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## AN UNORTHODOX STEP TOWARD REVELATION: LEON KASS ON GENESIS REVISITED

How is an interested nonbeliever to approach the study of Genesis? In his commentary on Genesis, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Professor Leon Kass offers an illuminating analogy: the Torah opens with a text narrated by an unintroduced speaker. Kass likens this to the moment when God first spoke to Abraham without introducing Himself. Despite apparently having no prior experience with God, Abraham listened to this voice and embarked on a journey that ultimately transformed him and the course of human history.<sup>1</sup> Kass similarly casts himself as a seeker who hears an unfamiliar commanding voice and chooses to follow it without knowing who it is or where his journey will lead (16-17).<sup>2</sup>

In the ten years since Kass published his commentary, he has been characterized as anything ranging from an academic nonbeliever who has little to teach people of faith<sup>3</sup> to a man of faith whose commentary should be likened to that of Rashi.<sup>4</sup> Although both assessments are significantly wide of the mark, each contains a kernel of truth. A believer in revelation necessarily reads the Torah differently from a nonbeliever, even in instances when both can agree on the interpretation of a text. However, the

<sup>1</sup> For a recent treatment of Abraham's influence on the great Western religions, see Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press—Tikvah Fund, 2012). I thank my father Rabbi Marc D. Angel, my wife Maxine Angel, my teacher Rabbi Shalom Carmy, and the referees for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003). Page references in this essay are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Jacobs, "Leon Kass and the Genesis of Wisdom," *First Things* (June-July 2003), at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/leon-kass-and-the-genesis-of-wisdom-49>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Sherlock, "Jerusalem and Athens," *Modern Age* 47:1 (Winter 2005), 64.

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nonbeliever or agnostic who takes the text and its ideas seriously may have much to teach the believer who then can translate those readings into his or her own language and religious experience.

Concurrently, Kass' respect for the wisdom of the Torah does not make him a person of faith. One area where a lack of connection to *masorah* is conspicuous is in his rendering of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs as ordinary people. For example, Kass suggests that Abraham initially left for Canaan motivated primarily by an ambitious desire to reap benefits from God's promises. The *Akeida* tested whether Abraham would follow God even when his blessing was threatened (256-258; 337-338). Kass prefers his interpretation over the "strictly pious" reading which maintains that Abraham followed God because of his exemplary faith. While the Torah repeatedly shows that our ancestors were human, they also were prophets who developed a profound relationship with God. When attempting to understand the Torah's messages, it is unhelpful to overly idealize them, just as it is deficient to treat them as regular people.<sup>5</sup>

Kass maintains that Tanakh ideally should be taught by professional scholars or believers, preferably people who are both. He wrote his commentary only after perceiving a lacuna in contemporary discourse as a result of biblical criticism, which precludes most professional academic Bible scholars from seeking enduring wisdom and meaning in the text.<sup>6</sup> Many believers also do not seek universal wisdom from Tanakh, focusing instead on their own particularistic faith values and traditions (xii, 2). R. Joseph Soloveitchik was similarly distressed that

Many Jews don't look to the Bible for guidance and that its spiritual message, so indispensable for man today, is completely ignored. Our

<sup>5</sup> For discussions of this balance, see e.g., Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), 7-24; Howard Deitcher, "Between Angels and Mere Mortals: Nechama Leibowitz's Approach to the Study of Biblical Characters," *Journal of Jewish Education*, 66:1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000), 8-22; Asher Friedman, "Imitate the Ramban, not the Professors – An Interview with Shalom Carmy," *Hamevaser*, 38:1 (2000); Yaakov Medan, *David u-Bat Sheva: ha-Het, ha-Onesh, ve-haTikkun* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), 7-24; Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Kibbud Av and Kibbud Avot: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques," *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), 35-44; Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Abraham's Stories," in *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy by Friends and Students in Celebration of Forty Years of Teaching*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2012), 385-401.

<sup>6</sup> While this criticism contains truth, as many scholars focus on philology or historical context to the near exclusion of pursuing the enduring religious meaning of the text, some academic Bible scholars are interested in the wisdom of Tanakh. Cf. Jon D. Levenson's critique of Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), "Category Error," *Jewish Review of Books* 11 (Fall 2012).

approach to Biblical interpretation is too often homiletical; it is the pulpit and the synagogue approach... However, the most beautiful aspect of the Bible is its *Weltanschauung*, its world view, its spiritual outlook upon both the world and man.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, many Orthodox commentators and thinkers have pursued universal teachings in the Torah, as well. Many of Kass' ideas find parallel in the writings of two twentieth century Orthodox thinkers, R. Joseph Soloveitchik and R. Jonathan Sacks. In this essay, we will briefly consider several central themes in Kass' commentary, and compare/contrast Kass' analysis with R. Sacks' *The Great Partnership*<sup>8</sup> and R. Soloveitchik's *Family Redeemed*.

