

Chapter Six- Text and Thematic Context: The Big Ideas Approach

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Introduction

The Torah is a book of ideas, of thought, hence its views can best be compared with treatments of the same theme in other sources of thought. Themes in *Genesis* include, for example, the origin of violence, sibling rivalry, barrenness, but also the polemic against pagan creation stories which are a necessary background context for understanding the ideas promoted by the Tanakh's creation story.

Instead of reading a story simply for its unique one-time plot, a teacher may sensitize the students to the repeating themes in the Bible. For example, the theme of women offering men food or night scenes. Below is one particularly rich example: barrenness. By exploring the background the student are presupposed to understand the institutional as well as literary issues involved as well as to abstract from the text and compare them more easily to contemporary issues, such as surrogate motherhood.

#1 - Background for the Teacher: Barrenness in the Tanakh and Genesis 16 .

To appreciate the emotional and legal and ethical dilemmas of Abraham's family the teacher must have a broader look at the theme in biblical terms and then find ways to introduce some of the following ideas into the classroom. The theme of the barren woman is a major theme in the Tanakh, especially though not exclusively in Genesis. This is extraordinary in a book whose major subject is the passing on of the line of the covenant with God within a family. A book that deals with children as the vehicle of transmission for the divine promise is full of women who have major difficulties in conceiving. Sarah, Rivkah and Rachel all have major problems in this department. It is as if the book is hinting at the difficulties and the frustrations of the covenantal relationship by using the birth problems of its central women as a metaphor.

The very first detail we hear about Sarai is that "*she was barren: she had no child*", (Berashit 11:30). It is as if the author wishes to view the whole story of Sarai/Sarah through the prism of her childlessness. In contrast, the first thing we hear about Rivkah is that she "*was very fair to look upon, a virgin. Neither had any man known her*" (Genesis 24:16). Only later are we told that she was barren, (Genesis 25:21). Similarly, the first personal characteristic that we are given regarding Rachel, is that she "*was beautiful and well favoured*", (Genesis 29:17). Only fourteen verses later do we hear that Rachel is barren. Thus the theme of barrenness and infertility is carried through the stories of all of these women, but only in Sarah's case has it the prismatic quality that singles it out as an essential lens for understanding the whole of her story.

The issue of barrenness is extremely serious in the world of the Bible in general and Genesis in particular. Apart from the meta-theme of the need to pass over the covenant agreement with God, which, as mentioned, is an overriding theme of the biblical book, the problems of infertile women in the Biblical world would be very complicated and serious. It can be suggested that the problems would take several major expressions.

1. Child bearing was seen as the major role of the woman in Biblical society and indeed in ancient society as a whole. A woman who failed to produce children was seen as not fulfilling her destined role in life. In the Bible, we see this very clearly in the fact that the first commandment to Adam and Eve regards procreation, while the curse of Eve relates to the pains and difficulty of childbirth although the curse of Adam relates to economic difficulties in farming and tilling the ground. Children and procreation were the responsibility of both partners but role differences emphasized the woman's part far more than the man's. In Genesis 3, Adam renames his wife "mother of all life" - אִם כָּל חַיִּי - חוּוּהָ, and this makes the point very clear. Problems of fertility and barrenness are presented essentially as the woman's problem and the woman's responsibility. There is almost no reference in the whole of the Bible to infertile men. The woman was seen as having the problem in the eyes of society.
2. This leads us to the second issue. Woman lived inside her society. If the society saw the woman as an agent of child bearing, women clearly tended to internalize that idea. If the *raison d'être* of a woman in her own eyes was to bear children, then it is clear that the lack of (perceived) ability to bear

children would lead to a feeling of inadequacy in many women. A feeling of meaninglessness, of having missed their calling and their "destiny" in life, would be sure to follow in many cases. Is it any wonder in these circumstances that Rachel cries out "*Give me children or else I die*"? (Gen. 30:1) Whether she means by this that she would prefer death to barrenness, or that she feels that she is living a state of "death-in-life" or that she will consider taking her own life if she has no children, her desperation is clear. Her life has no value. As such it is insufferable.

