Lekh Lekha

How Perfect Were the Patriarchs and Matriarchs?

In an extraordinary series of observations on Parashat Lekh Lekha, Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Girondi, or Nahmanides; 1194–1270), delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision, after arriving at the land of Canaan, to leave and go to Egypt because “there was a famine in the land” (Gen. 12:1). On this Ramban says:

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 God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the land contravened the Torah, which says, ‘For the land is mine and for your offspring I will give it’ (Gen. 15:18).
that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.¹

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan; he should have had faith in God that He would sustain him despite the famine. Abraham's decision to leave was not his only error; he also put himself in a position of moral hazard because, as a result of going to Egypt, he was forced to tell a lie. In saying that she was Abraham's sister and wife, she was taken into Pharaoh's harem where she might have forced to commit an act of adultery. This is a very harsh judgment made more so by Ramban's further assertion that it was because of lack of faith that Abraham's children were sentenced to exile in centuries later.

Further in the parasha, Ramban criticises Sarah. Despairing of a child, she asks Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in order that she might bear him a child. Abraham does so, and Hagar becomes pregnant. The text then says that Hagar "began to despise her wife" (Gen. 16:4). Sarah complains to Abraham and then "afflict[s] [16:6] who flees from her into the desert. On this, Ramban writes:

"Our mother [Sarah] transgressed by this affliction, as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction. (Commentary to Gen. 16:6)

Here the moral judgement is easier to understand. Sarah's conduct is em volatile and harsh. The Torah itself says that Sarah "afflicted" Yet Ramban seems to be saying that it is this episode in the past that explains Jewish suffering at the hands of Muslims (the descendants of Ishmael) in a much later age.

It is not difficult to defend Abraham and Sarah in these incidents. Their commentators did so. Abraham was not to know that God perform a miracle and save him and Sarah from famine had they stayed in Canaan. Nor was he to know that the Egyptians would endanger his life and place Sarah in a moral quandary. Neither of them had been to Egypt before. They did not know in advance what to expect.

As for Sarah and Hagar, although an angel sent Hagar back, later when Ishmael and Isaac were born, Sarah once again banished Hagar. This time, though Abraham protested, God told him to do what Sarah said. So Ramban's criticisms are easily answered. Why then did he make them?

Ramban surely did not make these comments lightly. He was, I believe, driven by another consideration altogether, namely the justice of history. Why did the Israelites suffer exile and slavery in Egypt? Why in Ramban's own age were Jews subject to attack by radical Islamists, the Almohads, who brought to an end the Golden Age of Spain they had enjoyed under the more tolerant rule of the Umayyads?

Ramban believed, as we say in our prayers, that "because of our sins we were exiled from our land, but what sins had the Israelites committed in the days of Jacob that merited exile? He also believed that the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children" (Commentary to Gen. 12:6) and that what happened in the lives of the patriarchs foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. What had they done to Ishmael to earn the scorn of Muslims? A close reading of the biblical text pointed Ramban in the direction of Sarah's treatment of Hagar.

So Ramban's comments make sense within his reading of Jewish history, but this too is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that God may punish the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 34:7) but not beyond. The rabbis further restricted this to cases where "the children continue the sins of the parents" (Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki; 1040–1105], Ex. 34:7) and Ezekiel (18:2) both said that no one would any more say, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge." The transfer of sins across the generations is problematic, Jewishly and ethically.

What is deeply interesting about Ramban's approach to Abraham and Sarah is his willingness to point out flaws in their behaviour. This answers a fundamental question as far as our understanding of the narratives of Genesis is concerned. How are we to judge the patriarchs when
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ey earth,” says Ecclesiastes, “as to do only good and never sin” (Eccl. 7:20).
No religious literature was ever further from hagiography, idealisation, and hero worship.

In the opposite direction, even the non-heroes have their saving graces. Esau is a loving son, and when he meets his brother Jacob after a long estrangement, they kiss, embrace, and go their separate ways. Levi, condemned by Jacob for his violence, counts Moses, Aaron, and Miriam among his grandchildren. Even Pharaoh, the man who enslaved the Israelites, had a moral heroine for a daughter. The descendants of Korah sang psalms in the Temple of Solomon. This too is moral maturity, light years removed from the dualism adopted by many religions – including some Jewish sects (like the Qumran sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls) – that divides humanity into children of light and children of darkness.

Lastly and most important, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, between God and human beings. Because the Torah is divine, there is space for humans to be human. In Judaism the line dividing them is never blurred. How rare this is was pointed out by Walter Kaufmann:

In India, the Jina and the Buddha, founders of two new religions in the sixth century BCE, came to be worshipped later by their followers. In China, Confucius and Lao-tze came to be deified. To the non-Christian, Jesus seems to represent a parallel case. In Greece, the heroes of the past were held to have been sired by a god or to have been born of goddesses, and the dividing line between gods and men became fluid. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered divine.

In Israel, says Kaufmann, “no man was ever worshipped or accorded even semi-divine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament.” There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why “no man knows Moses’ burial place to this day” (Deut. 34:6) – so that it could never become a place of pilgrimage.

3. Ibid., 188.
No religion has held a higher view of humanity than the book that tells us we are each in the image and likeness of God. Yet none has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest. God does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us, instead, to take risks in pursuit of the right and the good, and to acknowledge the mistakes we will inevitably make.

In Judaism the moral life is about learning and growing, knowing that even the greatest have failings and even the worst have saving graces. It calls for humility about ourselves and generosity towards others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature.
For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your seed. Abraham himself never actually took possession of the land and he never exercised dominion over it. How could God promise Abraham the land and then not fulfill His words? The answer is that the oath was not fulfilled during the lifetime of the patriarchs; it came true many centuries later when the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob conquered the land of Canaan. And yet the land was in fact specifically given to Abraham. Apparently, the words I will give it to you and to your seed expresses one thought: I shall give the land to you through your children inheriting it. The realization of the promise will occur on a historical level, on which the dead and living form one community. Abraham will indeed acquire the land, but through a conquest hundreds of years later. There is a quasi-mystical communion between Abraham and his descendants. The past relives and integrates itself with the chosen individual who founded the nation. Abraham projects his existence upon a historical background and introduces it into the everlasting community, into a mystical future, reaching out beyond the confines of its natural existence. Abraham exceeds the boundary line of individual, temporal existence and reaches out into the open, unlimited spaces of historical existence, in an act of self-transcendence. The historical covenant community is the continuous incarnation of its father. There is an eternal “migration” of the charismatic soul throughout all phases of historical realization.