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Several themes recur throughout Kass' book, including: (1) Torah and science are compatible. Scientific knowledge should not interfere with learning morality and wisdom from the Torah. (2) Human reason and science alone are insufficient to build a moral society, and today's overly secular society has much in common with ancient pagan Egypt and Babylonia. (3) People are fundamentally different from all other creatures. Those who insist that humans are nothing more than a part of the animal spectrum undermine the possibility of an elevated human morality. (4) The biological differences between men and women yield significant moral ramifications regarding serving God and raising a family.

Working in tandem with science and reason, the Torah offers breathtaking insight toward a universal vision that can help all people avoid pagan excesses and build strong moral families and communities. The Torah's concept of holiness is characterized by the ability to distinguish between different beings and realms.

## A. TORAH AND SCIENCE ARE COMPATIBLE

Despite the desirability of Torah and science marching together, science becomes the enemy of religion when it oversteps its mandate and denies the possibility of the supernatural. Once science presumes to speak about God, it tends to blur moral boundaries, as well.

<sup>7</sup> *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation-Ktav, 2000), 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> *The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).

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Furthermore, the Torah and contemporary science agree that one cannot learn a universal morality from nature. Science may explain theories of how the cosmos works, but it cannot tell us how to live the good life. Without a heteronomous, God-given morality, modern science offers a shaky moral vision, as did the pagan world which identified their gods with nature (40-45). As R. Jonathan Sacks writes,

Monotheism, by discovering the transcendental God, the God who stands *outside* the universe and creates it, made it possible for the first time to believe that life has a meaning, not just a mythic or scientific explanation.<sup>9</sup>

### B. HUMAN REASON ALONE CANNOT BUILD A MORAL SOCIETY

Kass finds much common ground between secular culture and the pagan societies of ancient Egypt and Babel. Like the contemporary West, ancient Egypt was the acme of civilization, science, and abundance, and it was characterized by a passion for longevity. Yet in ancient Egypt women were rounded up for the king's harem, foreigners were held in contempt, a man was worshipped as a god, and preoccupation with wealth led to slavery. Kass muses, "Is Egypt, perhaps, a permanent human possibility and temptation? Is something like Egypt *our* future? (21)." As in Babel, science and technology have become the new universal language: "The city is back, and so, too, is Sodom, babbling and dissipating away. Perhaps we ought to see the dream of Babel today, once again, from God's point of view. Perhaps we should pay attention to the plan He adopted as the alternative to Babel. We are ready to take a walk with Abram" (243).

Kass' likening the secular West to Egypt, Babel, and even Sodom seems rather overstated, as these worlds are not fully analogous. Nevertheless, his general point regarding the weakening of the West's religious underpinnings of morality is well taken.<sup>10</sup> Kass' identification with

<sup>9</sup> *The Great Partnership*, 9, cf. 19-24.

<sup>10</sup> For a stark sociological analysis, see Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: the State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012). See also Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010), 443-492, who demonstrate that religious Americans (defined by a battery of questions involving regular prayer service attendance, belief in God, afterlife, and the Bible) on average make better neighbors in every sense than

Abraham's journey against Egypt and Babel makes the statement that he is willing to stand on one side, like an *ivri*, against the overly secular world around him.

Human reason alone cannot create an enduring morality, and Kass questions the exaggerated emphasis on individualism in contemporary society. In his analysis of Abraham's protestations on behalf of Sodom in Genesis chapter 18 (319-331), Kass observes that Abraham spoke altruistically in the name of objective justice, but in truth cared about his nephew Lot as well. Abraham could not comfortably plead explicitly for Lot, so he made his case in more general terms. Why did he stop at ten, instead of pushing all the way to one? It seems that if Abraham had reduced the argument to one it would have been too obvious that he was asking God to save Lot. Thus, even the greatest human idealism often contains subjective elements. This is another reason an external system of morality is required to maintain an objective standard.

Kass submits an additional reason why Abraham stopped at ten. Initially, Abraham's concern was one of individual justice. He did not object to wicked people being destroyed for their sins, but rather protested the injustice of including the righteous in a collective destruction. God was more interested in the city than in each individual. Over the course of their dialogue, God taught Abraham to think about Sodom as a society, rather than merely as a collection of individuals. Communal justice is seldom fair for every individual. If Abraham was to build a nation, he needed to learn that political justice is not altogether just. Thus, Kass takes one of the great biblical episodes of protest against God, and explains it in a manner that offers wise guidance regarding objective and subjective elements in human morality and the need to balance individualism and the good of society.

