

Vayera 5778

The Children Who Cry 'Enough!'

Rene Lehman wrote to me twice this week. Both emails contained articles about the Akedah. Rene rather dryly observed,

Another interpretation of the Akedah. No matter what, this parashah bothers me.

My reply was to send him yet another commentary and agree that it bothers me, too.

Based on that correspondence I already knew that I wanted to talk about the Akedah this morning - but it wasn't until I started looking for this week's Mystery of Midrash piece that I decided on the particular focus. Because the Midrash that leaped out of the book at me simply won't leave me alone - and so I thought that we might take a deeper look at it together.

These are the verses that gave rise to the Midrash:

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and not withheld your favored one, I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes..."

This is the Midrash:

By Myself I swear: *what was the need for this oath? It was because Abraham had pleaded with God, "Swear to me that you will not test me any more, nor my son Isaac either..." Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Hama bar Haninah gave another explanation for the oath: that Abraham had begged, "Swear to me that you will not test me any more!" This is like a king who was married to a noblewoman. She bore him a first son, and he divorced her; a second, and he divorced her; a third and he divorced her; and so on. When she had borne him a tenth son, they assembled and demanded, "Swear to us that you will not divorce our mother any more!" In the same way, when Abraham had been tested for the tenth time, he begged, "Swear to me that you will not test me any more!"*

I feel that the short analysis I provided in the brochure only scratches the surface of this Midrash and what it might be trying to teach us about times in our own lives when we feel that we are being tested beyond what we can bear.

Let's take it in stages.

Stage 1: the initial question. We are seeing here a technique the Midrash often uses of writing in dialogue that is felt to be missing. The classic example of this is the conversation that is written between Cain and Abel when they go into the field. Here the author is supplying what Abraham might have said to God after the test was over. We can imagine him, the knife fallen from his hand, slumped at the bottom of the altar with the remains of that providential ram still sending up their smoke. The purpose of the Midrash is to take us inside Abraham's mind in that moment. And it seems clear that that whatever it was that just happened, he can't take any more of it. He's absolutely at the end of his tether. I think we can also hear him saying, 'and don't even *think* about putting my son through what you've put me through!'

Sidebar: to the Rabbis who wrote that Midrash, as soon as Abraham talks about being tested, they would hear the echo of that text from the Mishnah that I quoted in the brochure. That part of *Pirkei Avot* is a list of things that happen in groups of ten. We already know one - that the world was created with ten utterances; this is another. It's worth a closer look at the items on Maimonides' version of that list, all of which occur in either this week or last week's parashah:

1. God tells him to leave his homeland to be a stranger in the land of Canaan.
2. Immediately after his arrival in the Promised Land, he encounters a famine.
3. The Egyptians seize his beloved wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh.
4. Abraham faces incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings.
5. He marries Hagar after not being able to have children with Sarah.
6. God tells him to circumcise himself at an advanced age.
7. The king of Gerar captures Sarah, intending to take her for himself.
8. God tells him to agree to send Hagar away after having a child with her.
9. His son, Ishmael, becomes estranged.
10. God tells him to sacrifice his dear son Isaac upon an altar.

Let's just pull out the bits that relate to God. There's the first call, *lekh lekha*. Then there's the pain of circumcision. Then there's the pain of sending Hagar and Ishmael away. And finally there's the call - again expressed as *lekh lekha* - to sacrifice Isaac. God's demands seem to increase in intensity. By the end of the list we can easily imagine Abraham thinking, God, what *now*?

That takes us to Stage 2: the *mashal* or parable brought by Rabbi Levi, who quotes his sources as the rabbinic tradition says you should.

It is a brutal, radical, extraordinary *mashal*! If we were to ask ourselves 'what would the relationship between Abraham and God look like if it was between two human beings?' we probably wouldn't immediately jump to a serial divorcer.

And yet - all of those ten tests, all those things that God asks Abraham to do are precisely the kind of things that wreck relationships. Dislocation, pain, alienation, actual family breakdown...all of them the kind of things that would make anyone say - okay, that's it, I'm done.

This is such a powerful image for those times in our lives when we ourselves feel let down, and let down again, and let down a third time, and more. Whether we put this to ourselves in God-language or not, we have probably all asked ourselves at some point: 'why is all this terrible stuff happening to me?' or 'what did I do to deserve this?' or 'I thought I was doing the right thing, so how does this feel so wrong?' And in those times we *do* feel divorced - alienated from everything we previously knew, from the closeness and sense of security that we once had, even from the source of our own strength.

The *mashal* could really end there, and its lesson would be something like: Abraham was able to withstand all of these terrible trials and even though they probably changed him and his relationships - with humans and with God, he came through. But even for him, there was a point where he said, 'stop, it's enough now.' The author of the Midrash gives him the strength and the authority to articulate his breaking point - and indeed, after that point he is not tested further.

Which would be a perfectly good sort of Midrash.

But instead the *mashal* spins, giving us the image of the ten children banding together to confront their father, draw a line in the sand and declare: *Enough!* It's as if every trial has given birth to one of these children.

All week, I've been asking myself: why the ten children? What do they add to the Midrash, what do they represent and what can we learn from them?

I think it's significant that there are ten of them. Firstly, of course, ten is a quorum in Jewish thought, a minyan, a maximum. There are things that a group of ten can do that a group of nine can't. The act of standing up to the father-figure requires a group of ten. It's as if to say, here is the maximum - you can get away with this behavior ten times but that's all, and now things have to change. Even the tests can't go on for ever.

Ten also represents a minimum. Perhaps these children are some kind of inverse parallel to the ten good people that couldn't be found in the city of Sodom and Gomorrah - ten *tzaddikim*, who understand that when something evil is happening around them, it is their task to stand up and not accept what they are living in as reality.

The moral for Abraham is that even though he has been tested in the most extreme ways, he can still muster what it needs to say: Enough. Those 'children' of his ten trials, symbolize his own ability to say, 'no more.' He can't do it alone: he has to draw on other sources of strength within himself. While his own real-life relationships with his children are marked by tension, this internal brigade has the power to sustain him.

And the moral for us is similar, I think. As human beings we each undergo our own 'ten trials,' times at which we may feel as overlooked, as vulnerable, as ignored and abused as the queen in the *mashal*. Those are precisely the times when we must realize that we also have the power to cry, 'Enough.'

Abraham couldn't stop the trials happening to him, and we can't stop the ones that happen to us. That, I think, is the reason that the trials are attributed to God - a version of God whose power you can't just say 'no' to. But every time we are tried, a 'child' is born of that trial. Every bitter experience has the power to become a source of spiritual strength for us.

This is one of the hardest processes a human being can undergo. But if we can find the way to muster our spiritual strength after those times of pain, then, like Abraham in the Midrash, we too can refuse to let our own tests and trials dictate our futures. Because even as we are being tested, we are creating the children who will one day cry 'Enough.'

Shabbat shalom.