

On the Morality of the Patriarchs: Must biblical heroes be perfect?

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On April 16, 1935, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, then head of the Etz Hayyim Yeshiva in Kletzk, Poland, published an article in Warsaw's *Der Judische Tägblatt*¹ defending the honor of the patriarchs and matriarchs which he claimed had recently been maligned in a series of articles entitled "*Humash Motifs*" in the newspaper *Heint*. He wrote how shocked he was to see "the terrible blasphemies and the violation of the sanctity" of these great holy ancestors of the Jewish people printed there. He described his "shame" and "anguish" at this "betrayal," "travesty," "cynical ridicule," "insidious venom," "violation of the dignity of the patriarchs," and "defamation of the Creator, His Torah, and the holy patriarchs who form the very basis for the continued existence of the Jewish People." As a result, wrote Rabbi Kotler, he felt compelled to issue an uncharacteristic public statement protesting what he considered to be this rank disrespect. On the contrary, he wrote,

The holy forefathers – who were the most luminous, loftiest, and purest personalities, the holiest creatures – represent the foundation of eternal spiritual vitality, the wellsprings of *hesed* and the full range of positive attributes, for the entire world, for all of mankind. The patriarchs are, in fact, held in the highest esteem by every nation on earth. The worst enemies of the Jews did not dare tamper with their luminous and holy image.

¹ The article is entitled, "Ofener Brief ful Kletzker Rosh Yeshiva Ha-Gaon Rabi Aharon Kotler." I have used Rabbi Moshe Kolodny's translation printed in *The Jewish Observer* 24:2 (March 1991):50.

For a recent discussion of aspects of the biography and worldview of Rabbi Kotler, see Yoel Finkelman, "Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration," *Modern Judaism* 22:1 (February 2002):61-82.

Rabbi Kotler went on to insist that "every Jew possessing a spark of faith, to whom the honor of the Jewish People is dear, is forbidden to allow such heretical writings . . . to enter his home" and appealed to "rabbis, *gaonim*, *talmidei hakhamim*, as well as to ordinary God-fearing Jews to protest this sacrilege as strongly as possible."

What aroused the ire of Rabbi Kotler was a series of poems by Itzik Manger, Yiddish poet, playwright, parodist and literary essayist. Successive Friday issues of *Heint* had featured Manger's poetry on a variety of biblical themes from the Book of Genesis entitled, for example, "Hagar's Last Night by Abraham," "Hagar Leaves Abraham's House," "Abraham our Father Scolds Lot," and "Lot's Daughters."² I cite one in translation, "Hagar Leaves Abraham's House," as an example of what precipitated Rabbi Kotler's protest:

The dawn is blue at the window,
Three times the rooster crowed.
Outside the horse is neighing,
Impatient for the road.

Hagar is worn with weeping,
Her child lies in her arms.
Once more she casts her eyes around
The gray familiar room.

Outside the wagon-driver haggles
With Abraham for his fare
"R. Avraham, add a six-piece,
After all, there are two to haul."

The pony scrapes the gravel
As if it were saying, "Come on!
Give me a chance to show you
How to make the highway tame."

² The first two were published in the March 29, 1935 issue and the next two the following Friday, April 5, 1935. They were reprinted, with some changes, in Itzik Manger, *Medrish Itzik* (Jerusalem, 1984), 17-20, 29-32. My thanks to Rabbi Dr. Shalom Z. Berger and Shulamit Z. Berger for bringing these sources to my attention and making them available to me.

"Cry not, dear Yishmael,
Our portion is like this.
This is how the patriarchs behave
With their long pious beards. . . "

*(Ut azoi firen zikh di avos
Mit di lange frume berd.)*

There he stands wearing a silken cap
Rav Avraham the pious Jew.
"Loyal mother, does he at least feel
My bitter broken pain?" . . .

And Hagar takes as a witness
The heaven and the earth.
This is how the patriarchs behave
With their long pious beards.³

Manger himself acknowledged the irreverent nature of these poems at the beginning of his introduction to the work where they, as well as others similar to them, were published. "The poems gathered in this book are a sort of mischievous toying with the gray beards of the patriarchs and the head-shawl corners of the matriarchs," he wrote.⁴ He concluded the introduction in a somewhat similar vein with the following prayer:

I praise Thee Lord in Heaven, I praise/ Thee God
for strengthening my days./ I thank Thee that with
hand so weak/ I've finished just the same this work./
Diligence and care I've taken/ And the patriarchs I've
wakened/ From holy texts and silver dust/ That hard-
ened on them like a crust. / Here they stand, prepared
to give/ You proof that they are now alive;/ To greet,
dear readers, each of you/ With a cheerful, "Howdy-

³ This translation, with some changes, comes from Leonard Wolf, *The World According to Itzik: Poetry and Prose* (New Haven and London, 2002), 13-15.

