

Abraham's Failings?

What Abraham did

In this week's portion, *Lech Lecha*, God orders Abram and his wife Sarai to go to the Land of Canaan, which God promises to give to him and to his progeny forever:

Go to the land that I will show you... I will give it to you and to your descendants forever... I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you... I will make you a great nation... Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth. [Genesis 12:1-3, 13:15-6].

However, once there, things do not turn out well:

- 1-There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.
- 2-As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you." When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram. He acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. [Genesis 12:10-16]

Back in the Land of Israel, Abraham does it again:

Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So the King [of the Philistines] Abimelech of Gerar had Sarah brought to him. [Gen. 20:2]

His son and grandson did the same

-His son Isaac was also about to go Egypt because of a famine, but God told him not to:

There was a famine in the land -- aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham -- and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

The Lord had appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt. Stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you. I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham." [Gen. 26:1-2]

-His grandson Jacob also went from Israel to Egypt because of a famine. [Gen. 46:6]

-His son Isaac also claimed his wife was his sister for the same reason:

So Isaac stayed in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say "my wife," thinking, "The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful." [Gen. 26:6-7]

No hint of disapproval in Torah.

In those days, the only legal way to sleep with somebody's wife was to kill her husband on some pretext. They believed they were sinning every time they slept with her, but killing her husband was only a one-time sin, if that. After that, the woman was a widow, and so was permissible. [Radak]

The reason for these famines in the Land of Israel was occasional lack of rain. Egypt did not depend on the rain but on the Nile, which was always available, so famines were rare there.

Was it lack of faith?

Did Abraham display a lack of faith? How could he believe God would allow him to die in a famine or allow his wife to be dishonored?

-The Talmud approves of Abraham going to Egypt:

The Sages taught: If there is famine in the city, spread your feet, [that is, leave the city], as it is stated in the verse: "And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there". [Bava Kamma 60b]

-The Midrash and Rashi (11th-century France) believe it was a test of faith. Would Abraham continue to believe in God's promises to him? [The famine was] to test [Abraham], to see whether he would think ill of the words of the Holy One, blessed be He, Who ordered him to go to the

Land of Canaan, and now was forcing him to leave it. [Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 26:4]

-But Ramban (13th-century Catalonia) strongly criticized Abraham for lacking faith:

And you should know that our father Abraham committed a great sin unintentionally, when he brought his righteous wife to stumble into sin because of his fear of getting killed. He should have trusted God to have saved him, his wife and all that was his... God would [also] have saved him from dying in the famine. And because of this deed it was decreed that his seed would be in exile in Egypt under the hand of Pharaoh.

[Ramban on Genesis 12:10]

The punishment was slavery in Egypt for all Jews!

Note: Very unusual for such harsh criticism to appear this late in Jewish commentary.

Pushback: Do not rely on miracles

-Radak (13th-century Spain):

-[Abraham wasn't concerned for himself alone.] He had a household comprising many people for whose welfare he was responsible
-As to why he did not trust God ... this is not surprising... The promises by God are based on man having taken every reasonable precaution not to require a miracle to save him from danger. When one is aware that one finds oneself in a situation where danger to one's life is likely, one must first take every precaution at one's disposal to counter such danger. Our Sages [Pesachim 64b] have told us that it is inadmissible to sit ... waiting for God to perform a miracle to save one's life. They base this advice on the verse in Torah:

לֹא תִבְטֹחַ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Do not test the Lord your God. [Deut. 6:16]

This means "Do not put God in a position of having to perform a miracle for you."... When righteous people face danger in carrying out what they know to be God's will, they must not leave matters to miracles.

-Tur Ha-Aroch (14th-century Spain):

Abraham is not considered to have sinned when he described his wife as his sister. On the contrary, this was a meritorious act on his part, because it proves that he was reluctant to rely on miracles as long as he had not done what was humanly possible to save God from having to intervene by upsetting the laws of nature. The reputation of the Egyptians had been such that he had every reason to fear for his life if he had described Sarah as his wife.

In other words, always apply the popular saying: Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you.

Story of man trapped in a flood:

A car comes to rescue him, but he refuses, saying, "God will save me".