### C. HUMANS VS. OTHER CREATURES

The biblical concept of the uniqueness of humans is under attack from animal rights activists and evolutionary theory. Kass objects strenuously

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Americans who are not religiously involved. Religious Americans tend to give more charity, are more involved in both religious and civic causes, volunteer more for both religious and secular charities, are more likely to give excess change back to store clerks, donate blood, offer their seats to strangers, and many others. While of course there are many exceptions in both directions, the averages are meaningful. Cf. R. Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, 144-149.

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to the claim that humans have no unique dignity and are merely part of the animal spectrum (21). He defines people as being created in the Image of God to mean that they are endowed with God-like functions,<sup>11</sup> including: (1) God speaks, commands, names, blesses, and hallows. (2) God makes and makes freely. (3) God looks at and beholds the world. (4) God is concerned with the goodness and perfection of things. (5) God addresses other creations and provides for their sustenance. Even atheists must concede that humans have these qualities and animals do not. Still, the Torah is careful to say that people are God-like in certain respects, but they are not God. Humans were created on the same day as the land animals rather than on a separate day. The Torah thereby teaches that people are situated between the animal kingdom and the divine (37-40).

The Torah fundamentally insists on human freedom. Just as God is above the universe and freely creates, so too humans have creative freedom. If people use their freedom wisely, they can change the world. This assumption forms the religious basis of hope and morality. Viewing people as nothing more than part of the animal kingdom undermines purpose and morality. As R. Sacks writes,

Without freedom, there is no human dignity: there is merely the person as thing, a biological organism continuous with all other organisms. The discovery of human dignity is perhaps the single most transformative idea given to the world by Abrahamic monotheism. That faith was the first to teach that every human being regardless of colour, culture or creed is in the image and likeness of God, the first to teach the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human being, and to show how these ideals might be honoured and made real in the structures we build for our common life.<sup>12</sup>

In his analysis of the Joseph narrative, Kass applies this reasoning to explain why the Egyptians despised shepherds (Gen. 46:34; cf. Exod. 8:22). Egyptians venerated sheep and therefore resented Israel's insistence that people are superior to other creatures. Similar to today's overly secularized West, the ancient Egyptians believed in the interchangeability of gods, people, and nature. In contrast, Israel insisted that God is unique and people are unique among God's creations (625). These layers of separation form the basis of holiness and morality.

<sup>11</sup> See survey of traditional views in Yehuda Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Genesis vol. 1* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997), 25-27.

<sup>12</sup> *The Great Partnership*, 289-290.

#### D. MEN AND WOMEN

Genesis is mainly about the adventures of men... Does it represent (as current fashion believes) the sexist or patriarchal mentality of ancient Israel? Or does it reflect something closer to the reverse: a belief that men are by nature much more than women in need of education if they are to live responsibly, righteously, and well? Are men naturally drawn to domestic life and the care of those who will someday replace them? Or will they, if left to their own devices, pursue ways of life devoted to heroic quests for personal honor and glory, to power and domination, and to wealth and pleasure? (20).

It is one thing to beget a child... quite another to do so understanding what it means and entails... Patriarchy properly understood turns out to be the cure for patriarchy properly condemned. The biblical sort of patriarchy is meant to provide the remedy for arbitrary and unjust male dominance and self-aggrandizement, for the mistreatment of women, and for the neglect of children (250).

Given the centrality of family relationships in Genesis, Kass regularly explores notions of patriarchy and matriarchy. Because of their role in producing new life, women may become arrogant by viewing their children as their possessions. God therefore teaches humility to the matriarchs through their initial barrenness (270). Men, on the other hand, often seek satisfaction not by creating life, but by destroying it, as Cain and Lamech demonstrate (148). The Torah therefore teaches that not through material means, nor via pride of acquisition, can man hope to stand in a fitting relation to God. More than the arts and sciences, power, or prosperity, people need reverent orientation to the divine (150).

Kass continues his exploration of the Torah's efforts to guide men and women to the good life in his discussion of circumcision (313-315). Male circumcision was widely practiced in the ancient world as a puberty ritual.<sup>13</sup> It was a sign of sexual potency and an initiation into the society of males, ending a boy's primary attachment to his mother and household, the society of women and children. The Torah radically transforms the ritual of circumcision into a father's religious duty toward his son. Circumcision in the Torah celebrates not male potency but rather procreation and perpetuation. Immediately after the birth of a son, a father must begin transmission of the covenant.

<sup>13</sup> See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 131-133.

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More than women, males need extra inducement to take a parental role. They need to be acculturated to become interested in child rearing. Virility and potency are far less important to the Torah than decency, righteousness, and holiness. The society of males is one that must be sanctified from birth. It is defined by those who remember God rather than those who fight, rule, and make their name great. Of course, circumcision also profoundly affects the mother of the child, as it reminds her that her son is not fully hers. God therefore renames Sarai to Sarah at the time of God's command of circumcision to Abraham.

