



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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What Mystery Pervades A Well!

One of the great benefits of visiting communities where I once lived and taught is the opportunity to meet people who were my students long ago. I enjoy reconnecting with them and am occasionally amazed by how much they remember my lectures and sermons.

I recently returned to one of my former communities. I was approached by a participant in a short course that I gave over twenty years ago. It was an introductory course to the Bible. My former student asked if I would meet with him individually, and we arranged a time to do so.

After a few moments of catching up on each other's careers and families, he told me that he frequently reminisced about my course, especially during the time of year when the weekly portions are to be found in the book of *Genesis*.

"You may remember," he said, "that I had trouble accepting your claim that the stories of *Genesis* had sacred import. I felt strongly that the stories were no better than those to be found in children's secular literature. I vividly recall that you tried to dissuade me from my opinion, but unsuccessfully."

I conceded that I remembered very well just how difficult it was for me to convince him of the significance of the stories of the Bible. I

also wondered aloud about whether he had changed his mind over these many years.

His answer took me aback. "I have since carefully studied every narrative in the book of *Genesis*, from the creation of the world to the death of Jacob. I have discovered incredible meaning in every story. But there is one story that continues to confound me. I find no religious significance in it at all."

I asked him which story that was. He responded, "It is the story of those darn wells. Why do we need to know about them, and what possible meaning to those wells have to us?"

My former student was alluding to the brief narrative to be found in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Toldot* (*Genesis* 25:19-28:9); specifically, the passage which tells of Isaac's encounter with Abimelech, King of the Philistines. Isaac emerges from that encounter with such great wealth that the Philistines envied him.

Then we read: "The Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth... So Isaac departed from there... And Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham... And he gave them the same

names that his father had given them...”

The story continues with an account of other wells dug by Isaac’s servants that are contested by the Philistines who claim the wells for themselves. Finally, “he moved from there. And dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth...” (ibid. 26:12-22).

My former student looked at me with anticipation. “Rabbi,” he said, “we are now both quite a bit older and hopefully at least a little wiser. Can you tell me what all this fuss over a few wells is really about?”

At that moment, I allowed myself a dose of self-congratulation. Here was a distinguished middle-aged man who remained motivated to study the weekly Torah portion despite only a minimal commitment to religious observance. He had continued to ponder questions that were initially stimulated by a course that I gave more than two decades ago.

After thanking him for being such a faithful student, I asked him if he would agree to strike a bargain with me. I would share with him a teaching which sheds light on one piece of this narrative if he would agree to suggest an explanation of his own on some other aspect of it. He readily agreed.

I told him that I found it difficult to understand why the Philistines would stop-up Abraham’s wells and go so far as to fill them with earth so that they could never be used again. These were desert dwellers, and every drop of water was precious to them. Were they not harming themselves by stopping up the wells and filling them with earth? Was this spiteful act not detrimental to their self-interest?

He agreed that this was a good question, and that he had long been asking it himself.



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I then asked him if I had ever mentioned the name Nechama Leibowitz in the course I gave so long ago. He did not think that I had. So I proceeded to tell him a bit about this great lady, whom I never was privileged to meet. I paraphrased her answer to our question: “I once believed that only in antiquity were people capable of being so hateful that they would act against their own self interests. But now in this technologically advanced nuclear age weapons of destruction are still unleashed against an enemy, despite the inevitable horrible consequences for those who launched these weapons. This tendency toward self-destruction is not a Philistine perversion. It is a universal human perversion.”

The point made by this great teacher, who would insist on being called “simple Nechama,” evoked a knowing smile on the face of my former student.

“Thank you for that insight,” he responded. “Let me share with you an idea that I had, struggling with the same text. We read that although Abraham’s wells were stopped up and filled with earth long ago—and presumably forgotten—nevertheless, Isaac did not give them his own name but, rather, “gave them the same names that his father had given them.” To me, this has real relevance. I know that, like me, you were trained as a psychologist. And you know that we psychologists come up with new theories that are not really new but merely rehash the insights of the founding fathers of psychology. But we don’t give them credit. We claim that our theories originate with us and fail to attribute them to Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung or William James. Isaac was careful to credit father Abraham, the original digger of those wells. We have a lesson about modesty to learn here.”

This time, the knowing smile was on my face.

After our meeting came to an end, I found myself pondering an entirely different question, one that teachers often ask themselves: “What is more gratifying to a teacher? To have a student remember a lesson taught long ago, or to discover that a student has learned to think for himself?” Thankfully, that recent visit to a former community of mine helped renew my acquaintance with an old student who remembered some of my lessons, but who also went on to think for himself.

I continued to reflect upon this encounter for several days after leaving my old community. During those days, bits and pieces of a poem by Emily Dickinson floated up from the depths of my memory. This poem

speaks of the mystery of wells, a mystery hinted at in the story of the wells of Abraham and Isaac. Here are the first and last stanzas of that poem:

What mystery pervades a well!
The water lives so far,
Like neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

I telephoned my old student and informed him that, in discussing the “mysteries of the wells,” we were on the “same page” as a great American poetess, who may or may not have been familiar with *Parshat Toldot*. ■



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