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Self, Struggle and Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and Their Healing Insights for Our Lives

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Voices from Genesis: Guiding Us through the Stages of Life

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The Way into Torah

;

Hineini in Our Lives

; and

Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today’s Leadership

, all published by *Jewish Lights*. Contact:

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The core rabbinic curriculum of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion embodies a holistic approach that integrates text study with professional development and personal spiritual growth. Our role is to ensure that each student has a critical understanding of the texts of our tradition and has the skills to apply them to the challenges of life in a spiritual/religious context. However, the challenge in our seminaries to create a learning environment that achieves the integration of academic rigor, the honing of professional skills, and the cultivation of personal spiritual meaning is huge.

Most Jews (and perhaps most human beings), including theological students and religious leaders, have not internalized that need to integrate the critical analysis of the texts of our traditions with the search for personal meaning. Many of us, even the most committed, view the reading of our traditional texts, including the Bible in particular, as a dispassionate, objective exercise. Our sole intent is to use our analytic skills — linguistic, literary, source-critical, historical — to understand what the biblical writers meant in their day by any particular verse or narrative. However, the search for the original meaning is not the end-all and be-all of our immersion into the sacred stories of our past, and the dominant reading is not the only possible way to interpret any given piece of text. Even the rabbis of old recognized that there were “70 faces to the Torah,” only the first of which was the original.

Although the biblical text may be finite, its recreation, mediated by the process of interpretation, is infinite. Multiple meanings may be heard resonating within each word when the reader opens him/herself to it in a significant way. The text comes alive and operative when the reader and the text become one. The process of recreating the text through interpretation has been compared to the birthing of a child — once the umbilical cord that ties the biblical text to a particular time, place, and set of redactors is severed and the text’s existence becomes a fact, it has a life of its own. It grows, expands, and changes due to the interaction with it by readers in every age. Postmodern scholars describe this process as the “recontextualizing of the text.”

Yet the attempt to find contemporary meaning in the tradition, if it is to have any authenticity, must be grounded in the tradition itself, in this case the Bible. The starting point, then, in the search for personal meaning is a close critical study. By using all the knowledge we possess of the biblical text (philological, literary, historical, archeological, theological), we can approximate what the writers intended in any given passage. Our task at the outset is to utilize critical scholarship to open up the meaning and power of the text, which only enhances our appreciation of its beauty and applicability.

Since each generation and each reader can draw different meanings from the text, the second task is to filter our sacred stories through the prism of millennia of interpreters so that we might benefit from their readings. The sages of the past viewed our traditional texts through the lens of the political, religious, and sociocultural conditions under which they lived. Their interpretations contained responses to the exigencies of their own life situations, many of which inform our current struggles.

The third and ultimate challenge is to find contemporary meaning in the text. Reading a sacred text forces self-involvement and self-reflection, and it is through our own immersion into the text that new meaning surfaces. Thus, for example, with every biblical narrative we study, we can learn not only about the text, the characters, and the narrative line, but also about ourselves. In creating our own interpretations, we respond to our own questions and dilemmas, and we bring to the fore elements of our own being of which we may not always be conscious.

Entering this age-old conversation is complex. After reading and studying the biblical text closely, paying attention to every lexical element, choice of syntax, narrative structure, the repetition of motifs as well as to the obvious lacunae, and then seeing how the cumulative tradition interprets any given text, we must wrestle with the sacred stories of Torah. If we are anchored in the traditions of the past, then our modern readings will be built upon a firm foundation, enabling them to be a new link in a chain of interpretation extending back to Sinai.

There is no more challenging story in the entire Bible than the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). For each of us, whether we are blessed to be parents or as children of parents, this story poses the most difficult theological and human questions. Unfortunately, the narrative is so terse that it provides little information to help us in our struggle. From the very outset of the story we would like to know more. We are only told that, after receiving God's command to bring Isaac to one of the mountains in the land of Moriah, Abraham rose early the next morning, saddled his ass, took his two servants, and started out on the road (Genesis 22:3). We know little of their departure, and we are especially aware of Sarah's silence. Abraham never speaks to her, and we have no idea whether she is aware of what is about to take place. But how can Abraham take the son of her old age away from her, the child she had struggled to conceive and birth, without a word? It is to this poignant human question that the rabbis respond in a number of powerful interpretations.

In an eighth century Midrashic text we read of Abraham's realization that he has to tell Sarah something before he can separate Isaac from her. Over a meal that Sarah had prepared to enable them to rejoice in finally having Isaac in their lives, Abraham suggests that Isaac should already be receiving a religious education (the rabbis impose their model of Torah study on the biblical text). He then mentions a place to which he would like to take him. With her agreement, Abraham arose very early the next morning and set out on the road before Sarah could change her mind.

In a later Midrashic work, the rabbis extend the earlier Midrashic material in a very florid manner. Abraham stresses to Sarah that the time has come for them to provide Isaac with a thorough religious education and suggests that he take him to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever.

Sarah agrees, but insists that he not remain there too long, since her soul is bound up with his. Isaac then stays with his mother a long time that night and she holds him and embraces him till dawn. In the morning, Sarah dresses Isaac, placing a turban on his head, and accompanies Abraham and Isaac to the road to see them off. At the moment of separation, amidst many tears, Sarah grabs hold of Isaac and says to him, "Who knows if I will ever see you after this day, my son."

These biblical extensions, written between approximately 700 and 1,200 years ago, speak directly to each and every one of us. We know this difficult moment of separation of parents from their children. As parents or as children, we have lived through similar scenes in our own families. We can easily recreate this biblical moment by drawing not only upon the earlier Rabbinic texts, but also upon our own life experiences.

When I shared an extension of the Isaac story in an adult education class some years ago, a woman raised her hand and said, "My son is 5 years old and he started school this year. On the first day of class in September, I walked him down to the corner to catch the school bus. We walked slowly and I could not help but squeeze his small hand as we walked together. When the bus pulled up, the doors opened and he climbed the three stairs with difficulty, walked down the middle aisle and found a seat. I saw him press his face against the windowpane, and tears formed at the corner of his eyes. I started to cry and thought to myself, 'He's never coming home.'"

When we confront and immerse ourselves in the texts of the past, we not only learn about the text, but about ourselves. It allows us to come in touch with who we are and who we can become. What we discover is that the text is a mirror which reflects back to us the nature of our character and our relationships, and demands we reach for our highest selves. In joining the dialogue about the texts of our past, we channel the voices of our traditions through the fabric of our own lives and, as a result, we are transformed.