**Parashat Vayera**

From Adam to Avraham, each biblical man struggles with how he responds to God, highlighting the challenge of balancing freedom with responsibility. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks brings forth the idea that personal, moral, and collective responsibility harmonize with freedom, throughout the beginning of Sefer Bereishit, to teach us about proper leadership.

The Torah informs us that there is a mitzvah to be godlike, “והלכת בדרכיו”– walk in His ways, (Devarim 28:9). When the snake tells Chavah to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, she finds this as an opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah, to imitate God– imitatio dei, and so “וַתִּקַּ֥ח מִפִּרְי֖וֹ וַתֹּאכַ֑ל וַתִּתֵּ֧ן גַּם־לְאִישָׁ֛הּ עִמָּ֖הּ וַיֹּאכַֽל,” “So she took of its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Bereishit 3:6). However, Adam and Chavah still received a punishment, despite their good intention to resemble God. Why? For the sole purpose that God had commanded them not to eat from it. “וּמֵעֵ֗ץ הַדַּ֨עַת֙ ט֣וֹב וָרָ֔ע לֹ֥א תֹאכַ֖ל מִמֶּ֑נּוּ כִּ֗י בְּי֛וֹם אֲכָלְךָ֥ מִמֶּ֖נּוּ מ֥וֹת תָּמֽוּת,” “But of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die” (Bereishit 2:17). Through this punishment, Hashem is illuminating the fact that when doing עבודת ה׳, serving God, you must do it in the way that God commanded from you. However that’s not where Adam’s mistakes end. When God asks him “הֲמִן־הָעֵ֗ץ אֲשֶׁ֧ר צִוִּיתִ֛יךָ לְבִלְתִּ֥י אֲכָל־מִמֶּ֖נּוּ אָכָֽלְתָּ,” “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Bereishit 3:11), he lacks responsibility and blames Chavah. Not only is Adam struggling with how to handle his freedom, but he fails his test of personal responsibility.

Similarly, Cain attempted to please God in his own way: by bringing korbanot. However, it wasn’t accepted whereas Abel’s was. Although it doesn’t say explicitly in the Torah that Cain killed Abel because of this very reason, the midrash concludes that as the cause for Cain murdering his brother. When God questioned Cain and asked “?אֵ֖י הֶ֣בֶל אָחִ֑יךָ”, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Bereishit 4:9), Cain deflected all moral responsibility by answering “?הֲשֹׁמֵ֥ר אָחִ֖י אָנֹֽכִי,” “Am I my brother's keeper?” (Bereishit 4:9); yet another example of balancing freedom and responsibility.

The next man we come across is Noah. He recognized that Adam got expelled and ultimately killed because of doing things his own way, hence he did exactly the opposite and listened precisely to what God commanded of him: “​​וַיַּ֖עַשׂ נֹ֑חַ כְּ֠כֹ֠ל אֲשֶׁ֨ר צִוָּ֥ה אֹת֛וֹ אֱלֹקים כֵּ֥ן עָשָֽׂה,” “And Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did” (Bereishit 6:22). When God spoke to Noah and announced that he was to kill all of this generation, Noah did not question God or attempt to get God to reconsider; rather he obeyed Hashem’s words and built himself a boat. Noah lacked collective responsibility and only looked after himself. In analyzing the decisions of biblical figures up until this point, no one seems to grasp the correct balance between freedom and responsibility.

Then, in Parashat Vayera, comes a moment in which man, Avraham, questions God. God warned Avraham that he was to destroy Sedom. In an unprecedented way, Avraham answered, “?הֲשֹׁפֵט֙ כָּל־הָאָ֔רֶץ לֹ֥א יַֽעֲשֶׂ֖ה מִשְׁפָּֽט” “Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” (Bereishit 18:25). Contrary to Noah who followed blindly when God spoke to him, Avraham questioned God and was active in the leadership role that he was taking. Avaraham didn’t take his own path to do what Hashem wanted him to do like Adam and Chavah, nor did he strictly follow God’s words like Noah. He became the perfect combination of both: following in Hashem’s ways while challenging Him all the while. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains it, Avraham understood all levels of responsibility, especially the third: collective.

The reason why Avraham became the epitome of leadership in Judaism is for the very reason that he challenged, he protested, and he fought. He was not passive, but rather quite the opposite. Avraham took responsibility for the first time in the Torah. He acted despite the lack of support from others; he was confident in himself and in his options.

This idea of responsibility, whether it be personal, moral, or collective, applies to all. To be a leader is to follow in the footsteps of Avraham Avinu. To be active in whatever role you’re taking; to be independent and rely on yourself in the process of serving God. The failures of the men in the beginning of the Bible– Adam, Cain, and Noah– teach us what not to be and how not to lead, whereas Avraham Avinu teaches us the exact opposite. It’s up to you what path you will follow; whether you want to be an Adam or an Avraham.

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