

Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs: Paragons of Perfection of Symbols of Struggle?

Rav Aharon Kotler, The Jewish Observer 3/91

I was recently shown the last few issues of the newspaper *Heint*. How shocked I was to see the terrible blasphemies and the violation of the sanctity of our Holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs that they contained!

The laws of our Holy Torah obligate me to react to this unheard-of profanation of truth, *Chillul Sheim Shomayim* and violation of the dignity of the Jewish Nation. I thus feel compelled to depart from my usual practice and to issue the following public statement:

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 *chesed* and the full range of positive attributes, for the entire world, for all of mankind. The *Avos* 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.

How deep the shame and how

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings for G-d surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine G-d would redeem him from death.⁷⁶ It was because of this deed

that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.⁷⁷ In the place of justice, there is wickedness⁷⁸ and sin.

Rav Shlomo Riskin *Listening to God* p. 334

A close reading of the indictment revealed that my heresy lay in an article on Moses that I had published in my weekly *Jerusalem Post* column. I had suggested that, while Moses succeeded more than any other human being in relaying the will of the Divine to all generations in the form of the five Books of Moses, which were in actuality the word of the living God (Maimonides says in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that Moses' active intellect perceived and actually kissed the Divine Active Intellect), he failed as a politician; he failed in his duty to convince the Israelites to conquer and settle the land of Israel. Apparently the Hasidim (or the Rebbe, or both) believed it heretical to critique Moses in any form whatsoever.

I quickly looked around and realized that no one recognized me.

Shabbos 55b

ראובן בני עלי בני שמואל דוד ושלמה ויואש סימן: אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן כל האומר בני עלי חטאו אינו אלא טועה א"ר שמואל בר נחמני אמר ר' יונתן כל האומר דוד חטא אינו אלא טועה

דתיא ר"ש בן אלעזר אומר אף משה ואהרן בחטאם מתו שנא' (במדבר כ, יב) יען לא האמנתם בי הא האמנתם בי עדיין לא הגיע זמנם ליפטר מן העולם מיתיבי ארבעה מתו בעטיו של נחש ואלו הן בנימין בן יעקב ועמרם אבי משה וישי אבי דוד וכלאב בן דוד

Shabbos 10b

ואמר רבא בר מחסיא אמר רב חמא בר גוריא אמר רב לעולם אל ישנה אדם בנו בין הבנים שבשביל משקל שני סלעים מילת שנתן יעקב ליוסף יותר משאר בניו נתקנאו בו אחיו ונתגלגל הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים

רמב"ן בראשית יב:

ודע כי אברהם אבינו חטא גדול בשגגה שהביא אשתו הצדקת במכשול עון מפני פחדו פן יהרגוהו, והיה לו לבטוח בשם שיציל אותו ואת אשתו ואת כל אשר לו, כי יש באלהים כח לעזור ולהציל. גם יציאתו מן הארץ, שנצטווה עליה כתחילה, מפני הרעב, עון אשר חטא, כי האלהים ברעב יפדנו ממות. ועל המעשה הזה נגזר על זרעו הגלות בארץ מצרים כיד פרעה. במקום המשפט שמה הרשע והחטא:

Rav Hirsch Bereishis 12:10

The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given us of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no wise made lesser but actually greater and more instructive. 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. Take, for instance Moses's *ענה*. Did we not know that he could also fly into a passion, his meekness and modesty would seem to us to be his inborn natural disposition, and lost to us as an example. Just his *שמעו נא המורים* gives his *ענה* its true greatness, shows it to us as the result of a great work of self-control and self-ennoblement which we all should copy because we all could copy.

Rav Hirsch Bereishis 25:27

old books, but at the same time, a whole purpose of life, behind back, a life of which he has only learnt to know from one angle, and in a manner for which he can find no disposition in his whole nature.

Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esau's nature and character early enough, and asked themselves how can even an Esau, how can all the strength and energy, agility and courage that lies slumbering in this child, be won over to be used in the service of God, and the future גבר be trained to become, not a גבר צירי, but in truth a גבר יפני ה', then Jacob and Esau, with their totally different natures could still have remained twin-brothers in spirit and life; quite early in life Esau's "sword" and Jacob's "spirit" could have worked hand in hand, and who can say what a different aspect the whole history of the ages might have presented. But, as it was, ויגדלו הנערים, only when the boys had grown into men, one was surprised to see that, out of one and the selfsame womb, having had exactly the same care, training and schooling, two such contrasting persons emerge.

That as with Jacob the תם איש denotes the nature of his character,

Rav Nisson Wolpin, Jewish Action, Winter 2002

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, זצ"ל, described all of those whose lives and actions are chronicled in Scriptures as *malachim*—angels, no less, far beyond our comprehension. Rabbi Aaron Kotler, זצ"ל, instructed teachers of *tinokos shel beis rabban* similarly in a lecture at a Torah Umesorah gathering, published in *Mishnas Rav Aaron*, stressing that even Eisav was of a greatness beyond our reckoning. Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, זצ"ל, focused on the nature of the prize in the battle between Joseph and his brothers as *nischiyus*—a key factor in the eternal destiny of the Jewish people—and Joseph's "concern with his physical appearance" as an expression of royal dignity, or a reflection of the ultimate manifestation of human perfection as personified by Adam and Jacob; not another case of adolescent narcissism. (Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, זצ"ל, expounds on the rivalry of Joseph and his brothers with his signature profundity in *Michnav MeEliyahu II*, pp. 219-229.)

We dare not risk belittling the like of Joseph and his brothers, by equating them with us in any fashion.

Rav Shimon Shwalb – quoted in Shapiro p. 4

What ethical purpose is served by preserving a realistic historic picture? Nothing but the satisfaction of curiosity. We should tell ourselves and our children the good memories of the good people, their unshakeable faith, their staunch defense of tradition, their life of truth, their impeccable honesty, their boundless charity and their great reverence for Torah and Torah sages. . . . Rather than write the history of our forebears, every generation has to put a veil over the human failings of its elders and glorify all the rest which is great and beautiful. That means we have to do without a real history book. We can do without. We do not need realism, we need inspiration from our forefathers in order to pass it on to posterity.⁹

Rav Emanuel Feldman, Jewish Action Summer 2002

No sooner does a leading *rosh yeshiva* or rabbinic luminary pass from the scene than the Orthodox media swings into action with his life story. Articles, reminiscences, appreciations, and book-length treatments—all of them suitably adulatory—begin to appear, so that even relatively obscure *gedolim* become more famous in death than in life.

Most of these life stories—with a few shining exceptions—have common themes: the individual was brilliant, profound, wise, righteous, and kind. He was never angry, never discouraged, never wasted any time, never had any inner conflicts. Thus it comes as no surprise that certain questions—questions that are crucial to our understanding of any major leader—will rarely be addressed.

One shudders to think how it would be written today. Would any contemporary religious writer dare mention that Joseph, in his youth, was concerned with his physical appearance (Rashi on Gen. 37:2)? As for Jacob's favoring one son over another—would not our writer gloss over that inconvenient fact? Would Joseph's talebearing be omitted, as well as the jealousy of the brothers? Would not the story of Judah and Tamar be excised because it might offend—as would the story of Joseph and the wife of Potifar? And the slaughter of the inhabitants of Shechem is so unbecoming the sons of Jacob that it might best be elided. The actual hurling of Joseph into the pit and his subsequent sale into slavery—would not this

Puerile, cookie-cutter life stories are no tribute to the *gedolim* and no help to us.

cast an unflattering and cruel light on the brothers, and be expurgated from the story?

In today's *gadol*-ography (the term is irresistible) we would be treated only to the bare-bones information that Joseph, whom Jacob loved very much, mysteriously disappeared, causing Jacob great anguish, and did not appear until 22 years later as viceroy of Egypt. Jacob, we would be told, never lost hope, since he was a great *tzaddik*; and Joseph, also a great *tzaddik* like his father, always knew that some day he would see his father again. And when because of the great famine Jacob went down to Egypt, he finally was reunited with his son, and lived happily ever after in Goshen until he died at the ripe old age of 147.