⁴ *The World According to Itzik*, p. 3.

דו?"/ They with their holy mouths will tell/ ●f many
wonders, all so still.⁵

Of course, a full appreciation ●f Rabbi Kotler's response is only possible knowing the kind of language generally used in the Eastern Europe of the 1930s to describe the *avot*; it can only be assessed within the specific context of its time and place. However, measured against some contemporary expressions, Manger's formulations would qualify as veritable paragons of piety.⁶

Rabbi Kotler returned to this theme at least once after arriving in the United States in 1941, focusing on it in an address to a group of Jewish educators in the Fall of 1960. Notes of the lecture by one of the attendees were published shortly after they were delivered⁷ and again eight years later.⁸ Their status as an authoritative rendition of Rabbi Kotler's position on the matter was confirmed by their inclusion in the third volume of the collected works of Rabbi Kotler published by his closest students.⁹ Here too, in the context of discussing the conflict between Sarah and Hagar over Isaac and Ishmael, he reiterated and underscored his notion of the absolute perfection of the patriarchs. He maintained that it is "absolute heresy" (*kefirah mamash*) to apply "the conceptions and world view of regular people" to these figures. He denied that the patriarchs had any imperfection (*pegam*), even "the slightest of the slight (*pegam dak min ha-dak*)," and refused to consider the possibility that they may have been "influenced by subjective ten-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ For examples of disrespectful language about the *avot* written in the last decade or so, see Burton L. Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics* (New York, 1996), 31-32 and throughout the book and Naomi H. Rosenblatt and Joshua Horowitz, *Wrestling with Angels* (New York, 1995).

⁷ R. Eliyahu M. Bloch, *Yalkut Midah Keneged Midah* (Lakewood, 1962).

⁸ See "Ha-Derekh ne-Nekhonah be-Hora't ha-Tanakh," *Shema'atin* 15 (Kislev 5728):813.

⁹ See R. Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rabi Aharon* 3 (Lakewood, 5743), 177-87. For an English translation, see Yehoshua Leiman, *The Best of Light Magazine* (New York, 1995), 17-36; repr. in Rav Aharon Kotler, *How to Teach Torah* (New York, 2000).

dencies and desires (*mushpa'im mi-netiyot u-me-rezonot atzmiyim*).¹⁰ And, in fact, this "perfection model" of the patriarchs was expressed by others as well, either in programmatic statements about the role of the patriarchs in Jewish tradition¹¹ or as an exegetical methodology in commentaries on the Torah.¹²

An alternative view to that of Rabbi Kotler was promulgated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in a number of different places in his commentary on the Torah. In one place, his point of departure is the well-known statement of Nahmanides (on Genesis 12:10) that "Abraham sinned a great sin, albeit unintentionally," when he sent Sarah to the household of Pharaoh after having come down to Egypt because of the famine that struck the Land of Israel. This comment afforded Rabbi Hirsch an opportunity to reflect in general on the issue of the proper approach one should take to the patriarchs.

The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect, it deifies no man, says of none, "here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine became human." . . . The Torah is no "collection of the examples of saints." It relates what occurred, not because it was exemplary but because it did occur. The Torah never bides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. . . . It may never be our task to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past, to appear as apologists for them. They do not require our apologies, nor do such attempts become them. Truth is the seal of our

¹⁰ *Shema'atin*, p. 10; *Mishnat Rabi Avaron*, pp. 179-80. This article provoked an exchange in subsequent issues of *Shema'atin*. See *Shema'atin* 16 (Adar-Iyyar 5728):86-87; 17 (Sivan-Av 5728):5-8.

¹¹ See, for example, R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Sefer Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 1 (Jerusalem, 1959), 161-66; 2 (Bnei Berak, 1964), 160. See too R. Hayyim Eizik Sher, *Avraham Avinu: Hitboninut be-Ma'asei Avot* (Jerusalem, 1946); R. Hayyim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav* 5 (Tel Aviv, 1983), 400-01, #115. While there are differences between these sources, they share the basic "perfection" model. See also Eliezer Margaliyot, *Ha-Hayavim be-Mikra ve-Zaka'im be-Talmud u-ve-Midrashim* (London, 1949).

