We need a common language to teach human uniqueness and morality as we explore what we have in common with all other organisms and what distinguishes us from them. The Book of Genesis is that common language. For observant Jews, we have the additional language of halakha.

In this essay, we will focus on three different voices who have appealed to Genesis to teach human dignity and morality.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik gave a series of lectures in the 1950s, which have been published as a book, *Family Redeemed*.[2] In these lectures, Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguishes between Natural Man and Redeemed Man. Humans may redeem themselves through the building of a family, elevating themselves from being merely biological organisms that reproduce like all other creatures. More broadly, halakha elevates all physical-biological acts to the realm of the sacred when we follow God's revealed laws.

Professor Leon Kass, a prominent bioethicist at the University of Chicago for many years, describes his journey. He was a secular Jew, uninterested in the Bible. He came to the Bible as an adult by asking why so many people have been interested in it. He fell in love with the Bible and published an important work on Genesis (among other books).[3] He believes that strong family values are an essential building block of a moral society.

Pope John Paul II gave a series of 129 sermons from 1979 to1984 on the religious significance of family (I don't think too many rabbis could get away with giving so many consecutive sermons on the same theme). He was responding to the so-called sexual revolution that began in 1968.[4]

Before considering these three disparate thinkers, it must be stressed that although the strong nuclear traditional family is the ideal of the Torah, it does not always work out this way. People may remain single, get divorced, confront infertility, or have homosexual tendencies, to name a few. The Torah promotes family values as the ideal, but this value does not negate the value of full participation in the community when people do not have a traditional family for one reason or another.

Professor Leon Kass

Given the centrality of family relationships in Genesis, Kass regularly explores the notions of patriarchy and matriarchy. Because of their unique role in producing a new life, women may become arrogant by viewing their children as their possessions. God therefore teaches humility to the matriarchs through their initial barrenness.[5]

Males need to be acculturated to become interested in child rearing. Virility and potency are far less important to the Torah than decency, righteousness, and holiness. Male circumcision was widely practiced in ancient world as a puberty ritual. It generally was viewed as a sign of sexual potency and an initiation into the society of men, ending a boy's primary attachment to his mother and household, the society of women and children.

The Torah transforms circumcision into a father's religious duty toward his son. Circumcision celebrates not male potency but rather procreation and perpetuation. Immediately after the birth of a son, a father must begin the transmission of the covenant. The Torah's ideal of manhood is defined by those who remember God and transmit the covenant rather than those who fight, rule, and make their name great (consider whom Western histories label "the Great" vs. whom the Torah idealizes as great).

Circumcision also profoundly affects the mother of the child, as it reminds her that her son is not fully hers. God therefore renames Sarai to Sarah at the time of God's command of circumcision to Abraham.[6]

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

One underdeveloped area in Kass' analysis is the role of motherhood. For Kass, women need less religious guidance than men in order to stand properly before God. Once they overcome the potential arrogance of considering their children as their own possessions, they are well on their way to living a life of holiness.

In contrast, Rabbi Soloveitchik offers a more nuanced view of motherhood through his typology of Natural and Redeemed Man. In the natural community, a father's role is minimal whereas motherhood is central to a woman's life. Similar to Kass, Rabbi Soloveitchik outlines ways that the Torah teaches men that they must educate their children in the covenant to be worthy of a redeemed fatherhood.

Rabbi Soloveitchik also develops the central role of the mother in partnering with her husband in the religious upbringing of her children. Abraham—and not Adam—was called *av hamon goyim*, a father of many nations (Genesis 17:5), because redeemed fatherhood begins only with a father's commitment to his children's religious education.[7]

Unlike Adam, Eve received her new name because she was *em kol hai*, the mother of all living beings (Genesis 3:20). Natural motherhood involves true sacrifice. However, Sarai was renamed Sarah at the same time as Abraham's name change in the context of circumcision (Genesis 17:15), since she did more than raise biological progeny—she became a full partner with Abraham in

transmitting the covenant. Both Abraham and Sarah understood that serving God involves personal behavior but also comes with a commitment to teaching righteousness to one's family and society:

> In the natural community, the woman is involved in her motherhood-destiny; father is a distant figure who stands on the periphery. In the covenantal community, father moves to the center where mother has been all along, and both together take on a new commitment, universal in substance: to teach, to train the child to hear the faint echoes which keep on tapping at our gates and which disturb the complacent, comfortable, gracious society (*Family Redeemed*, p. 114).

