

Lech lecha: “The Patriarchs and Intergenerational Trauma”

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The fraught inter-personal relationships of the members of our patriarchal families call for a psychological analysis of their circumstance and the light it might shed on several related incidents.

The birth of Ishmael was truly a life-transforming Godsend to a hitherto profoundly dispirited Abraham. This condition is apparent at ‘The Covenant between the pieces’ episode when God assures him, “*Your reward shall be very great*” (Gen. 15:1). Abraham offers the surprisingly bitter and ungracious retort, *Adonai Elohim mah titen li v’anochi holech ariri* (‘O ‘Lord, God, what can You give, seeing that I shall die childless!’). Note the word *holech*, literally, ‘I walk; I wander around,’ with its overtone of restlessness. Note also *ariri* (with initial vowel, *ayin*), evocative of the similar-sounding (with initial vowel, *aleph*), *arur* (‘cursed’), the very antithesis of God’s initial promise that he would be greatly ‘blessed’ (See Gen. 12:2-3). Ironically, that promise repeats the verb *b-r-ch* no less than five times in the space of but two sentences!

That this word-association was conscious may be inferred from the fact that the term consistently employed in the Pentateuch to connote barrenness is *akar(ah)*, which occurs five times,¹ as opposed to *ariri* which occurs only here.

Abraham is clearly depressed by the fact that his life seems to have no meaning, no joy, no purpose. God’s initial *lech lecha* promise, that, if he agreed to uproot himself, and leave his country to travel to Canaan, he would become the progenitor of a great nation, blessed and famous (Gen 12:2), had simply not materialised. *What do Your blessings all amount to?* — he chides God— *uven-meshek beyti hu damesek Eliezer*. The latter phrase seems to have the implication that the manager of his home and estate, Eliezer of Damascus, is destined to become his heir, instead of his own natural offspring.²

From the moment he arrives in Canaan he suffers a succession of personal traumas – culminating in the Akedah – that would have sucked the joy out of anyone’s life, quite apart from sorely trying his faith in God’s promise and justice. They included a

Bedouin-type nomadic existence around the Negev (Gen. 12:9), a flight to Egypt to escape famine (v. 10), the seizure of his wife by the Pharaoh (vv. 11-20), his estrangement from his nephew, Lot, who might have been expected to have become his mainstay and ultimately his heir (13:5-12), his embroilment in the major battle between the four kings against the five (Ch. 14), a further battle to rescue Lot who had been captured in that battle (vv.12-15), the emotional turbulence of Sarah in the face of her barrenness, leading up to her request that Abraham take Hagar to be a consort and surrogate mother (16:1-3), and the on-going and bitter domestic strife between the two women both before and after the birth of Ishmael (vv.4-16), leading, years later, to Sarah's insistence that they be banished from the family home (21:9ff).³

That banishment was the final straw and, we contend, the key to the psychological barrier Abraham built up to any normal relationship with Sarah, or, later, with his child, Isaac. It also explains the emotional baggage that he bequeathed to Isaac (see below).

Abraham protests Sarah's decision, and the Torah does not hide the fact that the very thought of Ishmael's banishment caused him the profoundest grief: *The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his* (21:11). His relationship with Sarah was never the same again. Even if he, the exemplar of kindness, had been able to put behind him Sarah's behaviour all those years before when she had inflicted physical violence on her pregnant handmaid, how could he now justify her decision to banish Hagar and their young first-born son and expose them to the dangers of a journey through the inhospitable desert? But more: Sarah surely knew how much Abraham loved Ishmael. She must have realised the extent to which his paternal instincts had been fulfilled through their mutual bonding, and what a damaging effect on him emotionally her action would have.

That deep relationship with Ishmael accounts for Abraham's strange and lukewarm reaction to God's disclosure that he and Sarah were about to be blessed with their own son, Isaac, who would receive God's blessing and be the agent of His mission to the world. Abraham retorts: *Iu Yishma'el yichyeh lefanekha – "O that Ishmael might live by Your favour!"* (17:18).

