

What can we learn from the lives of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs? - **Dov Elbaum**

Every time I read the Book of Genesis, I am moved and amazed all over again.

I am moved by the sublime beauty of the tales of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am distressed by the tales of Joseph and his brothers; and I admire the poetry of the creation story. Each time I follow with fresh curiosity the fascinating relations between the sexes in the Garden of Eden: before Eve's seduction by the serpent, and then by what happens after she tastes from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge good and evil. Each time I learn to appreciate in a new way the courageous path taken by its characters. I observe their life journey and I immediately think about myself, and look at my own life from a fresh perspective.

For many years now I have been living my life in parallel with the lives of the protagonists of the Book of Genesis. Naturally, it began with the fact that as a child raised in a Jewish-*haredi* family, I was surrounded by their presence. I cannot even say that I remember when I first met them, because our relationship has always been intuitive, and precedes memory. Anyone who grew up in a family like my own, is intimately familiar with the figures in the Bible, first by listening to discussions on the Portion of the Week between their older brothers and their father at the Sabbath dinner table, and later on, at age four, upon beginning to attend school. In a profound sense, the stories I heard and read about the lives of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs in the Book of Genesis trickled into my soul, into my bones, and became an inseparable part of who I am.

Thanks to more prosaic facts of life, my connection with these figures deepened further in virtue of the fact that I am a citizen and a resident of the State of Israel. The scenery in which I walk and travel every day is the very same setting in which the figures of Genesis walk and live. When I read of Abraham herding his cattle in the desert, I know exactly what an Israeli desert afternoon smells like. When I think of

Jacob crossing the Jordan River and becoming stranded on its farther bank at night, I know the taste of moisture on the undergrowth of those riverbanks. These experiences, which I am sharing with you here, are probably relevant to many other people who grew up in the State of Israel, especially by those who studied the Bible closely in childhood.

Today, I would like to use this opportunity to talk about the personal, intimate connection that I have been maintaining with these figures for as far as I can remember. I like to think of it as a complete internalization of the titles they acquired in Jewish tradition – *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, *Sarah Immenu* – Sarah our Mother, *Yitzhak Avinu* – Isaac our Father, and so on. Since childhood, this sense of attachment has led me to maintain a searching and stormy dialogue with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Book of Genesis. This dialogue has its ups and downs, periods of an intense back and forth, and times of silence and disregard. But it has never stopped.

My earliest memory from this dialogue actually begins with the imagination. As a child, I would visualize that all of my favorite scenes from the Bible are taking place near my parents' home in Jerusalem. A quiet, green park, with Jewish burial caves from the Second Temple period, served as a natural theatre stage for these encounters. One of the scenes that fascinated me the most was obviously the Binding of Isaac. And so, the scene was set on an altar whose remnants I tried to see in a stone water fountain that the municipality had placed in that mysterious and untended park. I also saw Rebecca arrive at Canaan on camelback to marry Isaac, watching her slowly crossing the arid landscape of the Judean Desert seen from my childhood apartment. It is no wonder that I dedicated my second novel, *My Life with the Patriarchs*, to imaginary dialogues that the book's protagonist holds with these ancient literary figures.

But my profound connection with the biographies in Genesis does not end with the emotional and imaginary life of my early childhood. This connection had a more practical, and even drastic, impact later on, as a teenager and a young adult. At age 17, when I left the closed and highly isolationist environment in which I was raised,

Israeli *haredi* society, I needed strong willpower and determination in order to pave my way in the world, alone, without any family support or backing. I owe a large part of the mental powers I discovered in myself at that time to Abraham. In tough moments, quite often I would try to imagine myself as Abraham leaving the familiar and the known, choosing to follow an internal voice that calls upon him to reach a new destination, regarding which he has no notion of what it looks or feels like. In those years, I understood God's commanding Abraham, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you," (Genesis 12:1) not only as part of a private dialogue between God and Abraham that may or may not have taken place; but as an imperative directed at each and every person in the generations to come – go forth on your own way, carve out a path for yourself. Do not think about how your friends and family will react. Do not hesitate or fear the difficulties entailed by change and by the adjustment to a nomadic life.