3. To all this we must add an additional theological component. Fertility is seen as being dependent on the blessing of God. It was not only the man and the woman who are responsible for conception through the biological sexual act. God is an active partner in the process. Without the divine blessing there would be no conception. If fertility is a sign of God's approval, infertility is a sign of God's curse. Thus in addition to a feeling of personal failure, a barren woman (or, a woman who was seen as barren, which, as we have suggested, was not necessarily the same thing at all) would have to contend with the feeling - both the society's and her own - that she was out of favor with God. We see this expression in a number of places.

In the case of the barrenness of Rivkah we are told: *And Yitzchak entreated God for his wife, because she was barren. God answered his prayer, and Rivkah conceived.* (Genesis 25: 21).

In the case of Rachel, we are told "*And when Rachel saw that she bore Ya'akov no children, Rachel envied her sister and said: "Give me children, or else I die". And Ya'akov's anger burned against Rachel and he said: "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"* (Genesis 30:1-2) In addition, after she finally has her first child (Yosef), her immediate response is theological as well as emotional/psychological. "*God has taken away my shame.*" (Genesis 30 :23)

In the case of Chanah, the mother of Shmuel, we are told twice that "*God had shut up her womb*" (I Sam.1:5-6). In the second case, we are told, that "*her rival (Penina) provoked her, to make her upset, because God had shut up her womb*", a hint of the ridicule and scorn that the married woman without children would encounter.

Sarai herself also gives expression to this idea when she says in the introduction to the Hagar story, as the explanation for her infertility, "*God has stopped me from bearing children*" (Genesis 16:2).

Thus we see that in a world conceived in terms of direct relationships between people and God, there was an extremely dominant theological dimension to barrenness.

4. In addition to all of these factors, there was another set of practical factors, legal and economic, that would also play a major role in the problems of the barren woman. In a world in which the woman was always seen as someone's property, either her father's or her husband's, the state of barrenness would include within it, the real possibility of reduced status within the husband's house. Since childbearing was seen as something so crucial in ancient society and childlessness was blamed on the woman, many societies, including the ancient

Hebrew society, allowed the man to take a second wife to bear children. In the case of the second wife having children, there would almost inevitably be some shifting of status within the family.

In addition Biblical society made divorce fairly easy, with the initiative lying principally with the husband. In Rabbinic law we hear that the inability of the wife to produce children gave specific grounds for divorce. It is reasonable to assume that this was the case in the Biblical period since the initiative of the husband was much freer than in the later period. A woman, essentially dependent on her husband financially, would have little choice in such a case other than returning to her father's house, to another dependent position. Thus, there must always have been the fear in the mind of the woman of the husband initiating divorce in the case of childlessness. If the husband died, it seems that the second wife (the mother of the children) would gain an especially dominant position in the family, which might make the position of the "barren wife" especially vulnerable. There were clearly cases where the father's children (by the second wife) would be the direct heirs in which case they would be in a position to make the first wife's position in the family non-viable and impossible.

All of these factors must be taken into account to understand the desperation of Sarai at this advanced stage of her life, vulnerable and disappointed. As she comes to her last years, the safety and security of her position in the household and family, must have seemed very shaky indeed. We suggest that we need to understand this dimension of Sarai in order to understand the story.

#2 - INTRODUCING GENESIS 4: THREE THEMES

As educators we may let issues arise inductively and discursively from the text of the Torah or we can frame the big questions in order to define the universe of discourse of our study and then read closely for clues to that major question. The existentialist philosopher of Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel, insisted that the proper study of traditional text begins with these big philosophical questions for Jewish texts are attempts to answer them, not merely historical facts or maxims to be handed down from generation to generation - lest we forget. Heschel's great fear was that we would forget the questions.