Pope John Paul II

Before we consider Pope John Paul's discourses, we must address two concerns: First, and not surprisingly, many elements in Pope John Paul II's sermons connect to Trinitarian theology and the Incarnation. After all, the Pope was Catholic. Consequently, strikingly few elements of his discussions of Genesis can be translated into Jewish language. Second, it is irrelevant to this discussion that Catholics maintain an ideal of non-marriage for their priesthood. The Pope focused on the majority of society and believed in the sanctity of the family.

Pope John Paul II links the idea of people's being created in God's Image (Genesis 1:26) to marriage. The Image of God should be interpreted as human perfection, and the ultimate fulfillment of that human perfection is through marriage.[8] In his reading of Genesis, the first two chapters should be read as a single unit, since marriage appears only in chapter 2:

> The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him”… So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from man was she taken.” Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:18–24)

To support Pope John Paul II’s reading, humans are not explicitly called “good” in chapter 1. Rabbi Yosef Albo (*Ikkarim* III:2) maintains that unlike most of God’s creations, people are left incomplete so that we may use our free will to become good. Most creations simply are programmed to do what God wants, making them “complete” and good. Genesis 2:18 has God reflecting on man’s single state as being “not good,” and therefore creates Eve as a wife for him.

Several rabbinic sources likewise consider the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) fulfilled through marriage (Tosefta *Sotah* 5:6; *Kiddushin* 41a).

In contrast to the Pope’s reading of Genesis chapters 1–2 as a single unit, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik[9] considers each chapter as reflecting different aspects of divine truth. The narrative in chapter 2 focuses exclusively on the relationship between man and woman and does not mention God’s Image or childbearing. In contrast, Genesis chapter 1, which mentions humankind’s being created in God’s Image, goes on to bless people to procreate:

> And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill

the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." (Genesis 1:26–28)

Long before Rabbi Soloveitchik and Pope John Paul II, two of the greatest medieval rabbinic commentators debated whether Genesis chapters 1–2 should be read as one or two units. This disagreement is manifest over the proper understanding of Genesis 2:24: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh."

Ramban explains that "becoming one flesh" refers to the uniqueness of human sexual intimacy and marriage. There are sexual relations throughout the animal world. However, there is no emotional attachment or commitment except in the human realm.

In contrast, Rashi interprets "becoming one flesh" to mean that when men and women have a child, they have created this one flesh together. Rashi thereby links the marriage in chapter 2 to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply in chapter 1.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's analysis of chapters 1 and 2 as separate units resembles Ramban's approach to this verse. Pope John Paul II is methodologically closer to Rashi in reading chapters 1–2 as an integrated, harmonious sequence.

All three perspectives address the same fundamental issue: We are created in the Image of God, humanity can elevate itself above animals through a life of Godliness. Marriage-parenthood-family are sacred. The Torah thus provides keys to understanding the facets of our complex nature and guides us to work toward achieving the ideal balance of our biology and religious commitments for ourselves and our families.

We of course share biological components with many other organisms, but interpersonal love is sacred—loving our neighbor as oneself, husband and wife becoming one flesh, and through being covenantal partners in child rearing. We connect ourselves and families to eternity through God and covenant.

We need to develop a shared language with like-minded people of different backgrounds, since our belief in family as the cornerstone of a righteous community and society is relevant to everyone. The Book of Genesis lies at the heart of that language.

Notes

[1] Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), pp. 289–290.

[2] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation-Ktav, 2000).

[3] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003). See also my review of his book, “An Unorthodox Step Toward Revelation: Leon Kass on Genesis Revisited,” in Angel, *Peshat Isn’t So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 173–185.

[4] Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006).

[5] *The Beginning of Wisdom*, p. 270.

[6] *The Beginning of Wisdom*, pp. 313–315.

[7] *Family Redeemed*, p. 58.

[8] *Man and Woman He Created Them*, p. 20. Spousal love and intimacy are acts of the purest giving of oneself (p. 24). Cf. the comments of Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg (*HaKetav VehaKabbalah*, late eighteenth-century Germany): Man's inner capacity for good never can be realized until he has someone on whom to shower affection. Mature love is expressed through giving, and through giving comes even greater love.

[9] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. Michael S. Berger (Jersey City: KTAV, 2005), p. 92.