DEBAR TORAH: TRIBAL LITERATURE AND THE FOUNDERING OF NATIONS

— RABBI IRA ROHDE, HAZZAN —

The saga told of Abraham and his family relations and connections convey many implicit messages, of mixed types of character, to the reader. The story of Sodom, and of Lot and his descendants in particular, is complex, with many implications, both for the good and the bad, implied. God be the land, Lot and his descendants are a tribal people who are not only close relatives of Abraham, a nephew for whom Abraham took special responsibility after Lot’s father died. Later on in the Bible, despite conflict, Moab especially, as well as Ammon, continue to be thought of as closely-related peoples. And history has borne out the closeness of these relations: Ancient Moabite inscriptions are written in a language which is basically a form of Israelite Hebrew. Now, Lot seems to be ordained for originally having chosen to settle in the rich southern deep-valley plain around the walled city of Sodom and for dwelling in the city of Lot. But at the same time, Lot and his family are much preferred to the men of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the vicinity. One ambiguity is whether Lot was saved due to his own merit or whether that was purely God’s favor due to Abraham’s merit, but the text does seem to be saying that Lot had some considerable merit of his own, and contests him with Sodom. Of course, Lot originally came to the region to provide room for his. Lot is not a native city-dweller, but rather from a tribal pastoral background. This makes him unlike the original “Canaanite” people of the Sodom region, who seem not organized by tribe, but rather as “Cities of the Plain,” each city with its own king and cultivated fields. Lot’s attempt to give hospitality and protect his visitors seems portrayed generously, and, at the same time, mockingly. The treatment of Lot’s daughters in the story occurs even further in the confusingly “mixed” implications for the hunting of Israel with Ammon. Although there is a clear sense of tribal loyalty, unlike Sodom, Tribesmen are known for hospitality and wares they offer to guests from the outside, unlike city-dwellers, for whom rights are only due to their fellow citizens. And yet that claimed loyalty of the daughters to their father is, at the same time, being mocked, perhaps in the offer to exchange them for the visitors, and surely in the story of the birth and naming of Moab and Ammon.

Another group of tribal panaurem, prominent in our parashah and those following, are considered as direct relatives of Abraham, the children of Hagar and the other wives of Abraham, and here again, there are mixed positive and negative messages. Overall, even though tribal groups often don’t get along, there is a general respect for the tribal organization of Abraham’s relatives, over and against the kings of Canaan, whether of Sodom, the cities of the Canaanites, or in the story told here of the “King of Gerar,” a city-state of the Philistines. At the end of our parashah yet another related tribal people with pastoralist origins on Israel’s northeast border is referred to as the children of Abraham’s brother Nahor, who seem to be seen as the ancestors of the Syrians/Arameans. And again the reader is given mixed messages: Rebecca will be Isaac’s wife, and Laban’s daughter Jacob’s wives. Laban is our relative, and the children of Abraham are preferred to those of the Canaanites. Laban “helps” both Eliezer as well as Jacob, and Jacob even makes a pact with Laban. Yet Laban’s true worthlessness is deeply suspect.

Although there were, doctored, stories told among tribal groups, our Torah is perhaps the first written version of such stories to have appeared. All written literature prior to the Torah seems to have been geared to the needs of city-states and empires. The Torah itself seems to bear this out, naming the great cities built by Ninitrom and others, the tribes or peoples they organized, and by large. Where there were “peoples” involved, it meant that they were empires subjugated by the great cities. Interestingly, it is first among the Israelites and their neighbors, who de-scribe themselves as organizing tribally, as peoples held together by bloodlines, do the first truly national bodies of literature emerge. And Israel’s Bible, perhaps the first expanded body of national literature to have ever existed, cemented Israel’s existence as perhaps the first true nation.
EARN YOUR THANKSGIVING BY GIVING BACK
Fourth Annual Thanksgiving Pack-A-Thon
Thursday, November 23, 9:30 am | Levy Auditorium

Building on the success of the past three Pack-A-Thons, this year we will be expanding our circle of local faith community partners to include Drisha, along with our continuing partners: the West End Collegiate Church, the Jewish Center, and the Church of Latter-day Saints.