As if the aged Abraham hadn't had enough, he then felt constrained to challenge his God's decision to destroy Sodom (18:23ff). Imagine the fear that such brazenness would have engendered within him and the confusion he must have felt regarding God's justice and

righteousness. Shortly afterwards he felt constrained to compromise Sarah's honour to save his own life and to lie to the Philistine king, Abimelech, by declaring that she was his sister (20:2). One may wonder how his conscience dealt with that, especially after having had the temerity previously to seize the moral high ground to chide his God.

But, as if all those problems were insufficient to destroy the spirit and mental equilibrium of an old man, the biggest trial of all was about to be imposed on him: The Akedah (22:1-19). That experience, more than any other, betrays the effects of the emotional strain underpinning Abraham's relationship with both Sarah and Isaac, a strain that left all three as emotionally bruised as was Hagar physically.

We contend that it was that outburst of Abraham's— *lu Yishma'el yichyeh lefanecha*— which provides the key to understanding Abraham's troubled relationship with Isaac, Isaac's strange behaviour at, and following, the Akedah, and, some years later, the perplexity of Isaac's own cool relationship with Jacob as contrasted with his love for Esau. It was not what he said in that outburst, but what he was clearly implying, namely, *"I don't need another child. I've got Ishmael. He amply fulfils my emotional and paternal needs."*

This was surely the unnatural, if not unpardonable, reaction of any would-be parent, let alone of a righteous and God-fearing man. Even more curious was the fact that Abraham seems to have forgotten the promise of God at 'The Covenant Between the Pieces' that "that one [Ishmael] shall not be your heir, but your very own issue shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4)!

But, Abraham was old, tired, emotionally drained, theologically troubled, battle-scarred, plagued by self-doubt, and in no fit state to change diapers and to educate, and deal with the swinging moods of, a child. He'd been through it all with his beloved Ishmael and had had the fruit of those labours cruelly stolen from him. Life had lost its purpose. Family joy had evaporated.

Now, imagine the effect of all that on the young Isaac, growing up with an aged father who was silently brooding over the absence of his firstborn, Ishmael, a father who did not hunt and fish like the other dads, who did not joke with Sarah and lighten the atmosphere around the home, but who was away most of the time engaging the Canaanites in talk about the

one God and who was forever bringing back strangers to eat with the family. It must have been hard for Isaac to grab private moments of his father's attention, that he might demystify life for him, listen to his hopes and fears, help him mature emotionally, develop his social and intellectual skills, and grow confidently into manhood. The inevitable result was that he did not do so!

Abraham and Sarah had drifted so far apart that Abraham could not even bring himself to share his divinely ordained Akedah mission with her before he left. Nor was he able to consider the devastating effect on her of her beloved Isaac's sudden departure without warning, depriving her of the opportunity of kissing and blessing her son and bidding him farewell as he set out into the unknown on an unpredictable mission. In a bitterly ironical manner, Abraham, by his precipitous departure early in the morning, was imposing on Sarah — albeit for just one week — the experience of shock, fear, loss, loneliness and grief, that she had inflicted on him all those years before when she peremptorily drove Ishmael and Hagar out of the family home!⁴

As to the objection that, had Abraham disclosed to Sarah in advance the precise nature of his Akedah mission, she would have strenuously sought to prevent them from leaving — possibly with the aid of Eliezer — we might argue that Abraham could easily have forestalled that. After all, he had already shown how, in a crisis, he could conjure up a convincing excuse to save the situation even in the face of a monarch, as when he vehemently asserted that Sarah was not his wife, but his sister. In the *Akedah* situation, likewise, he might have contended that he needed to spend some time away bonding with Isaac after having been away so frequently on his missionary efforts over the years. The cause-and-effect linkage that the sages make between the suddenness of Abraham and Isaac's departure and the death of Sarah,⁵ is thus most plausible.

Against the background of his parents' troubled lives and the constant domestic tension in the home, it is not surprising that Isaac, in turn, should have grown up socially uncommunicative, with an inability to read another's body language or emotions, and a tendency to withdraw increasingly into himself. Hence his inability to distinguish between the qualities of the gentle and spiritual Jacob and the rough and aggressive Esau. Hence,

when his father takes him to the Akedah, his protest consists of a mere seven-word query as to why no lamb had been provided for the burnt offering (see Gen. 22:7).

One may wonder how any son - other than one emotionally divorced from reality - could have failed to read the signs of anguish on a father's face as they silently made their three-day journey to an Akedah. Which son, under such circumstances, would not have challenged his father, pleaded for mercy, put up resistance at his attempts to tie him down, and fled the scene?