Long, fascinating and complex years accompanied my move away from Israeli *haredi* society into the heart of secular cultural life in Israel. It entailed a challenging transition into a new language, culture and behavioral codes. The figure of Abraham proved courageous pioneer was useful and encouraging. But over the years, as the pain caused by the estrangement from my family began to wane, and the new ground I was standing on began to feel more solid, Abraham's place in the internal dialogue was taken over by a new figure, which naturally had to come from the Book of Genesis as well. This is when I discovered Isaac. The tragic figure at the heart of my book, *My Life with the Patriarchs*, became a model for overcoming a deep wound, a horrible trauma, which had torn his personality at a young age. I deeply identified with Isaac, lying bound on the altar as his father raises a big knife in order to slay him. I met Isaac as he wandered through the desert, a walking mental wound, still prisoner of the horrible moment when his father raised the knife.

My dialogue with Isaac led me to reread his story in a completely new way. I assume that any reader of the Bible will notice that it contains very little explicit information about him. Certainly compared to the two other Patriarchs – Abraham and Jacob – the amount of text that the Bible devotes to him is very small. But once I began studying him more carefully, I came across an increasing number of literary clues

that the Bible provides about his enigmatic figure. And so, ever so slowly, I met Isaac as he distanced himself from his father for many years, trying to forget, and even erase, his memory. I met him taking a belated revenge from his father, Abraham, releasing himself from pain and fear. And finally, I met him as he suddenly awakened in the prime of his life and began chasing away the shadows in his soul, bringing them to light and scaring darkness away.

In those years I came to realize that our relationship with the culture we are brought up in is tied up with our relationship with our parents. I began appreciating the impact that our childhood scars have on our life choices. I continued accompanying Isaac at the precise moment when he overcomes the pain, as he succeeds to shake off the load that we all carry on our backs: The load of our counter-reaction to our parents; the load that twists our path if we fail to shake it off at the right time. Isaac was able to extract himself from a deep, and understandable depression that, I believe, had seized him for many years after the Binding. This has taught me that each and every one of us can overcome our childhood wounds, no matter how deep or terrible they might be; because if Isaac could overcome his past and turn into a productive and successful individual, then anyone can.

Thanks to Isaac I learned how to forgive the world I came from, make peace with it. And most importantly, decide, free from anger, what to accept from my family tradition, and what to reject and leave behind. My dialogue with Isaac has taught me a lot about forgiveness, reconciliation, and about the possibility of finding blessing and abundance even in moments of great hardship and pain.

And so, my journey with the Patriarchs extends to my present life. Now, I can tell you, my main and most intense dialogue is with Jacob. The third, and probably most complicated figure of all Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The dialogue is especially challenging. Jacob's childhood stories in Genesis are very hard to digest, morally. It begins, of course, with the description of him as trying to hold his twin brother's ankle at birth to stop him from coming out of their mother's womb first, and become firstborn. This person's very name declares his crooked nature, as in biblical Hebrew *ya'akov* means just that – crooked. His crookedness leads Jacob to blackmail his

brother into taking a shady deal whereby the younger brother will acquire the birthright of his elder. And naturally, there is the sinister and awful deed of Jacob the Crooked and his mother, who plot to deceive the old and blind Isaac, misleading him to think that Jacob is his beloved son Esau, to have Isaac give him the final blessing at his deathbed.

These stories, which distanced me from Jacob for so many years, suddenly became the reason why I found his figure even more fascinating than before. Today I can understand the path Jacob chose since childhood, in trying to buy his father's blessing with a lentil stew. I am no longer angry with him for committing acts of deceit, because I understand that we are all driven by an early yearning for an instant, quick, immediate and superficial blessing. I smile to myself and realize how childish it is. Today, after conversing for so many years with Abraham and Isaac, who also searched, each in his own way, for a life of blessing, I know that a blessing cannot be stolen from someone else. I know that a blessing can occur only in the wake of a profound change in our personality; I appreciate that blessings and curses are in fact of our own doing.

