

Saints or Sinners

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For those of us who take our Bible seriously, the narratives of Genesis are meant to be moral pointers to correct human behavior. If so, then it is very difficult to explain why our great forefathers did certain things.

Or should I phrase it this way—Why did the Torah not edit out those uncomfortable incidents, if, as the Talmud in Sotah says, “Whatever the Fathers did sets an example for us”? (We needn’t go into the actual context of this phrase which actually refers to the days of Joshua, not Avraham, because it is now part of our commentators’ lexicon.) What, for instance, are we to make of the following:

Putting your wife and marriage in danger to save your own skin (and this happens three times)

Throwing a lively teenager and his sullen mother out of your home into the world with no more than a day’s supplies

Pretending to your son you’re taking him on a hiking holiday but really you intend to do something nasty to him

Fooling your father and telling lies to get your hands on his money

Favoring one son over another (seems to be pretty commonplace)

Taking advantage of your brother (another commonplace)

Give as good as you get (even more commonplace)

Moonlighting and playing with your father-in-law’s capital

Allowing your out-of-control sons to behave despicably and “top” the local gang

Spending the night with a call girl who turns out to be your daughter-in-law

Allowing yourself to lose your self-control and lash out at those around you

All of these are there, in black and white in our Holy Writ. Of course, I have oversimplified, and anyway in every story there is always another side and life is never as simple or straightforward as it seems. After all, the Bible is a document which, even according to its detractors, is nearly three thousand years old, and many of the narratives much older. We would hardly expect it to conform to modern sensitivities and, quite frankly, given the highly dubious moral values of huge swathes of modernity one should be very

grateful that it doesn't.

In our times any document, opinion, cleric or tradition that doesn't totally permit anyone to do whatever they feel like doing comes in for popular criticism. Yet religions have flourished particularly at times when society in general was amazingly corrupt and heading for a serious fall. (The series [Rome](#) is providing a graphic depiction of how corrupt ancient Roman society was.)

I used to thrill to [Georgie Best](#)'s brilliance on the soccer pitch and felt sad when he descended into inebriated self-destruction. But you'd think he was a real saint the way he is being treated in death. When men talented in their use of their bodies are lauded and treated as heroes, showered with immense and illogical rewards and worship, whilst those who care for our elderly or teach our young are all but ignored, one can hardly be surprised if more and more people yearn for some "good old fashioned values".

But my point is that, looking at the behavior described in the Bible, one is bound to wonder what exactly those values were.

One approach of apologists is to argue that we don't understand and if only we weren't so mired in secularism and so anxious to rubbish our forebears we would comprehend. Indeed, one point of view in the Midrash/Talmud says that Kings David and Solomon never put a foot wrong throughout their lives. It is simply our misreading of the text or inadequate information about the exact circumstances that leads us to make these erroneous assumptions.

Another point of view in the very same sources (which only illustrates the variety of debate then, which, alas, is often suppressed nowadays) is to say that, indeed, they did do something wrong. The fact is that they were human beings, not saints, and "the Torah was not given for/to Ministering Angels." This is the greatness of our tradition that the examples we are given are, indeed, human. "There is no human on earth who has done only good and never sinned," as King Solomon himself said in Ecclesiastes 7 (which, for those who might not know, is part of our Bible).

I regard it as very positive that our tradition gives examples not of perfection, to which we have no chance of aspiring, but of human beings who, like us, sometimes fall short and yet are still capable of the highest spirituality and goodness to others. Although in the current hagiographic fashion, no great rabbi has ever done anything wrong, who of us has not made serious mistakes? Who has not been seduced by the mirage of materialism, or favored a child, or had a spouse lie on our behalf, or failed to control unruly kids, or not told the complete truth out of fear? We are all incomplete, every one of us. But the Torah gives us hope because it tells us that even in our imperfections we are inextricably bound to our Creator and are given challenges that we must try to overcome, and even if we fail we can still try again.

I am troubled by a great deal in the Torah I do not understand. My late father, Kopul Rosen, loved to quote the saying, "The God that is small enough for my mind is not big enough for me." But I am inspired by the examples of

our great forefathers who had to grapple with life and adverse circumstances despite the promises of ultimate success. I am encouraged precisely because they were humans and not perfect saints.

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