Imagine the deep-rooted trauma the Akedah must have inflicted on his sensitive spirit, a trauma soon to be intensified by the news that his beloved mother had died while he was away. He would inevitably have identified his father as the one responsible for the shock that caused her death.

We construe the description of Rebekah's arrival at Isaac's home to become his wife— *And Isaac went to meditate – lasu'ach – in the field towards evening* (24:63)— as betraying the long-term psychological effects of the Akedah on Isaac, compounded by his other traumas. 'To meditate' is how most translations render it.⁶ The sages, however, offer the meaning of 'to pray in the field,' given that this is the only occurrence of this infinitive, *lasu'ach*, in the entire Hebrew Bible, and hence the uncertainty as to its precise meaning.

One thing is sure: The objective of Isaac's wandering in the field that evening was not to meet his future wife's caravan. In that far-off era of slow trekking across deserts and unmade and dangerous tracks, neither the day, nor the week, nor, at certain seasons, even the month, of arrival from a distant country could be predicted. Furthermore, had the objective of his walk been to welcome her, the Torah would certainly have disclosed the fact.

Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that Isaac was particularly excited at the prospect of a forthcoming marriage to a total stranger, chosen not even by his father but by Eliezer. Isaac wasn't even consulted beforehand about how he felt about marriage. Considering his very recently bereavement, and the fact that the weight of his grief was only assuaged after he had married Rebekah,⁷ he would more than likely have declined the suggestion. So, the question arises, what was he doing in the field at that time?

I have suggested elsewhere⁸ that it is more than likely that Isaac had developed that practice of wandering in the surrounding fields on a regular, if not daily, basis, based on the fact that the verb *lasu'ach* suggests 'exaggerated behaviour as a demonstration of complaint and angst,' and hence the noun *siach*, 'a complaint'.⁹ Thus, when the barren Hannah went up to the Sanctuary at Shilo to pray for a child, she chided the High Priest, Eli, for misinterpreting her agitated and exaggerated demeanour as a sign of drunkenness. She told him she had not touched a drop, but that her musings and bodily shaking were *meirov sichi v'cha'asi* ('a result of the depth of *my complaint* and my anguish' (I Sam. 1:16).

Thus, the verb *lasu'ach*, used to describe Isaac's nocturnal musing 'out in the field,' suggests that he would repair there each evening – after the workers had left, and away from their intrusive and uncomprehending looks – to rock his body, shake off his demons, shed his tears, scream his complaint to the heavens, cast away his anguish and agitation over the loss of his mother and his father's estrangement and readiness to kill him, and seek some solace in an attempt to discover some meaning in his existence.

In this way I explain the effect on Rebekah as she espied Isaac walking towards her caravan. She is taken aback and alarmed by his strange and tormented demeanour. Her shock is reflected in the otherwise brazen query, *Mi ha-ish ha-lazeh*... "Who is that man over there?" (Gen. 24:65). We may assume that a demure bride on her way to meet her future husband, and with no idea what he looked like, would not inquire about a random man walking along the way! After all, he might well have been just a part-time estate worker! Her query can only be explained as an involuntary expression of alarm at the sight of a man behaving so strangely.

I have also drawn attention to the many occurrences of the demonstrative pronoun, *zeh* – and its doubly demonstrative nuance, *ha-lazeh* – to convey a derogatory emphasis (which is often overlooked in Bible translations). Thus, Rebekah's outburst, *Mi ha-ish ha-lazeh*, should more literally be rendered, "Who is that *most strange* man?" Understanding it in this way lends credence to our thesis regarding how to explain Rebekah's curious reaction on meeting Isaac for the first time.¹⁰

Isaac's reaction at seeing the arrival of Rebekah's carriage in the distance is also significant: 'And, looking up, he saw camels (*gemalim*) approaching' (v.63). Significantly, it does not say

ha-gemalim ('**the** camels'), the implication of which would have been that he was, in fact, expecting Rebekah's entourage at that time, and that he had gone out with the intention of welcoming her. The arrival of 'camels' is mentioned merely to indicate that they had interrupted his musings. It was too late, however, to compose himself. His future wife had seen enough.