I am very happy to hold such dialogues with Jacob. We can talk about things that preoccupy me at my current age, and where I am at in life. I can talk to him about high achievement, and property and finance. I talk to him about parenthood, and obviously about an issue that preoccupies me a lot – relationships. As you know, Jacob was an expert on the subject, as the Bible tells us that he had four wives.

And now I reach the main question I would like to address here: What can we learn from the family life of the Patriarchs?

I consider the Bible as a book of a people-loving culture that wishes to help people find their own path in life. In this sense, I consider the first book of the Bible, Genesis, to be a book that educates us by employing highly impressive literary and aesthetic devices. But most of all, it educates us by telling the life stories of its heroes and heroines from a moral, existential and human perspective. Abraham has taught me to pave a new path; I have learned from Sarah to believe in the possibility of wonders and miracles; Isaac has taught me how to heal and recover from the

deep wounds that tear our life apart, and I also learned from him how to succeed in life by making a genuine effort rather than by opting for conflict or deceit. I have also learned a lot from Jacob. Starting out in life crooked, he slowly learned from the blows life delivered him to mend his ways. And then – like it or not – he underwent a profound transformation. Once more he became worthy of the blessing, which he had outrageously tried to steal away from his brother by using deception and lies.

This is all good and well, and we can learn from the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs about growth and *tikkun* at the individual level. But can we also learn from other dimensions of their lives? Can we learn from them about how to maintain intimate and family relationships? Can we learn from them something about educating our children to have a morally sound and fulfilling life? This is the question that I am exploring at present. It preoccupies me on both the personal and spiritual level. It underlies my dialogue with all paternal and maternal figures in the Bible, beginning with Adam and Eve, moving over to the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs, and ending with Moses, the great leader and legislator, who, according to the Bible, founded Hebraic culture, but also abandoned his family and two children the moment he assumed the role of leader and man of God.

Since, if we truly and honestly look at what Genesis tells us about its main protagonists, we realize that they come from families that suffer from severe and ongoing dysfunctional problems. Most of them are constantly on the brink of, or even beyond, meltdown. So if we move on to ask the text what it has to teach us about our love life, our intimate relationships, about our lives as parents and as children, we become hopelessly confused. The truth begins to surface before our very eyes: the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs had terrible intimate relationships and dreadful family life.

Let's take for example Abraham and Sarah's marriage, who suffer for many long years from deep, ongoing frustration because they are childless. The Bible tells us how Abraham brings himself and his wife into a situation whereby he hands her over to the harem of a local ruler. The Bible tells us of two separate occasions, one in Egypt and another in Gerar, in which Abraham allegedly hands his wife over to the

local rulers in exchange for benefits. In both cases, God saves Sarah from the rape she faced by those rulers. In other cases, we follow Abraham sending away his mistress Hagar and son Ishamel to almost certain death in the desert. Naturally, Abraham does not seek Sarah's advice on whether to listen to the voice he hears inside of his head that calls upon him to slaughter his own son as sacrifice to God. The proximity of the story of Sarah's death and the Binding of Isaac attests, according to many interpretations, to the strong causal relationship between the two events. Abraham's actions, his interpersonal communication with family members and spouse lead to a dramatic clash. After the Binding, none of the family members live with the others anymore. Abraham is alone, Sarah is alone, Hagar and Ishamel are alone, and obviously Isaac, who lives in seclusion, shutting his father out of his life. Love appears to have never been present in Abraham's home, and this state of affairs only worsened as years went by. And I haven't even mentioned questions of education: Did Abraham take any part at all in the upbringing and education of his children? It seems pointless to even ask.