¹² See, for example, Amos Frisch, "R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg's Method in the Issue of the Patriarchs' Sins," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 53:1 (Spring 2002):107-19.

Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers.

Rabbi Hirsch added that not only does such a view not detract from the greatness of the patriarchs or other biblical heroes but, on the contrary, it enhances it. "If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection, we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us. Were they without passion, without internal struggles, their virtues would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and certainly no model that we could hope to emulate." For example, continued Rabbi Hirsch, the great humility the Torah ascribes to Moses (Numbers 12:3) can only be fully appreciated by knowing that, on occasion, he could lose his temper (Numbers 20:10).

It would appear, then, that Rabbi Hirsch takes a very different approach to that of Rabbi Kotler. Not only, in his view, do the patriarchs have "faults, errors and weaknesses," but the Torah does not hesitate at all from presenting them in all their details.¹³

In my public presentation I noted that the first step for Jewish educators who teach *Humasb* is to appreciate this issue *per se*, to understand and be sensitive to the multiplicity of opinions on the question of the "perfection" or "humanity" of the patriarchs, or other biblical heroes for that matter, from the rabbinic period up to contemporary times. There is a large and growing literature on this subject, drawing on a wide variety of theological, exegetical and polemical texts.¹⁴ But

¹³ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch, Vol. 1 Genesis* (New York, 1971), 236-37 (on Genesis 12:10). See also Rabbi Hirsch's comments on Genesis 25:27 (p. 425): "Our sages, who never objected to draw attention to the small and great mistakes and weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers, and thereby make them just the more instructive for us ...," *The Pentateuch, Vol. 2 Exodus* (New York, 1971), 73 (on Exodus 6:14), regarding Moses' "perfectly ordinary human nature, subject to all failings and weaknesses, to all the limits and requirements of human beings, just like all other men amongst whom he had been born and grown up . . ."

For a discussion of Rabbi Hirsch's position, see Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Kibbud Av and Kibbud Avot: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques," *Tradition* 33:4 (1999):35-44.

¹⁴ Much has been written, for example, on the Talmudic statement (*Shabbat* 55b-56b) that "Whoever says that David (and others) sinned, can

after having mastered the literature on this issue, and having come to his or her own personal conclusion, the educator must then very carefully examine how potentially "problematic" biblical stories that present biblical figures in a less than perfect light should be taught to elementary and high school students. It is one thing to arrive at one's own conclusion on this issue; it may be something else to determine how to present those conclusions in class where clearly, for example, grade level must be a major consideration; what is appropriate in eleventh grade is surely not appropriate in fourth grade. If, as I would suggest, the ultimate goal of a yeshiva education is to produce young men and women who love Judaism and are inspired to maintain a life-long commitment to our *masorah*, or Jewish tradition, then great thought must be given to how to present apparent patriarchal imperfections to students.

And, in fact, both the Rabbi Kotler model and the Rabbi Hirsch model pose conceptual challenges. First, how does Rabbi Kotler account for the many rabbinic and medieval statements with which he was undoubtedly familiar that seem to explicitly assert patriarchal misbehavior? Indeed, rabbinic literature is full of statements like that of Nahmanides just cited, and some even more sharply formulated. The Talmud considers the Jewish people's forced enslavement in Egypt as a punishment for Abraham having committed one of three

only be mistaken."

A number of relatively recent publications on this general subject have generated heated debate: R. Shlomo Aviner's article, "Tanakh be-Govah Eynayim" elicited much reaction in the newspaper *Ha-Tzofeh* from April-June, 2002 (http://www.hazofe.co.il/web/mador.asp?Modul=24&kod=132&ko_d_gilon=499); R. Yuval Sherlo's article, "Asher Banu Shtehen et Bet Yisra'el," in Ofir Schwartzbaum and Amichai Sadan, eds., *Ketonet Or* (Jerusalem, 2000), 413-22 and R. Tzvi Yisrael Tau's book, *Tzaddik Be-Emunato Yibyei*. For the polemical context, see David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation* (New York, 1987), 49-62; repr. in Shalom Carmy, ed., *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah* (Northvale, 1996), 131-46; Ofir Mintz-Manor, "Mah Atah Noten Pithon Peh le-Minim?: Le-Pitronah shel She'elat ha-Zenzurah be-Piyutim le-Shavuot," *Tarbiz* 70:3-4 (2001):637-44.