One underdeveloped area in Kass' analysis is his treatment of motherhood. For Kass, women need far less spiritual guidance than men in order to stand properly before God. Once they overcome the potential arrogance of considering their children as their possessions, they are well on their way to living a life of holiness. In contrast, R. Soloveitchik offers a more nuanced view of motherhood through his typology of Natural people and Redeemed people. In the natural community, a father's role is minimal, whereas motherhood is central to a woman's life. Similar to Kass, R. Soloveitchik outlines ways the Torah teaches men they must educate their children in the covenant to be worthy of a redeemed fatherhood. However, R. Soloveitchik also develops the central role of the mother in partnering with her husband in the spiritual upbringing of her children.<sup>14</sup> Abraham—and not Adam—was called *av hamon goyim*, a father of many nations, because redeemed fatherhood begins with a father's commitment to his children's religious education: "Man's involvement with God is only realizable if he is ready to commit his offspring to God by imbuing them with Torah knowledge and Torah ideals."<sup>15</sup> Eve received her new name because she was *em kol hai*, as natural motherhood involves true sacrifice. However, Sarai was renamed Sarah in the same discussion as Abraham's name change in the context of circumcision, since she did more than raise biological progeny—she partnered with Abraham in transmitting the covenant:

In the natural community, the woman is involved in her motherhood-destiny; father is a distant figure who stands on the periphery. In the covenantal community, father moves to the center where mother has been all along, and both together take on a new commitment, universal in substance: to

<sup>14</sup> See also R. Soloveitchik's "A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 73-83.

<sup>15</sup> *Family Redeemed*, 58.

teach, to train the child to hear the faint echoes which keep on tapping at our gates and which disturb the complacent, comfortable, gracious society.<sup>16</sup>

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In addition to developing major themes, Kass also provides a close reading of Genesis. While many of his interpretations find precedent in earlier works, he also offers several original insights. For example, he interprets Joseph's success in dream interpretation in conjunction with time. Three branches and baskets symbolize three days; seven cows and stalks symbolize seven years. Kass suggests that Joseph's interpretations represent a fundamental shift away from the Egyptian obsession with permanence, in which the dreams appear stable and represent an unchanging world. Joseph introduces the Israelite sense of time, which always allows for the possibility of change (555-561).

We may extend Kass' conceptual analysis to another aspect of the Joseph narrative. If Joseph's initial dreams should also be interpreted in light of time, one may submit that each dream suggests a period of eleven years. Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sold (Gen. 37:2), and was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh (41:46). This means that he was twenty-eight when he interpreted the dreams of the baker and the butler since Pharaoh brought Joseph from prison two years later (41:1). Thus, eleven years elapsed from the sale of Joseph into slavery until he interpreted the butler's dream—thereby tasting his first glimmer of freedom. As noted, Joseph was thirty years old when he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and consequently rose to power. Seven years of plenty and two years of famine passed before Joseph reconciled with his brothers (45:11), making him thirty-nine years old. If so, eleven years elapsed from Joseph's first ray of hope until he and his family fully reunited at the top of Egyptian society. How precisely one interprets the sheaves and the stars is subject to additional interpretation, but Kass' insight may unlock a new dimension of meaning into Joseph's original dreams. Joseph's story spans two periods of eleven years: one of slavery and imprisonment, and the other of hope and royalty.

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The Torah has taught eternal truths from the moment it was revealed—both in battling against its surrounding pagan context and in offering a positive agenda that penetrates to the roots of human nature and creates

<sup>16</sup> *Family Redeemed*, 114.

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realistic balances to elevate each individual and all society into a relationship with God and to a moral life.

R. Jonathan Sacks quotes Tolstoy, who suggested that, once the religious basis for biblical morality dissipates in a society, eventually the moral underpinnings erode as well.<sup>17</sup> While this observation may hold true, it is possible that a thoughtful secularized reading of the Torah might enable those who have lost their religious moorings to reconnect and take a step toward a faith commitment, as well. Kass' book is a valuable effort to allow the Torah to speak to contemporary society. Perhaps his greatest moment is when he writes, "if we allow ourselves to travel its narrative journey, the book may reward our openness and gain our trust. Who knows, we may even learn who (or Who) is speaking to us, and why" (17). That Kass allows for the possibility of a capitalized "Who" is a tribute to his spiritual openness.

As Kass observes, the best commentaries expounding on the Torah should emerge from its heirs who believe in revelation and the binding claim of the Torah on our souls and actions. Kass provides an illuminating model of how to present the Torah to contemporary Westerners of all backgrounds to seek a meaningful relationship with the eternal messages of the Torah and its Author.

<sup>17</sup> *The Great Partnership*, 146-162.