Let's put aside Abraham's marriage and move over to the life of the next couple – Isaac and Rebecca. Isaac is the first Patriarch, according to the Bible, who loves his wife, for it says, "And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebecca as wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was consoled after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67). But this was, perhaps, exactly the problem. Judging by Rebecca's treatment of him in the affair of Esau's stolen blessing, it didn't really pay off to love her so much. She probably didn't love him back. Could a loving wife steal the heart of her old, blind and helpless husband? Clearly she could not. The large age difference probably didn't allow her to feel close to him and love him back. She may have even felt deceived after Abraham's servant took her to be wife of Isaac, tempting her with gold and jewelry to follow him to the faraway Land of Canaan, which she would not be able to leave in order to return to her family. Everything is possible, but to my mind, there is one thing that is beyond doubt: From a literary point of view, Rebecca and Isaac maintain a lifelong, deep silence. Even when they demand from God to give them offspring, they do not pray together, but at a safe distance from one

another, as it is written: "And Isaac pleaded with the Lord *on behalf of his wife*, for she was barren." (Genesis 25:21)

This is not all. When I think about the modest family cell that Isaac and Rebecca created, I am appalled. Think about it – they had twins, two boys, Jacob and Esau. And yet, despite its modest size this family is rent by a deep and sharp internal clash. The mother openly loves Jacob, whereas the father openly loves his twin and elder brother Esau. That is, there are two distinct camps within the family, which view one another as enemies to the point of spying on conversations behind tent walls and doors.

Pay attention – these descriptions are but a light prelude to the havoc in Jacob's family life, whose wives multiply in direct proportion to his children. There we learn about the protagonist's falling in love with the young and beautiful sister, Rachel. This great love story of Jacob for Rachel, which inspired countless legends and romantic tales, the love for which Jacob willingly paid the girl's father with seven years of hard work; this story raises an important question about the authenticity and meaning of love of first sight. Here, too, it is told that Jacob loves Rachel, but it doesn't say that Rachel loved him back. And on that fateful night, the wedding night, the father, Laban, replaces the young and fair Rachel with her older, and less appealing sister, Leah. In the course of that horrible night, no one protests – not Rachel who is left back in her father's house, not Leah, and most surprisingly, Jacob. To my mind, his behavior raises the most troubling question: How could the man who dreamt for seven years about the skin and face of his beautiful beloved Rachel, be misled for an entire night as he caresses and kisses her very different sister, without realizing that he has been deceived and that his beloved has been replaced by another? Was his love that superficial, to the point that it collapsed so quickly and easily under the cover of darkness and the wedding celebrations?

This is where the tortured life of Jacob's family only begins. Love progresses on and on in its dysfunctional path, as Jacob finds himself with two wives, hating and jealous sisters who trade their husband's body as if it were lentil stew. We read how they bargain with their husband's body: "And Reuven went out during the wheat harvest

and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to Leah his mother. And Rachel said to Leah, 'Give me, pray, some of the mandrakes of your son,' And she said, 'It is not enough that you have taken my husband, and now you would take the mandrakes of my son?' And Rachel said, 'Then let him lie with you tonight in return for the mandrakes of your son.' And Jacob came from the field in the evening and Leah went out to meet him and said, 'With me you will come to bed, for I have clearly hired you with the mandrakes of my son.' And he lay with her that night." (Genesis 30:14-16)

I will now describe just one more example for dysfunctional family life. Before leaving the details aside and trying to appreciate this incredible phenomenon from a bird's eye view, I would like to recall the story of Joseph and his brothers. This is perhaps the most sophisticated and impressive story, in terms of its plot structure, out of all Genesis stories. The unique storytelling and dramatic qualities of the series of tales about Joseph, attest to the exceptional literary genius of the Book of Genesis. In these stories we see how the dysfunctional relationships of the parents create the dysfunctional relationships of their descendants. You can actually feel how the focus shifts from the question of intimate and family relationships to the relations between siblings. After all, the reason why the brothers hate Joseph is related, primarily, to the question of who is the more senior and influential mother in the family: their mother Leah, or Joseph's mother, Rachel. Observing the families of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs we discover families passionately torn apart by competition, jealousy and hatred, which often degenerate into murder plots.

