**PARASHAT LEKH L’KHA**

**(SECOND PORTION IN TRIENNIAL CYCLE)**

**BERESHIT (GENESIS) 13 – 16**

**HERTZ 48; PLAUT 96; EITZ HAYIM 74**

Parashat Lekh l’Kha is where, as Rabbi Plaut says, the Book of Genesis moves “from myth toward history” (88). We are the beginning of what will be the main theme of the Book of *Bereshit* (*Genesis)*, which covers the family tree that includes the three Patria-rchs and four Matriarchs (six, if you count Bilhah and Zilpah) and that reviews their various adventures and misadventures. My earlier d’var on the first portion focused entirely on the three instances when Abraham and Isaac asserted that their wives were their sisters to protect their own lives. There is plenty of material to discuss in the second portion, as for example the story where Sarai, who was having trouble getting pregnant, treated her maidservant Hagar so badly that she ran away. I admit that there is a lot to be learned from their experience, but I hate to tell the story, as it inevitably reflects a dark side of the person who will be called Sarah and become one of the heroines of the historical part of the Hebrew Bible. However, having failed to become pregnant over many years as Abraham’s wife, she urged him to take her maidservant Hagar as a concubine to ensure that he has progeny--and then blames him when Hagar shows signs of pregnancy (Verse 16:5).

I was dealing with that dilemma, when I came across an alternative way of describing the same period as our parashah. It is Esther Goldenberg’s (2024) book entitled, *The Scrolls of Deborah* (Rose House: New Egypt, New Jersey, USA), which is supposed to be Book 1 of the Desert Songs Trilogy. It tells the story of Deborah (in Hebrew: “the bee”), who, according to the family tree provided at the start of the book, is a grand- daughter of Hallel and Moshel, who are themselves son and daughter of Abraham and Sarah. That is high in the Biblical family, except that I have never heard of any of them, so they must appear in one of the backstories that—provided one reads Biblical Arama-ic—is not found in the Hebrew Bible. (Fortunately, it has now been translated.) To clarify, a backstory is a narrative providing a history or background context, especially for a character or situation in a literary work, film, or dramatic series. My summary will indicate why a backstory is helpful to interpret Parashat Lech L’kha

The first dozen years of Deborah’s life are happy but then her mother dies, and the Pharoah whom her grandmother serves also dies. Deborah’s few remaining local members of her family decide that she must join the rest of the Israelites who live some-where near the Dead Sea. To get there, Deborah is entrusted to a guide, who takes her down the Nile and then over land to where the rest of the Israelites live. En route, she is repeatedly raped by the guide who is supposed to be taking care of her, but he does deliver Deborah to her new family in a state of physical filth and complete uncertainty as to her future. Indeed, most of the family does not want to accept her.

All that is preamble. The story really gets going when Deborah is immediately and enthusiastically accepted as her nursemaid by young Rebekah, and they are together for the remainder of the novel whether happily telling stories or sadly crying over their limited freedom. More importantly, the story begins to follow what we read in the Hebrew Bible—not exactly but close enough that it ***might*** have been true. For example, remem-ber Abraham’s servant being sent off to other parts of the family to find a wife for Issac. Could that have been Rebekah? Yes, it could have been, but not if she is only 12 years old, and not if, as soon as she is met by Issac near his home, she is guided right into his mother’s tent and married in the old-fashioned way. On the other hand, there is no mention in the novel of Isaac treating Rebekah as his sister. Moreover, in this back-story, Isaac is by no means happy with his father’s near sacrifice of him, and he wants nothing to do with him. More happily, this is where the novel gets interesting as, once Deborah and Rebekah become close friends, it is Deborah who becomes the go-between for Abraham and Isaac, a job she performs with real diplomacy.

Of course, we must not forget that Rebekah was betrothed to Isaac, and of course both girls soon pass puberty. After an enormous series of parties and dances, Rebekah does marry Isaac. Though it seems to be a happy marriage, there are a number of years of unsuccessful pregnancies, and, with Deborah’s permission (but no mention of her past rapes), she is offered to Isaac as a concubine. (I hope that sounds familiar.) Indeed, Deborah does get pregnant, and does have a successful birth, but the child soon dies from some disease. Fortunately, Rebekah shortly thereafter gives birth to Esau and Jacob, who are breastfed by the two women, and are called respectively “Mommie” and “Auntie.”

I have no need to relate the growth of Esau and Jacob with their different personalities and repeated arguments, as it is told briefly in the Bible and at greater length in the novel. All that I want to note is that it was Rebekah who involved Jacob in deceiving Issac, and Deborah who tried unsuccessfully to discourage her. Of course, it was Rebekah who had heard God’s information about the older serving the younger, and Deborah who had always favored Jacob. Thus, it was no surprise when Esau’ said--according to the novel; not the Bible--“Auntie, you have betrayed me. You have all betrayed me.” Nor was it a surprise when Esau added that, after Isaac’s death, he would kill Jacob.

Of course, that did not happen, and the novel continues for another 100 pages through the rest of Deborah’s life. It was mostly happy including an additional love affair with a Jewish man named Orry who was also from Egypt. However, they never could bring Esau’s wives to the love of God. Worse than that, Rebekah felt that she had not prepared Jacob adequately to become the leader he would need to be. On the other hand, the two additional matriarchs, Zilpah and Bilhah, get to play a useful role. And, remarkably as it seems, Esau’s anger softened, and he even--but again not Biblically-- told a group that all his family was brave, but Deborah was the bravest of all.

The remaining pages do not add much to the novel. There is an overlong conflict between Orry and Isaac with respect to who was Deborah’s husband, and another of the role of Leah and Jacob’s bargain with Lavan. However, the warn relationship between Rebekah and Deborah never cools. Near the end of Deborah’s life, by which time she is called “Auntie” by everyone, Deborah says to herself, “I am a sister, mother, daughter, and friend. I have lived my song and told my story. Hallalu Yah!.” And she was buried beneath a blossoming almond tree.

I know that Esther Goldenberg’s backstory is not a regular d’var—certainly not a d’var Torah—so before I conclude we should return to my earlier comment on Parashat Lech L’kha (source Rabbi Plaut) that it is the bridge between myth and history. My first addition is itself from the Plaut Chumash (version 1; pg. 151):

The story may thus may be read as a paradigm . . . . In a way every parent seeks to dominate his child and is in danger of seeking to sacrifice him to his parental plans or hopes. In the Biblical story, God is present and can therefore stay the father’s hand. In all too many repetitions of the scene, God is absent and the knife falls. Thus is the Akeda repeated forever, with its test and its terror.

The second is a much older commentary from *Legends of the Jews* (1:5:262). It occurs when Sarah wakes up after Abraham and Isaac have left for the sacrifice, and she feels that God has not heard her plea to save Isaac’s life. Satan, then, acting on his own, which is different from his role any other part of the Hebrew Bible, and he tells her that Isaac is safe, which is true, and will soon appear with Abraham, which is not true. No matter; the news is so good that Sarah dies in a burst of happiness, or maybe in a burst of despair when he does not appear. What an enigmatic ending between myth and history!

Shabbat shalom,