

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

AVRAHAM, YITZCHAK AND INTERMARRIAGE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Avraham Avinu's journey begins with clear instructions from G-d to abandon his land (*eretẓ*), his culture (*moledet*), and his family (*beit av*), and move to a new land, which turns out to be Canaan. His journey ends when he orders his servant to go back to that very same *eretẓ*, *moledet*, and *beit av* to find a wife for Yitzchak, and under no circumstances to marry Yitzchak to a Canaanite. What accounts for this ambivalence?

There is a natural temptation to argue that G-d's initial instruction was intended to make life more difficult for Avraham – to estrange him from all his support mechanisms – because loneliness and insufficiency naturally make one turn to G-d. But Avraham was already willing to listen, so this strategy seems redundant.

Alternatively, one might argue that G-d wished to remove Avraham from a corrupt and corrosive family and culture. But if Canaanite culture was superior to that of Clan Terach, why insist that Yitzchak marry in the family?

At least one Rabbinic tradition reflects a very complex approach to this question.

G-d refers to himself in *Beresheet* 15:7 as having extracted (*hotẓi*) Avraham from Ur Kasdim. (*Nehemiah* 9:7 reiterates the point.) The Rabbis were fully aware that Ur Kasdim was a location, but they were bothered by the connotation of *hotẓi*, which implies success over resistance; thus G-d was also *motẓi* us from Egypt during the Exodus. They suggest, or record a tradition, that Avraham was rescued by G-d from religious persecution in Aram at the hands of Nimrod's emerging totalitarian empire. To concretize this

interpretation, *Ur Kasdim* was translated punningly as *the (auto da fe) furnace of the Chaldeans*.

In this reading, G-d took Avraham out of Ur Kasdim into Canaan to rescue him from religious persecution. Indeed, the Torah records no negative reaction to Avraham's religion in Canaan. Quite the contrary. Malki Tzedek seems to be a co-believer, and even the Hittites refer to Avraham as a Prince of G-d.

Nor does the Torah record Avraham critiquing Canaanite culture. Again, quite the contrary: Avraham makes a covenant with natives Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, and in contrast to Egypt and Philistia, it seems that he considers Canaan a culture which possesses *yir'at Elokim*, fear of G-d. (Sodom and Gomorrah were not Canaanite.)

It therefore seems likely that Canaan was a culture of religious freedom, and more than that, a culture which was capable of appreciating at least some of what Avraham had to offer, and which enabled him to become his best self. It was a pluralistic culture. (Perhaps this is why there is no mention of Avraham and Sarah making converts in Canaan; in a culture where identity is fluid, conversion can become meaningless).

But in the Covenant Between the Pieces, Avraham is given a deeply pessimistic vision about Canaanite culture. Avraham's children will eventually take ownership of Canaan, but not for several generations, "because the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete." Not yet complete, but begun, and begun in such a way that completion is inevitable. In other words, the virtues of Canaan were genuine but not sustainable.

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What if the original sin of the Canaanites, the reason that their culture was already decadent in the time of Avraham, was *extreme* pluralism? This formulation is deliberately provocative, but having (hopefully) grabbed your attention, I want to lay it out in detail.

There are two roads to homogeneity. One is totalitarianism/Nimrodism, which gives absolute value to a very specific and detailed set of cultural markers and seeks to enforce them on others. The other is pluralism/Canaanism, which insists that all cultural markers have exactly the same value and denies the objective legitimacy of any values hierarchy.

Extreme pluralism is opposed to diversity. A healthy, diverse culture celebrates values clashes but develops robust nonviolent arenas for persuasive combat. In a culture of aesthetic diversity, some value classical music and others value heavy metal, and they *argue* about matters of taste. In a culture of moral diversity, some favor limited euthanasia and others see it as murder; but all agree to abide by a common decision procedure.

In a culture of diversity, identity is more than a source of grievance, more than the basis of a claim to *equal* rights; it is the basis of a claim to genuine moral superiority, which is the antithesis of extreme pluralism. It works in reverse as well; without a claim of superiority, no identity is sustainable long-term. Cultures of extreme pluralism will eventually be conquered from within or without.

This kind of identity can also develop under totalitarian persecution; revolutionary individualism goes easily with condescension toward the homogenized masses. And it seems the Ancient Near East had no genuine cultures of diversity, so Avraham could only develop under Nimrod.

But revolutions tend to replace one totalitarianism with another. The challenge is to maintain hierarchy without absolutism, to believe that something can be less correct without being wholly incorrect, less valuable but not valueless, not ultimate and yet not unnecessary.

In halakhic Judaism, this challenge is perhaps best embodied in various paradoxes about the relative precedence of Torah study and mitzvah action. In the Avraham narrative, it is embodied in the *Akedah*, where Avraham at least seemingly makes clear that he ultimately has only one value.

Yitzchak reacts against this. Yitzchak, as Rabbi Joshua Berman has argued well, never comes to terms with the expulsion of Yishmael. He cannot choose Yaakov over Esav, even though he knows that choice must be made. Yitzchak, in other words, is susceptible to Canaanism. For Avraham's unique legacy to survive, Yitzchak therefore needs to marry a woman from home.

Marriage in the classical sense is a commitment to sustainability. Continuity is not an end in itself, but a culture's purpose is not to be an ephemeral work of performance art. When continuity becomes its own justification, opposition to intermarriage is plausibly seen as racism. But it is more than evident that Judaism will not survive in America if Jews believe that it is one of a large set of equally valuable options.

Perhaps more dangerously, we need to recognize that both inclusion and exclusion always have costs. The cost of exclusion is the value of whatever and whomever is excluded; the cost of inclusion is the value of whatever difference you are ignoring.

The full arc of Avraham's life, which values both his natal and adopted homelands, stands for the necessity of both hierarchy and egalitarianism.

I contend that the dialectic need not be extreme; every Jew need not oscillate between totalitarianism and latitudinarianism, nor need we alternate generations of chauvinists and pluralists. We can find both within ourselves as necessary.

The same is true on a communal level. It is possible and ideal to build a community which contains both these pulls, rather than dividing into absolutists and relativists.

The balance is always delicate; Modern Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism, and Reform each claim to embody it. If the capacity to sustain the norm of endogamy is a fundamental measure of sustainability – and I believe it is – clearly the latter two have failed, and Modern Orthodoxy must profit by their example. Deep and sincere appreciation for the achievements, values, and beauties of other cultures, religions, and even denominations must not be allowed to reach the point at which the only reason to choose ours over others is inertia. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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