

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

UN in 1956 and who, since representatives sat in the alphabetical order of their nations, sat between the representatives of Iraq and Israel, was led to ponder whether religious traditions are really just another unpleasant facet of nationalism. The Avrahamic traditions may be good at self-replicating, but so are flu viruses! God may have known from the outset that Avraham could be relied upon to perpetuate God's message, but it is only at the end of the parashah, after the story of the binding of Isaac and Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, that God comes to know that this desire and ability to perpetuate is not merely an expression of self-interest:

"...for now I know (Ki Atah Yadati) that you fear God..." (Genesis 22:12)

Only with the binding of Isaac are we reassured that Avraham's capacity for continuity is outweighed by his commitment to God.

Stirred by our nervousness about our incapacity to transmit our beliefs and practices, liberal Jews often eye our illiberal Jewish cousins with a holy envy for their apparent capacity to *"command their children and their household after them"*. It does seem to be true that various aspects of religious fundamentalism seem to contribute to high levels of cultural transmission. A fundamentalist belief in the pristine source of your own canon; a tendency towards social isolationism and exclusion of outsiders; a declared belief in one's elevated status in the eyes of God; a focus on particularist rather than universalist religious motifs; a heightened sense and practice of altruism tuned almost exclusively to insiders, a serene sense that one is transmitting an unbroken authentic chain of tradition – all of these do seem to contribute to high levels of cultural continuity.

But continuity is not God. If our yearning to perpetuate Judaism is motivated by the desire for self-replication and we are thus tempted to use the tools of the fundamentalist, then we should take a long hard look in the mirror. Jewish continuity may be a good thing for the world but only if it is motivated by deep desires other than the cultural "evil inclination". If a liberal Muslim were to follow the same track; eschewing the values of peaceful integration, intellectual integrity and moral courage and, based on a fear of assimilation, began to espouse rabidly particularist and fundamentalist ideas in order to ensure that her kids stayed within their fold, we would beg her to reconsider for the sake of Peace, for the sake of Truth, for God's sake.

God knows at the start of the parashah that Avraham is capable of guaranteeing continuity. Only at the end of the parashah does God know that Avraham does not worship continuity and that he will not sacrifice his deepest values on her altar. By being prepared to sacrifice his son he is articulating, in the deepest way possible, that continuity is not God. Avrahamic religions all have an Achilles' heel connected to cultural narcissism and we must all be constantly vigilant that we do not turn to the dark side.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayera

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Annual | Genesis 18:1-22:24 (Etz Hayim p. 99-122; Hertz p. 63-76)

Triennial Genesis 21:1-22:24 (Etz Hayim p. 112-122; Hertz p. 71-76)

Haftarah | 2 Kings 4:1-37 (Etz Hayim p. 123-126; Hertz p. 76-79)

D'var Torah: The Cult of Continuity

Rabbi Joel Levy, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

Was there something special about Avraham which caused God to pluck him from obscurity and enter into an eternal covenant with him? Our tradition offers many different responses to this question and one is buried in this week's parashah:

"For I know him (Ki Y'dativ), that he will command (Y'Tsaveh) his children and his household after him, that they shall keep the way of God..."
(Genesis 18:19)

According to one reading of this verse, Avraham is special (or God chooses Avraham) because God knows ("Y'dativ") that Avraham will be capable of creating an on-going, self-sustaining community that will preserve God's message. There could have been other people who were morally worthy of entering into a covenant with God but only Avraham was able to *"command his children and his household after him"*. All previous uses of the verb "to command" in the Torah refer to God commanding humans. Here for the first time, we have a human making commands; a fact that the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 56b) picks up on when, based on this verse, it acknowledges Avraham as the archetypal human commander (*m'tsaveh*). To put it crudely, Avraham was "Mr. Continuity". We live in a world where, for better and for worse, the Avrahamic traditions dominate much of the planet. It does seem as if there was, at least mythologically, something special about Avraham's capacity to create self-perpetuating religious traditions. Avrahamic traditions really are astonishingly good at self-replicating.

