

## **Davar Torah Parshat Va'era by Jonathan Forman**

**Nov. 12, 2022**

Shabbat Shalom

My name is Jonathan Forman. Today my wife Debbie and I are sponsoring the kiddush in celebration of my recovery from my recent accident, and this drash is also part of that celebration. Thanks To Minyan Maor and the Temple Emmanuel clergy and community for all your support and for giving me this opportunity today. I am also dedicating this drash to the several others in our Minyan who have had recent injuries and illnesses. May they all have complete healing.

The parsha is Vayera. It's incredibly packed with some of our most famous biblical stories.

Included are the angels visiting Abraham, Abraham's bargaining with G-d, the destruction of Sodom and Gemorah, the birth of Isaac, and the binding of Isaac, the Akedah.

Today I'd like to focus on two of the episodes in today's Parsha. As my major source, I have used the book: Subversive Sequels in the Bible. How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine each other. it was written by Judy Klitsner. I know some of you are familiar with her work, and you may have heard her speak as I did several years back on a couple of her

speaking tours to Boston.

She is a senior faculty member and Bible scholar at the Pardes Institute of Jewish studies in Jerusalem

Her particular expertise and contribution to biblical studies is in the way she pairs biblical stories to show how a later text will often comment on, or even subvert an earlier one. She tends to draw surprising parallels between biblical passages, and in so doing she increases our understanding and appreciation of our stories. Mostly, I have found that her explanations greatly enhance the relevance of stories that at first seem totally out of touch with our modern sensibilities.

Okay, so we will look at two stories in a bit more detail today. The first is the Akeda, the binding of Isaac. It is a story well known to all of us, but extremely difficult for us to interpret or understand. As the Eitz Chaim commentary says, “the Akedah is an unforgettably harrowing story that defies easy interpretation. “

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks did give a very thoughtful explanation.

He feels the major lesson of the Akeda is that our children are not ours but belong to God. He feels that the Akedah serves to show all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is NOT because they lack the courage to commit child sacrifice. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason Jews do not commit child

sacrifice is because God is the God of life and not death. As Rabbi Sacks concludes, “the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history.”

And while this is a somewhat satisfying explanation, we are still very much troubled by the basis of the story. How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, and how could Abraham be so unquestioning and so compliant in this horrific request?

Klitsner feels that the Bible itself was not satisfied with the story of the Akedah, and proposes that it is revisited in the book of Job.

I will begin by giving a very brief overview of the story of Job. He was a perfect person in every way. He took care of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the blind, the handicapped, and the downtrodden. He was a man of justice. In fact, he’s the only person described as perfect in the entire Bible. He is wealthy, has good health, and has 10 wonderful children.

Satan and God are discussing him. They both agree he is perfect, but Satan feels he’s only perfect and righteous because he has everything. God feels he would be good no matter what. That he is truly righteous. They make a bet.

Because of the bet, God takes everything away from Job. He was rich and he becomes poor. His 10 children all die. He was healthy and he becomes

sick with plagues on his body. He loses his family, his wealth, and his health.

It turns out that Job IS really good and continues to lead a righteous life.

After hearing of the death of his children, Job recites a line that has become well known to us as it has been incorporated into many of our funerals.

The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

His supposed friends come to visit him -presumably to comfort him. But they merely tell him that he must've done something wrong to have suffered this fate.

Job disagrees with them, and feels his fate is undeserved. He's angry with God and challenges him for what is happened to him.

God answers Job with a classic theological argument. How can I a finite man possibly understand God's actions? Where was Job when the world was created?

The story goes on, but ultimately God admonishes Job's friends for telling him he must've done something wrong to have deserved his fate, and God praises Job for his questioning and challenging of God for punishing him when he has done nothing wrong.

Okay, so how does Klitsner feel that the two stories are related? First, she points out linguistic and thematic similarities.

Right after the ending of the Akedah story, there is a list of names of the 8 children born to Abraham's brother Nahor.

Three of those names are repeated in the book of Job, and are found almost nowhere else in the Bible.

Both Abraham and Job are called by God as a God-fearing Yiray Elohim. (Gen 22:12) Very few others are given such an honor.