On Thanksgiving morning, after Rabbi Soloveichik’s special Thanksgiving address, registered volunteers will pack meals to be distributed to hungry New Yorkers.

Last year, we raised over $18,000 to fight hunger. Help us top that this year—we’re off to a great start!

To sign up or support this event, visit shearithisrael.org/packathon2018.

Would You Like To Co-Sponsor Our Thanksgiving Festivities?
Visit shearithisrael.org/thanksgiving.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Condolences to Dr. Eli Bryk on the passing of his father, Dr. David Bryk.

When available, shibadetails can be found at: shearithisrael.org/announcements

DEADLINE: THIS MONDAY, OCTOBER 29
Shabbaton & Luncheon for CSI & PTTS Young Couples and Families
Shabbat Morning, November 3
Jr. Congregation with a Torah Reading begins at 10:30 am
Luncheon begins after Morning Services

CSI and PTTS families will form meaningful bonds at our inaugural PTTS Shabbaton. Our Hebrew School students are preparing in class for this big day when they are invited to take center stage in our Junior Congregation on Shabbat morning, with a Young Couples and Families Luncheon to follow.

To register or sponsor the luncheon, go to shearithisrael.org/ptts-csi-luncheon.

CSI Teens — PTTS Needs You!

We are looking for a few experienced Junior Congregation participants to mentor some of our PTTS students to help them prepare for this special event. Contact Yona Glass at yglass@shearithisrael.org if you would like to help a PTTS student master their part. This is a rewarding and fun chance to support our PTTS students, and can also be used to fulfill community service hours.

Film Screening: When the Smoke Clears
Saturday Night, November 10 | 6:30 pm
Join us the night before Veterans Day to see this compelling and relevant documentary from Jerusalem U, When the Smoke Clears: A Story of Brotherhood, Resilience, and Hope.

It tells the true stories of young Israeli soldiers, Gil, Ofer, and Elad, whose injuries leave them fighting for the strength to live. Making breakthroughs and finding meaning by reaching out to those in need, they discover that what didn’t kill them really did make them stronger.

For tickets, visit shearithisrael.org/smoke.
Only $5 for members/$8 for non-members in advance, $10 for all at the door.

THE ONLY STOP ON SCOTT SHAY’S TOUR WHERE YOU CAN HEAR HIM WITH RABBI SOLOVEICHIK
A Shabbat Dinner Featuring
Shearith Israel Member and Author, Scott Shay in Conversation with Rabbi Meir Soloveichik
Friday Evening, November 9 | Following Evening Services

Religion can be both inspiring and distressing. And many critiques of it are simultaneously compelling and dubious. In his new book, In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism, Scott Shay examines atheist arguments with a refreshing modern eye in this comprehensive look at our most fundamental questions about faith and reason.

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/scott-shay.

Scott A. Shay has had a successful business career spanning Wall Street, private equity, venture capital, and banking. Throughout his life, he has also been a student of religion and how religion ought to apply to the world outside of the synagogue, church, or mosque, also authoring the best-selling title, Getting Our Groove Back: How to Energize American Jewry.

4 Mitzvot Workshops with Z. Edinger
Exclusively for PTTS & Shearith Israel Elementary School Age Members
First Session: THIS Sunday | 10:00 am
Sunday, December 23 | Sunday, March 3 | Sunday, April 14
Our Shamash, Zachary Edinger, is launching a very special series of Mitzvot Workshops, to be held on select Sundays throughout the school year. The first session will be THIS Sunday, October 28.

These workshops are a wonderful opportunity for our elementary school age youth - both boys and girls - to learn to sing the melodies of selected prayers from the Shabbat and holiday services as well as learn about the parts of the Torah service, and get trained in the hands-on parts of the service.

PTTS students are expected to be in attendance, and CSI youth are heartily welcome and are asked to register in advance so we know how many of you to expect.

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/mitzvot-workshop.