potential wrongdoings.¹⁵ Radak harshly criticizes Sarah for the way she treated Hagar and claims that the Torah included the story about their disagreement as an example of how *not* to behave.¹⁶ And there are many more such examples. I am beginning to develop a carefully nuanced understanding and appreciation of Rabbi Kotler's position that would explain it even given these apparently contradictory statements, but it is beyond the scope of this brief paper. Second, how does Rabbi Kotler respond to the "didactic argument" of Rabbi Hirsch? If, in fact, the patriarchs are perfect, of what pedagogic purpose is the Torah's description of their behavior? How can any individual be inspired to emulate them if their fundamental makeup is so unlike that of anyone else? Both of these issues will undoubtedly be raised by thoughtful students and need to be addressed.

Teaching Rabbi Kotler's position poses one final challenge that is not a criticism of him but rather of contemporary culture which has been deeply embedded in parts of the Modern Orthodox community as well. Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville already noted the "general equality of condition" he discovered in the United States which, he suggested, kept its citizens from acknowledging the greatness or superiority of any single idea or even any particular individual. Because America is a democracy, he asserted, all of its citizens are considered to have been created equal, none greater or on a higher level than anyone else.¹⁷ George Orwell began his review of Gandhi's autobiography by asserting that "saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent."¹⁸ The status of sainthood is never simply bestowed; on the contrary, the operative assumption is that it is inappropriate and undeserved. In contemporary America where the personal behavior of a president of the United States was shown to be utterly inappropriate and embarrassing, our students quickly develop a huge degree of cynicism about the greatness of any authority figure.

¹⁵ *Nedarim* 32a. For other rabbinic texts that take Abraham to task for saying to God, "How do I know that I will inherit it?" (Genesis 15:8), see *Midrash Tanhuma*, Parshat Vayigash 2; *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:4.

¹⁶ Radak, Commentary on Genesis 16:4.

¹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1966).

¹⁸ George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," in *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* 4 (New York, 1968), 463.

And so, in a culture where we shrink everyone to Lilliputian dimensions, how hard it is to expose our students to the fact that there were people who lived who had no imperfections whatsoever, even “the slightest of the slight.”

But, while Rabbi Hirsch’s position is closer to and resonates more fully with the assumptions of our culture, it too poses a significant challenge for it opens up the proverbial Pandora’s box. Is it now appropriate to ascribe whatever “faults, errors and weaknesses” we want to the patriarchs? Is there a line to be drawn beyond which such ascriptions are inappropriate?¹⁹ Where do we draw the line? Can they, in fact, be considered just like you or me? Do we not refer to God repeatedly in our daily prayers as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?” Do we not conclude the first blessing of the *Amidah* by referring to Him as “the shield of Abraham?” Clearly we assert, and to my mind must genuinely believe, that they are just not like “you and me;” indeed, they are much, much greater, an entirely different dimension of being. In the words of Gary Kamiya, “To feel the pedestal is to call the very idea of the pedestal into question.”²⁰

It is incumbent upon *Tanakh* educators squarely to face this issue and construct an approach that will resonate, first for themselves and then for their students, whatever age they may be.²¹

¹⁹ See the books cited above, n. 6.

²⁰ Gary Kamiya, “Falling Out with Superman,” *The New York Times Book Review* (January 23, 2000), 35.

²¹ For various approaches to this issue, see Yitzchok Adlerstein, “On Football: The Avot and Recent Disputes in Israel,” *Jewish Action* 50:2 (Spring 1990):33-36; Hayyim Angel, “Learning Faith From the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives and Commentary,” in Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman, eds., *Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education* (Jerusalem and New York, 2003), 192-212; Avishai David, “Perspectives on the Avot and Imahot,” *Ten Da’at* 5:2 (1991):24-26; Howard Deitcher, “The Child’s Understanding of the Biblical Personality,” *Studies in Jewish Education* 5 (1990):167-82; *idem.*, “Between Angels and Mere Mortals: Nechama Leibowitz’s Approach to the Study of Biblical Characters,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 66:1-2 (2000):8-22; trans. with some changes in *Iyunim be-Hinukh Yehudi* 9 (2004):193-211; Zvi Grumet, “Another Perspective on the Avot and Imahot,” *Ten Da’at* 6:1 (1992):25-27; Emily Shapiro, “Approaching the Avot,” www.atid.org.

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