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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Lekh Lekha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And it will come to pass when the Egyptians see you that they will say: This is his wife; and they will kill me but keep you alive. Please say you are my sister so that it may be well with me for your sake and that my soul may live because of you” (Bereishith 12:12-13).

As Abram and Sarai flee the famine in Canaan, they reach the border with Egypt. Sarai is beautiful and Abram fears the Egyptians will seize her and kill him. He asks her to claim that she is his sister rather than his wife, and in this way (although Sarai may be taken away) Abram’s life will be spared.

If the Torah didn’t record this episode, we would never have known anything about it. In portraying Abram as our spiritual forefather, why did the Torah include this story that casts Abram in a negative light?

Our commentators have been puzzled by this incident. Abram acts in a manner that places his wife in danger, that entails deceit, and that results in him reaping profit from his unsavory tactic. We would expect better of him. He and Sarai could simply have remained in Canaan and suffered through the famine along with all the others in the land. The Torah reports that Abram and Sarai came to Canaan with Lot and a retinue of others. Where were they during this episode? Why didn’t Abram call upon them to accompany him to Egypt and to serve as a protective force?

The questions are much stronger than possible answers.

Perhaps the Torah records this incident for posterity (and a similar incident later in the lives of Isaac and Rebecca) to teach us that even great human beings are not perfect in every respect. They sometimes fail. They sin. They are, after all, just human. They are not plaster saints who make all the right decisions at all times.

When we read of the shortcomings of our spiritual ancestors, we are taught that we can aspire to greatness even with our own faults and shortcomings. By bringing them down to human dimensions, the Torah allows us to raise ourselves.

In an article about “Gedolim stories,” Rabbi Simcha Feuerman points to the spiritual dangers of depicting our sages as being absolutely saintly, without internal conflicts. He wrote: “I have heard

people complain about “cookie cutter” biographies of Gedolim, where one gets the sense that their inner struggles and challenges have been sanitized for fear that they will be a bad influence on others. When the struggles are left out of the story it compounds feelings of inadequacy and guilt among the readers, leading some to give up on attaining anything worthwhile in comparison to the unnaturally saintly lives depicted in these stories.” <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/are-gedolim-stories-good-chinuch1>

Attempts to portray our biblical heroes or rabbinic sages as perfect saints is not only an affront to them and to truth: it actually promotes a religiously problematic worldview.

In our blessings, we thank the Almighty for having given us *Torat Emet*, the Torah of truth. The Torah does not flinch from negative features in the lives of our biblical heroes and ancestors. It does not engage in sugar coating or explaining away problematic behaviors.

Barukh shenatan lanu Torato Torat emet.