Below are three **thematic framings** by which an educator may introduce the student to the importance of the story of Cain and Abel so as to focus one's attention and to arouse the associations from life and literature and the rest of the Torah that we wish our students to bring to the brief text we are exploring. As Judah Goldin, professor of Midrash, wrote: "**Text and experience are mutually enlightening.**" Thus the framing helps the students marshal experience to illumine the text and to identify existentially meaningful phenomena on which the text may shed its light for the student. While many Biblical subjects transcend the student's world, here the story of Cain and Abel concerns an area of family conflict and sibling rivalry in which the students' associations and feelings have much to contribute to illuminate the text and its commentators.

Theme 1: The Question of Violence.

The story of Cain and Abel is about violence - the first murder - so it serves as an eternal **archetype**. The early part of Genesis 1-11 is a series of **etiological stories**, stories constructed in mythical terms to provide answers to the essential questions of human life, of which there were many. How was the world created? How were people created? Where does sex come from? Why is childbirth so painful? How was language created? How were nations created? All these questions are "must" questions, the questions that must occur to human beings groping towards full consciousness of their existence. In that sense the often-asked question whether these stories are "true", misses the point. They are true in a very deep sense which may have nothing to do with the historical. They are true in the sense that they are stories which represent the deepest attempts of people to find fundamental answers to the most important questions that they have. They represent, to the people who first related them, the ultimate truths of their time.

The stories of Genesis 1-11 are true not necessarily because they happened but because they happen - the paradigm repeats - more or less as a model, not as a detailed predestined prophecy that forecloses free choice. They do not in fact offer us "causal explanations" of the origin of human phenomena but **theoretical models** of the factors involved in most similar cases expressed in the form of concrete first case. This style of explanation was typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth century when philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau spoke of the state of nature out of which the world of human culture emerged.

The story of Cain and Abel explores the meaning of - and the reasons for - **violence between people**. It is a story about why God's purported attempt to create a good

world with good people created in the Divine image, ultimately failed to achieve its goals. It is a story about the deep impulses inside of people, the dark side of human nature, which can cause people to raise their hands against each other. It is a story both about why people attacked each other at the beginning of time and why they continue to do so today. In that sense it is profoundly contemporary.

Genesis 4 is not just about violence in general. It is specifically about one aspect of **family violence**, that plague of our world which features so commonly, and at first glance, so counter-intuitively in the headlines of our morning papers in which family members often become the greatest threat to each other on a physical level.

Theme 2: The Question of Sibling Rivalry.

The story of Cain and Abel is about rivalry between siblings, an archetype that shows us the worst scenario - **rivalry turned to fratricide**. The brothers derive from the same parents, the same race, both of them have ties to each other with common blood and common origin Yet the hatred and jealousy comes between two brothers. Though fratricide is unusual within a nuclear family the rage and often the language "I could kill you" are frequent. It is a plague that causes parents to despair, forgetting, for the moment, the fact that so many of them were themselves part of the same tensions and rivalries when they were younger. It is not by chance that one of the primary themes of our first sacred text, is precisely the tensions between siblings. Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers - all of these represent variations on the same theme. They will continue well past the Torah into the other books of the Bible, but the family stories of the Torah provide the primary material for the examination of the subject. Just like numerous **family sagas** in modern literature, we see the first multi-generational family epic, characterized time after time, generation after generation, by the terrible rivalry and passions that occur when brothers and sisters clash deeply over the material of everyday life. If the first family is the archetypal model by which we come to understand ourselves and perhaps, if we are lucky, to transcend its limitations, then this story is about us.

Theme 3: The Question of Self-Control and Human Nature.

The story of Cain and Abel is about the loss of self-control. It leads to introspection on God's own advice and raises the question of our ability to act freely and rationally when passions crouch like demons to attack us. Rabbinic midrash in Breshit Rabbah develops the notion of *yetzer hara* -the inclination or passion for evil - in its treatment of Genesis 4:7.

Even after the warning from God, Cain seems unable or unwilling to master his passions and runs straight into an act which should have been avoided, which was counter productive but which he seemingly could not avoid. As such, he is a warning to all of us. If Hillel in a later generation is held up as a man whose self-control and lack of temper makes him a model for us, so, Cain, in this story represents the opposite, a terrible comment on the consequences of spontaneous passion which burst through the thin veneer of human culture that we have acquired over time.

