



D'var Torah Toldot: Nov. 18, 2023

By Joram Borenstein

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Joram Borenstein.

The parsha this week speaks about lots of famous stories and concepts like Esau & Yaakov, holding onto heels, lentils, digging wells, Hittite wives, and so much more. It's got so much to discuss!

But - I am going to disappoint you and ... instead of those topics, I want to present some questions and observations about inheritance and its role in the Tanakh.

I will admit that this is NOT a topic that I had ever thought about explicitly or precisely. But as I prepared for giving this drash, it popped out as a key theme.

Both in this parsha and as we look across the entire Tanakh, there are loads of examples of inheritance. Inheritance is a concept that is well-studied and - even beyond our own tradition - it is something we find details about as far back as the Code of Hammurabi and it also appears in plenty of places throughout Christian and Muslim history. So it's clearly a piece of the bedrock of society; if it was not, why else would there be so many rules about it extending so far back in time?

OK, now back to the Tanakh...

TYPES OF INHERITANCE

In the Tanakh, we have various inheritance types, such as:

- Physical Stuff vs. non-Physical Stuff
- Inheritances for an Individual vs. for a Group (like a tribe)
- Inheritances for only certain segments of society (e.g. the Leviim)
- Inheritances Within a family vs. Outside a family
- Inheritances that are given Immediately vs. ones that only are received in the Future
- Inheritances that are Permanent (land, jewelry, etc.) vs.

Temporary (like crops or a debt that will soon be paid off);

AND

- Inheritances that are a 1-time event vs. an ongoing situation

As you can see, there are many more variations of inheritance than one would have initially thought. I was shocked to see this variety!

Lessons & Thoughts

If we look at all of these inheritance types, a few things are notable:

- First, inheritance is NOT ABOUT LOVE (despite how we sometimes perceive it in today's society).
- 2nd, inheritance is NOT ABOUT OPINIONS OR CHOICE; many of the inheritances we read about in Tanakh are commanded and part of the legal infrastructure. Humans do not get to weigh in with their own thoughts or ideas.
- 3rd, NOT EVERYONE "qualifies" for an inheritance in their lives; they may not be in the right birth order or segment of society or the right gender or belong to the right tribe. On the other hand, some individuals may receive multiple inheritances, again for reasons entirely out of their own control and simply due to the sheer good fortune of having been born as a boy or first in the family or to the right parents or into the right tribe, etc.

So am I saying that life is not fair and that the Tanakh is not equitable? No, not really ... in fact, I think we can argue just the opposite.

Why do I say that? I say that because I think there is ANOTHER TYPE OF INHERITANCE that doesn't fit any of these categories. What I am referring to are the CUSTOMS, STORIES, and VALUES that exist in Tanakh and that are provided to all of us. I am referring quite literally to all of the famous stories we know, to the rules around observing holidays, and things of that nature. Call it THE DEMOCRATIZATION OR EXPANSION OF INHERITANCE. When we pause to think about it, these items such as VALUES, CUSTOMS, or STORIES are:

- meant for everyone
- Can be received by people of any age
- Any gender
- Any tribe
- Any social category or hierarchy

And even though I am categorizing values as an inheritance, I think it is no accident that these all-important items in our tradition are less explicitly discussed as "inheritance" in the same way we read about livestock or land or jewelry or any of the other examples mentioned earlier.

If we think about Am Yisrael, it makes sense to me that for both psychological and sociological reasons, NOT talking about customs and stories and values as an inheritance imbues them with a higher order sense of purpose. They are so deeply woven into the fabric of the Tanakh that perhaps we don't notice they are there.

At the individual psychological level of each one of us, it means that there is nothing to wait for, nothing to think about when it comes to worrying about our birth order or our gender or our tribal affiliation. This is such a superb message to keep in mind!

On the group sociological level, this approach - I would argue - helps us as a group to remain resilient in the face of an unknown future. It helps us to remain connected across tribes and geographies and generations. It also gives us flexibility for situations in which we as Am Yisrael are in transition or moving around from place to place. And finally, it helps us to remain somewhat consistent across all of these changes.

Conclusion

When I realized this, I actually felt a sense of pure, almost irrational joy. It demonstrates to me the openness and inclusivity of our tradition and is in some ways a testament to how we can grow and learn from it and with it as we progress through our own life stages.

And while I am reluctant to start to apply this framework to our modern lives, I must admit that the notion of non-physical inheritance does make me think about the fact that I am blessed to have known all 4 of my grandparents well and to have learned from their life stories and personal histories. That richness is something I have within me and which I think about a lot at this juncture in my own life, having already lost one parent 11 years ago and as I get the joy of watching our children launch themselves into young adulthood. It makes me think a great deal about which values and traditions are important to me as a person and to us as a family.

Poem

I want to close with a short poem by the American poet, Gary Soto, since I feel it speaks to this concept beautifully as a way to close out this morning's drash.

Grandfather rose late,
The day already sobbing heat in the garden.
He sliced a lemon and in the bathroom
Rubbed its sweet acids under his arms,
The scent that would follow him through the day.
The squeezed lemon collapsed into a frown,
And he was ready. Ready for what? He ate
And drank coffee, his mouth pleated on each deep sip. He studied his roses, the wicked
queens of his garden, And raked puckered oranges into a herd
Of croquet balls. "Keep things green, mijo,"
He repeated to me of life.
In the flower bed, water surged into the volcanic peaks
Of ant hills, the silt as fine as gold.
Grandfather was a simple man, a work-worn camel

With a busy jaw. Our inheritance was a late afternoon With my small hand under his,
the garden hose splashing For the good of t

Shabbat Shalom