But continuity is not enough. Conor Cruise O'Brien who represented Ireland at the

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D'var Haftarah: Causing a Miracle

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Elijah and Elisha were Israel's miracle-working prophets. They saved poor widows from the clutches of poverty and when needed even resurrected the dead.

This week's haftarah tells the tale of a wealthy but childless woman in the town of Shunem. Whenever Elisha came to town, she generously hosted him and offered him bread to eat. He, like the angels who come to visit a childless Avraham and Sarah, prophesies that she will give birth to a child, an event which ultimately comes to pass. The Shunamite woman's miracle child grows up, but unlike Yitzchak in the story of the Akeida, he is taken from her. One day while working in the field, he clutches his head and dies. The dead child is brought home and placed on his bed and the Shunamite woman summons Elisha the prophet. Elisha comes and miraculously restores the child to life, perhaps echoing the angel who directed Avraham to spare his son and sacrifice the ram in his place.

The rabbinic sages saw this as far more than a fantastical story, and drew out of it a powerful moral lesson. As read by Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:5:3, the miracle at the end of the story was a product of the simple righteous act done at its beginning: "Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai came forward and took as his text: 'One day, Elisha visited Shunem. A wealthy woman lived there and urged him to have a meal' (2 Kings 4:8). Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Shimon said to him: 'Is it really true that because "she urged him to have a meal", she merited that her son be brought back to life?' Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Zeira and Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: 'Great is the merit of those who maintain the needy, for their acts cause the resurrection of the dead to occur before its time.'"

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai believed in a world of strict justice - sins are punished and good deeds are rewarded. There is no such thing as a free miracle. But he, like many other sages, also believed in *midah k'neged midah* - that justice is poetic, with the consequences themselves reflecting the original deed. So the healing of the Shunamite woman's son was brought about because she also performed a "miracle", namely, she fed those who were needy, which in a sense might also be considered a kind of *tehiyat hametim* – resurrection of the dead.

Though we may not share Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's mechanistic view, this does not preclude taking seriously the idea that human actions, both positive and negative, reverberate and have real consequences. Even when the causal sequence is unclear, we can choose to see life's little miracles as rewards for good behavior, and not just good luck. If that motivates us and others to do more good in the world, that would be the greatest miracle of all.

Parashat Vayera Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this Parasha we have 2 intertwined storylines: The first relates to Yitzhak (Isaac), the son of Avraham and Sarah, from the announcement about his upcoming birth to the binding of Isaac. The second centers on the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot (Avraham's nephew) exits the story.

1) Avraham is sitting by his tent in the heat of the day when he spots 3 people. He invites them in, promising food and water to wash up, and then they may leave (18:1-5). When 2 of these angels arrive at Sodom in the evening, Lot offers them a place to sleep before they will continue early in the morning (19:1-3). What can we learn about hospitality and the needs of wayfarers in biblical times from these offers?

2) When Avraham is informed by God that He is about to destroy Sodom and Gomora, Avraham questions God "will you perish the righteous together with the evil-doer? Maybe there are 50 righteous in the town, won't you bear [the sin] for the sake of the 50?... Is it possible that the judge of the Earth will not do justice?!" and God agrees to avert the destruction for the sake of 50 (18:23-26). Is that justice? What is Avraham teaching about justice?

3) When Avraham was 100 Sarah gives birth to their son Isaac. There is great happiness, but Avraham does not do a party when Isaac is born but rather when he is weaned (21:1-8). What might be the reason for that?

4) Following the instruction to take his one and only beloved Isaac and bring him as a complete sacrifice on a mountaintop that God will tell him, Avraham gets up in the morning, saddles the donkey, takes his servants, and Isaac, and chops wood, and goes to the place (22:1-3). Why do you think that the Torah tells us of the preparations in great detail?

5) Twice in the story of the Akeda (the binding of Isaac), Avraham responds "*hineni*" (here I am, at your disposal), once to God and once to Isaac (22:1,7). What does this double use of *hineni* teach us about Avraham in the Akeda?

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