LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM OUR GREAT ANCESTORS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The conclusion of the book of Bereshith not only completes for us the picture of the founders of the Jewish people - our fathers and mothers - but to a great extent also concludes the purely narrative portion of the Torah. There are precious few commandments or laws and ritual that emanate from this first book of the Torah.

From now forward the Torah, while continuing to be a narrative of early Jewish existence and life, develops into a law book detailing the commandments of the Creator to the Jewish people. If so, then what is the purpose of this lengthy beginning narrative? This is really the essence of the question that Rashi quotes at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah: "Should not the Torah have begun from the commandment regarding the new moon?"

It is there that Rashi answers why it began with the story of creation but the question remains: Why does the Torah continue the narrative regarding the personal lives of our ancestors? To this question the rabbis responded by stating that the events that occurred to our ancestors are sign posts for the later events that would occur to their descendants.

Since this idea can only be validated in hindsight - only after the event occurs to later generations can it be glimpsed as having been foretold by events that occurred to our ancestors - it still begs the original question somewhat. It is important to know that otherwise inexplicable events somehow fit into a preexisting pattern. But what particular lessons can be learned from the detailed narrative of the lives of our great ancestors?

There are general lessons about Jewish life that can certainly be gleaned from the Torah narrative of Bereshith. And perhaps this idea of general lessons is one of the reasons why the Torah invests so many words and descriptions in this eternal book.

One lesson is that Jewish life is not an easy one. Being a small minority and yet preserving a unique identity is no easy task. The struggle of our ancestors to do so is therefore clearly delineated for us. Another life lesson is that there are no guarantees in life especially as regarding children. Yishmael and Esau are prime examples of this disturbing truth.

Another lesson is that in the absence of tolerance for the differences in personalities and outlooks that will always be part of Jewish life and society, terrible things can happen to the Jewish people as a whole. Witness the narrative regarding Yosef and his brothers. A further lesson is that others will always threaten Jewish survival, often by violence and murderous intent. Nimrod, Abimelech,

Pharaoh, Lavan, Shechem, Esau are but a few that illustrate this point.

All of our ancestors were forced to face up to enmity, jealousy and the duplicity of others. Another teaching to us is the power of the individual and the power of an idea. Abraham and Sarah, practically alone, changed the world with their idea and teachings of monotheism. The Torah further informs us that "good" exiles such as Goshen Egypt can eventually turn out to be less good. All of these lessons are essential to Jewish life and its survival. The wise will ponder upon them and apply them well in one's own life and current society.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com