So what does the Book of Genesis want to teach us when it tells us about such families?

Does it want to teach us to love God to be point of sacrificing our own children, or precisely the opposite, that we should not try to slaughter our children as sacrifice? Does Genesis want to teach us not to marry two sisters as wives? Or maybe that we should not split the love of children between their parents? Perhaps it tries to teach us to prefer the firstborn over the young? Or the other way around, it seeks to teach us to prefer the young over the firstborn?

The answers to these questions naturally depend to a large degree on our pre-conceived approach to the Bible. Some will consider the lives of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs as stories about model figures who never sinned or did any wrong. They are able to explain away the personal and family failures of their admired figures. For years I thought that what we can learn from the stories of the Bible are mostly counter-examples. That is, the Bible showcases their failures so that we may learn to do the exact opposite of what these characters did. In recent years, as my dialogue has been focusing on Jacob, I have learned to withhold my judgment and listen to the stories' undercurrents. By this I do not mean that I do not have a personal, moral opinion about Abraham's decision to follow the dictum of his faith, bind his son and raise a knife at him. I certainly object to this act, even if it was done in the name of deep devotion to God. But I do think that with these stories the Bible simply wants to present one detail or another from the life of one of the most famous families in the Bible.

I think that the broader educational implications of the Genesis story far exceed the life of any of its characters. It is essentially a story of four generations in a single dynasty. The story provides us a perspective that is sufficiently broad for examining various processes within the family in light of the unique culture that the Bible tries to establish. It is an exceptional cultural approach that promotes the development of very unique individuals on the one hand, while being very family-oriented on the other hand, hailing the family institution as a central value. The story, which unfolds over many years, attempts to understand and clarify the meaning of our individual decisions for the generations that follow our own. In this sense, the great story of the families in Genesis raises to the surface the clash between the personal, private will and the collective will of the family, the people, and the group.

Hence, regardless of whether the characters in the play succeed or fail in the test of their personal life, a bigger story continues to be passed on from one generation to the next. It shows us how a certain cycle of life corresponds to and interacts with another life cycle that came before it; how parents pay the prices for the mistakes of their own parents, and how parents pay the price for the mistakes of their children and grandchildren. Through this story we discover the meaning of our actions not

only for the present generation or the one that will follow it, but also their implications for generations to come.

Certainly, this important insight can be terrifying. Responsibility assumes monstrous proportions. We discover the meaning of being an individualist who is compelled to follow an independent path, while at the same time appreciating the meaning of his actions for the people living with him in the present, and to the same extent, for those who will be there in the distant future. The Book of Genesis is an educational journey between liberty and responsibility; between the liberty to be who you are authentically, and the responsibility toward your environment and toward the other. In other words, the perspective of the individual life in a single family over generations, in the manner the Bible presents it to us in Genesis and elsewhere, teaches us what it means to be a mature person, who is responsible both and at the same time for himself and for the other, a person who is responsible over his present, but also over the past and over the future.

In this respect, and in many other respects, I continue to discover how the ongoing dialogue I have been holding with the various books of the Bible, and especially with Genesis, keep enriching my life. With every year that goes by, they continue to set challenges for me on every step and turn. There is no age where we can rest, the Bible tells us. There will always be challenges that demand of us to be flexible and compel us to be alert and proactive. Genesis reminds me that no matter how many years went by since the story of the Garden of Eden, the role of humans remains the same it was at the time when there were only two of them in the world: "And the Lord God took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden *to till it and watch it.*" (Genesis 2:16)

To till it and watch it. The challenge humans face is to till themselves and their lives, but to also watch over that which already exists, and over the achievements of the present and the past for the sake of future generations.