Many of us know the reality of spontaneous anger which boils deep inside us and which we struggle to master with greater or lesser success. For those of us who recognize that as a part of us and a part of our behavior, Cain represents a direct challenge. Can we control ourselves or are we doomed in some way to pay the price of our violent impulses and to carry the mark of our weakness through the world? . Can we be *giborim* /heroes as defined by Pirkei Avot - *hakoveish et yitzro* /conquering our instincts?

#3 - THE PROBLEM OF EVIL - THE QUESTION OF JOB

After examining the basic Biblical paradigm of reward and punishment, both individual and collective, it is time to move onto the astonishing book that both bases itself on that paradigm and protests against it. This is the book of Job, written by an unknown author in an unspecified period, an author who recognizes and uses the reward and punishment paradigm as the basis of his work (everyone in the book takes the paradigm as their reference point), but whose whole book (not just the speeches of the protagonist Job) protests against the simplicity of that paradigm. The book of Job becomes then, an important tool for understanding the fact that protests against the paradigm developed well before the Rabbinic period which we shall survey in the next section of our booklet. In this section, we will examine different aspects of the story of Job, drawing on the book itself and on the impressions it has made on the minds and hearts of subsequent generations.

The book of Job has had enormous influence on the western world. In spite of its compositional complexity, the book has been seen as one of the world's great philosophical and poetic masterpieces, and has won a special place in the affections of the whole western world. Job has been portrayed in multiple ways:

Job, the Ultimate Victim.

Job has been seen as the ultimate everyman - not in his misfortunes which are, of course, too extreme to act as a model, but in the human vulnerability that he experiences, the idea that for all of us, good fortune cannot be taken for granted, and that we live with **human uncertainty**. It is a book which cruelly reminds us to be on guard against complacency and to understand the fragility of the human condition.

Job's Utter Isolation

On another level, Job's terrible misery, sometimes a silent scream and sometimes an extraordinarily passionate oratory, cannot but arouse enormous empathy, both among those who have experienced pain and misfortune and those who have not but whose secret nightmares find resonance in Job's terrible fate. The book's message can speak to everyone, both those theologically inclined who see God as their savior and rely on God's help and protection, and to those existentialists who see the world as a dark and merciless vacuum. Ultimately, there can be times when we are all truly alone with our misery, believers and unbelievers as one. Neither wife nor friends can really understand the planet where the sufferer lives. Yet we feel a kinship with Job precisely in his isolation.

Job, the First Dissident

On yet another level, Job has become the metaphor for the ultimate protester, the outsider who stands alone against a world which rejects him and sees him as a crazy and self-deluding madman. All of the other four main human characters in the text try and

convince him how wrong he is and how he must bow down to their greater collective wisdom. Time and time again, using countless variations on a single theme, they tell him that he cannot fight against "what everybody knows". He cannot put himself above all human experience and knowledge. He cannot protest against the world. But time and time again, he rejects those who claim to know better, and who claim to speak in the name of "conventional wisdom". His knowledge of his own innocence stands against the world. As such, he has been identified as the greatest of all human dissidents, inspiring those who try to run against the prevailing winds. Just a few years ago, the political commentator, William Safire, chose Job as the hero of a tract on dissidence and non-conformity, *Job: The First Dissident* in which he saw Job as a model for the human challenge to society's conventional wisdoms. How can a book like this not find some response in every human heart?

Saint Job, the Patient or Job the Hero of a Sophisticated Faith

Surprisingly, Christian tradition has often seen Job as the ultimate proof of faith. A patient saint suffering for God. Even if we read Job as another example of a God-wrestler like Abraham, he still does maintain his faith and that is remarkable in itself. His faith is complex and it grows through his ordeals. He is not an "all or nothing" believer in or rejecter of faith.

In Search of Models for the Problem of Evil

The educational approach proposed here is not designed to study Job the book as a literary whole but to extract from it conflicting models of God and providence and of human stances towards suffering. Therefore we have only selected small sections for study and we have concentrated not on the very difficult task of interpreting its language or literary structure but on confronting the relevance of its models.