The water rises. A boat comes to rescue him, but he refuses, saying, "God will save me".

The water rises some more. He is on the roof of his house. A helicopter comes and throws him a rope ladder, but he refuses, saying, "God will save me".

So he drowns. He sees God and asks Him, "Why didn't You save me?"

God replies, "I tried three times."

Just because it's not a miracle doesn't mean God is not involved.

God's involvement

Why did God explicitly prevent Isaac from going to Egypt, but not his father Abraham or his son Jacob?

-Because there was no famine at the time in the Land of the Philistines, which is in the Holy Land, so Isaac had better go there. [Radak]

-Midrash: Rabbi Hoshaya said: [God said to Isaac]: "You are a burnt offering without blemish. Just as a burnt offering becomes unfit if it goes beyond the Temple enclosures, so will you become unfit if you go out of the country." [Gen. R. 64:3]

-Reference to Akedah?

-Related Midrash: The Holy One said to Isaac: Because your father came to the land from abroad, he went down to Egypt; but, since you were born in the Land of Israel and represent a pure burnt offering, how could you be going down? [Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Toldot 6:1]

-God told him this in order to be able to reward him for obeying. God had done something similar when He told Abraham in Gen. 12:1 that he was to go to a place God would designate (in the future). Five verses later on God specified the land, i.e. "the land of Canaan," something He could have done immediately were it not for the fact that He wanted Abraham to accumulate merit for obeying His directive. [Ohr HaChaim]

-Hassidic: Abraham's major attribute was אהבה, his love for people... This being so, God did not object to his descending to Egypt... His son Isaac's primary attribute was יראה, reverence for the Essence of God; i.e., he concentrated all his faculties on how to serve God. This being so, it would have interfered with his basic character were he to leave the sacred soil of the Land of Israel for even a short period. [Kedushat Levi, Genesis, Chayye Sarah 8]

Was Abraham punished?

As mentioned, Ramban said that Abraham's punishment was slavery in Egypt for all Jews for centuries! But some argue: Abraham's punishment was more focused, witness the rest of the story:

- Abraham tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister.

- Pharaoh takes her in his harem and gives Abraham "sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels." [Gen. 12:16] (He "buys" Sarah, as it were; and Abraham "sells" her.)

- God protects Sarah from defilement by "afflicting Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues". [Gen. 12:17]

The Midrash says these plagues did not allow sex. [Genesis Rabbah 41:2]

- Pharaoh is angry with Abraham for deceiving him and sends him and Sarah away under escort with all their possessions and with an Egyptian slave, Hagar. [Gen. 12:20]

- Midrash drops bombshell:

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai said Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter.

When [Pharaoh] saw [God's] deeds on behalf of Sarah in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to him, saying, "better that my daughter by a maidservant in this house than a mistress in another house." [Gen. R. 45:4]

- Sarah can't conceive so she asks Abraham to sleep with Hagar to get a son. He does so and Ishmael is born. [Gen. 16:15]

- Sarah does not get along with Hagar at all. (As a former princess, Hagar does not take kindly to being a servant and shows utter contempt for her mistress.)

- Sarah finally conceives and Isaac is born. She then she convinces Abraham to repudiate Hagar and send her and Ishmael away:

[Sarah] said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." [Gen. 21:10]

- God allows that, tells a reluctant and pained Abraham to accept, but promises Abraham that Ishmael will become a great nation. [Gen. 21:13]

- Ishmael marries an Egyptian and becomes the progenitor of today's Muslims, who have fought the Jews off and on since that time.

So, in this view, Abraham's punishment was God giving him Hagar as a servant and having him father a son, Ishmael, who became an enemy of the Jews.

- Is this why God delayed Sarah having a child of her own?

Did this experience convince Abraham that he should have total faith in God, and that's why he later accepted without question the command to sacrifice his son Isaac?

Conclusion

Whether Abraham should be praised or criticized for his actions in our portion is debatable and, ultimately, of secondary importance. In Judaism, biblical characters are never perfect, always flawed. This makes their stories believable and makes them people we can identify with, and so learn from.

Shabbat shalom.