This might well be the sense of *Va-tippol me'al ha-gamal*, lit. 'she fell off the camel' (v.64). A demure young woman does not "fall" off her camel-drawn conveyance. She steps down, gently and gracefully, and customarily with the aid of her driver. To convey the latter sense, the verb *y-r-d* is generally employed.¹¹ Hence, we interpret literally here the employment of the verb 'to fall,' as indicating that Rebekah was indeed so startled by his odd behaviour that she lost control, and slipped off her seat.

On being told that the strange man was, in fact, her husband-to-be — *vatikach ha-tza'if vatitkas* — 'she took a veil and covered herself up'. She was the only matriarch who is recorded as having done that at the first meeting with her fiancée! Still an unmarried girl, there would have been no convention requiring such a token of modesty. It seems to have been an instinctive reaction, therefore, and we may speculate that it was done to shut out what she had just witnessed and to hide her agitation and embarrassment.

Though his marriage to Rebekah brought Isaac a measure of comfort (see v.67), his relationship with his father, Abraham, seems to have remained cool, to the extent that the Torah records no dialogue between them thereafter. This may also be attributed to the fact that he (re)married Keturah¹² and was preoccupied with the new family of six children he fathered with her, as well as having to find time for visits to his concubines and their children (see 25:6).

Alas, Isaac's introversion and struggle with his demons also affected his relationship with his own children. He failed to appreciate the nobility of Jacob, and, according to the Midrash, was also hoodwinked by Esau's feigned piety.¹³ The text itself hints at the fact that Isaac's 'love' of Esau was no more than a gesture of appreciation for the venison he regularly brought him — '[Isaac loved Esau] *because* he brought him venison to eat' (25:28) — but was not motivated by any deeper feelings, whereas Rebecca's love of Jacob was unqualified.

We may now appreciate the wider effect of the Akedah as the cause of the dysfunction that characterised the three generations of the patriarchal family and their interrelationships. This process of trauma transmission is referred to by psychologists as Intergeneration Trauma, whereby one generation's fearful experiences may impact strongly on subsequent generations even though the latter had no direct exposure to the original event.¹⁴

NOTES

1. See Gen 11:30, 25:21, 29:31, Ex. 23:26, Deut. 7:14.
2. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, Jewish Publication Society, 1999, p.35, commentary on Gen. 15:2.
3. For Ishmael's various serious transgressions which, according to tradition, accounted for Sarah's decision to banish him from the family home, see *Rashi* on Gen. 21:9.
4. See Gen. ch.15.
5. See *Rashi* on 23:2, s.v. *lispod lesarah v'livkotah*.
6. *The Jewish Publication Society* translation renders this problematic infinitive, *lasu'ach*, as, simply, 'walking,' a suggestion arrived at already by the critical school's emendation of the text to *lashut*, 'to go or rove about'. See F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 962, sub *su'ach*. See n.6 below.
7. See Gen. 24:67.
8. See Jeffrey M Cohen, "Consequences of the Akedah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. XXIV:4 (96), 1996, 241-246.
9. See I Kings 18:29; I Sam. 1:16; Job 7:13, 9:27, 10:1; 23:2, *et al*.

10. See Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Some unattested occurrences of *zeh* as a derogatory demonstrative," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* (Vol. 52 No.1, January-March 2024), pp. 56-64.
11. For examples of the verb *y-r-d* ('to go down') in the sense 'to alight from an animal-drawn conveyance,' see Ju. 4:15; I Sam. 25:23, *et al.* The same verb is employed to convey the nuance of a dignified and measured alighting from a royal throne. See Is. 47:1; Ez. 26:16. Disembarkation from a ship would also require a slow and measured step, for which reason the verb *y-r-d* is also employed (see Ez. 27:29), as it is with stepping out of a bed (see II Kings 1:4, 6, 16).
12. The Midrash (*Tanh.* Ch.8; *Ber. Rabb.* 61:4 identifies Keturah as Hagar, whom Abraham took back after the death of Sarah (see 25:1).
13. See Mid. *Ber. Rabb.* 61:4, and *Rashi* on Gen. 25:1.
14. See www. Cacace, A., & Summers, S.J., "Intergenerational Trauma in Phenomenological Research," *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 30 (8), 1134-1169. Accessed 20/110/2025.