Both Abraham and Job refer to themselves as being but dust and ashes. afar va-aifer. (Gen 18:27)

The last words used to describe both Abraham and Job are Zakeyn vsovaya. Old and contented. (Gen 25:8)

Both stories deal with the concepts of ultimate justice, of good and evil. In the Akedah, Abraham is blindly obedient to the word of God. And this occurs after Abraham has already argued with God about his plans to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah. Job openly challenges G-d for destroying his family, his health, and his wealth despite his having been a truly righteous person. The book of Job has many reminders to the Binding of Isaac, but brings the issues to an entirely new level.

Rabbi Micah Goodman of the Hartman Institute has spoken on the book of Job. His lecture is on the Hartman website and well worth listening to, but I believe his major point is that it is remarkable that the book of Job was included in the Bible at all. The book portrays God as punishing Job so that he can win a bet with Satan. It questions one of the most fundamental beliefs in Judaism. It openly challenges the concept that good is ultimately rewarded. The book of Job is a critique of biblical theology; yet it is a part of the Bible.

Goodman's thoughts are similar to Klitzners: the book of Job revisits the major Biblical teachings, but in a way that shows that our Tanach is troubled by its own principles. Why be a good Jew? --- a very difficult question.

Abraham's complete acquiescence. In the book of Job, God seems to change his mind and punish Job for objecting to God's injustice. The Bible asks us to follow the word of God, and teaches that good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds are punished. But the book of Job objects to this theory and says that good deeds simply do not work. Goodman feels that the inclusion of this skepticism within the Bible itself makes the Bible larger than we can imagine “

OK let's briefly discuss one other story in today's parsha. And don't worry, this part of my talk

The other story from today's parsha that we'll review today is the birth of Isaac and the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. Also, very familiar to us,

as it immediately precedes the Akeda and both stories are read on Rosh Hashanah.

Klitsner feels that this is also a subversive sequel, but now this story is the sequel.

Sarah saw Ishmael Mitzachaek – translated as playing or making sport - though not at all clear what it really means. She has a strong response and asks Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is distressed, but reluctantly goes along once God instructs him that it is the correct thing to do. It is a difficult story. As Nachum Sarna has written “how could the Bible conceive of God is acquiescing in what is an act of manifest inhumanity?”

Klitsner does not directly answer that question, but does feel that the story of Sarah and Abraham, their fertility issues, and their family story and relationship are very much parallel to and a reenactment of the creation story in Bereishit. And she feels the major theme of this connection is the development of the strength of the woman partner in marriage.

She has many examples to show the parallelism, but we will go directly to the climax of her argument.

When God is telling Abraham to do as Sarah says and banish Hagar and Ishmael, he says,

“Kol asher tomar aelecha Sarah shema bikola “

“Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says“

We then turn back to the story in Bereishit of the snake convincing Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and Eve convincing Adam to do the same.

When God is punishing Adam he says in chapter 3 verse 17 Kee Shamata likol ishtecha “because you did as your wife said” you will be cursed.

In the creation story, man is punished for listening to his wife. In our story today, man is told to listen to his wife. All in very similar language.

It seems that the character of the relationship between husband and wife is being re-examined in our story today, and that the wife is now given a much stronger and more dominant role.

Personally, I am hoping that later in the Tanach there is another sequel that perhaps supports more of a collaborative joint decision making between the members of the couple. I guess I’m going to have to get back to you on that one.



Okay, so today we have reviewed two examples of what Judy Klitsner calls subversive sequels.

Hopefully, it gives us a greater appreciation and understanding of our biblical stories. And, as in my own accident, things often do not turn out as one would predict. The future can be different and brighter than we would ever imagine.

In the past, one of my favorite sayings was that inertia is the strongest force we have. Things are predictable, and as such, one should not waste too much energy in trying to change ourselves or things around us. I tend to like my routines, and as many of my family and friends would say, tend to resist change. But perhaps what the Bible is trying to tell us is that things are not so predictable, and hoping for and struggling for improvement and meaning in our lives is well worth it.

We need to be open to the possibilities that things are not always as they seem and that things can improve. If we do not allow ourselves to envision better outcomes and a better world, we will never be motivated to work for them.

May we all be open to the notion that things do not have to stay as they seem today, and to do what we can to improve our own lives, our communities, and the world.

Shabbat Shalom