בני זמננו

Modern Commentaries

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Should children be exact copies of their parents?

Rabbi Sacks: On Clones and Identity

Drawing on the midrash in Sanhedrin 107b, the essay explains that Yitzchak's physical resemblance to Avraham was a sign that Avraham was truly his father, but that it also led to a loss of individuality, since people could no longer tell the two apart and Avraham therefore prayed to grow old. The author draws from this that every person is unique and non-substitutable, and uses it to argue against eugenic cloning, which threatens to make children replicas of their parents and to treat human life as a commodity. AI SUMMARY

Toledot תולדות

Toledot tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, who struggle in the womb and seem destined to clash throughout their lives and those of their descendants. It contains two great passages: the birth and childhood of the boys, and the scene in which Jacob, at Rebecca's behest, dresses in Esau's clothes and takes his blessing from their father Isaac, now blind. Between them is a narrative about Isaac and Rebecca going to Gerar because of famine, very similar to that told about Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 20.

The first of the following essays is about the close similarity between Isaac and Abraham in appearance and in other ways, which has a message about a contemporary question in medical ethics: the desirability or otherwise of eugenic cloning. The second is about the precise meaning of the revelation given to Rebecca about the twins and their destiny, before they are born. The third is about Isaac in the land of the Philistines, one of the first intimations of what would later be called anti-Semitism. The fourth is about the surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of Esau in the scene in which Jacob takes his blessing.

On Clones and Identity

Around the gaps, silences and seeming repetitions of the biblical text, midrash weaves its interpretations, enriching the written word with oral elaboration, giving the text new resonances of meaning. Often, to the untutored ear, midrash sounds fanciful, far removed from the plain sense of the verse. But once we have learned the language and sensibility of midrash, we begin to realise how deep are its spiritual and moral insights.

One example was prompted by the opening verse of Parashat Toledot:

And these are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham: Abraham begat Isaac. (25:19)

The problem is obvious. The first half of the sentence tells us that Isaac was the son of Abraham. Why then does the text repeat, "Abraham begat Isaac"? Looking at the apparent redundancy of the text in the context of the Abraham-Isaac narrative as a whole, the sages offered the following interpretation:

The cynics of the time were saying, "Sarah became pregnant through Avimelekh. See how many years she lived with Abraham without being able to have a child by him." What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He made Isaac's facial features exactly resemble those of Abraham, so that everyone

had to admit that Abraham begat Isaac. This is what is meant by the words "Abraham begat Isaac" – there was clear evidence that Abraham was Isaac's father.

This is an ingenious reading, taken in the context of the narrative as a whole. The opening of Genesis 21 speaks of the birth of Isaac to Sarah. Immediately prior to this, in Genesis 20, we are told that Sarah was taken into the harem of Avimelekh, king of Gerar. Hence the speculation of the sages that gossips were suggesting that Abraham was infertile; that Avimelekh was Isaac's father and that the conception took place during the time Sarah was in Avimelekh's harem. Hence the double emphasis of the verse: not only was Abraham Isaac's father in fact, but also everyone could see this because father and son looked exactly alike.

But there is a deeper point at stake. To understand it we need to turn to another midrash, this time on the opening verse of Genesis 24:

And Abraham was old, well advanced in years: and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. (24:1)

Again there is a problem of an apparently superfluous phrase. If Abraham was old, why does the verse need to add that he was "well advanced in years"? The rabbis noticed something else as well: Abraham and Sarah are the first people in the Torah described as being old, despite the fact that many previously mentioned biblical characters lived to a much greater age. Putting these two facts together with the tradition that Abraham and Isaac looked identical, they arrived at the following interpretation:

Until Abraham, people did not grow old. However [because Abraham and Isaac looked alike] people who saw Abraham said, "That is Isaac," and people who saw Isaac said, "That is Abraham." Abraham then prayed to grow old, and this is the meaning [of the phrase] "And Abraham was old." (Sanhedrin 107b)

The close physical resemblance between Abraham and Isaac refuted the charge of those who said that Abraham was not the real father, but it gave rise to an unexpected difficulty. Both father and son, identical in appearance, suffered a loss of individuality. Nor is this pure speculation – it is pointing to a subtle but important aspect of the story. Examine Genesis carefully, and we see that Isaac is the least individuated of the patriarchs. His life reads like a replay of his father's. Like Abraham, he is forced by famine to go to the land of the Philistines.

He too encounters Avimelekh. He too feels impelled to say that his wife is his sister. He re-digs the wells his father dug. Isaac seems to do little that is distinctively his own.

Sensitive to this, the rabbis told a profound psychological story. Parents are not their children. Children are not replicas of their parents. We are each unique and have a unique purpose. That is why Abraham prayed to God that there be some clear and recognizable difference between father and son.

There is, I believe, contemporary relevance to this midrash, especially in relation to a new medical technology: eugenic or reproductive cloning. Cloning – the method of nuclear cell transfer pioneered by Dr Ian Wilmut in the experiment that created Dolly the sheep in 1997 – raises profound issues of medical ethics, especially in relation to humans.

Cloning is not just another technology. It raises issues not posed by other forms of assisted reproduction such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilisation. Nuclear cell transfer is a form of asexual reproduction. We do not know why it is that large, long-living creatures reproduce sexually. From an evolutionary point of view, asexual reproduction would have been much simpler. Yet none of the higher mammals reproduce asexually.

Some biologists argue that this is because only by the unpredictable combination of genetic endowments of parents and grandparents, can a species generate the variety it needs to survive. The history of the human presence on earth is marked by a destruction of biodiversity on a massive scale. To take risks with our own genetic future would be irresponsible in the extreme.

There is another objection to cloning, namely the threat to the integrity of children so conceived. To be sure, genetically identical persons already exist in

the case of identical twins. It is one thing, though, for this to happen, quite another to bring it about deliberately. Cloning represents an ethical danger in a way that naturally occurring phenomena do not. Identical twins cannot be brought into being so that one may serve as a substitute or replacement for the other. Cloning, however, can bring us to treat persons as means rather than as ends in themselves. It risks the commoditisation of human life.

It cannot but transform some of the most basic features of our humanity.

Every child born of the genetic mix between two parents is unpredictable, like yet unlike those who have brought it into the world. That mix of kinship and difference is an essential feature of human relationships. It is the basis of a key belief of Judaism, that each individual is unique, non-substitutable, and irreplaceable. In a famous mishna, the sages taught: "When a human being makes many coins in a single mint, they all come out the same. God makes every human being in the same image, His image, yet they all emerge different."

The glory of creation is that unity in heaven creates diversity on earth. God wants every human life to be unique. As Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam put it: "Every child has the right to be a complete surprise to its parents" – which means the right to be no-one else's clone.

What would become of love if we knew that if we lost our beloved we could create a replica? What would happen to our sense of self if we discovered that we were manufactured to order?

The midrash about Abraham and Isaac does not bear directly on cloning. Even if it did, it would be problematic to infer halakha from aggada, that is, to derive a legal conclusion from a non-legal source (aggada is the general rabbinic term for anything that does not involve law). Yet the story is not without its ethical undertones. At first Isaac looked like a clone of his father. Eventually Abraham had to pray for the deed to be undone.

If there is a mystery at the heart of the human condition it is otherness: the otherness of man and woman, parent and child. It is the space we make for otherness that makes love something other than narcissism, and parenthood something greater than self-replication. It is this that gives every human child the right to be themselves, to know they are not reproductions of someone else, constructed according to a pre-planned genetic template. Without this, would childhood be bearable? Would love survive? Would a world of clones still be a human world? We are each in God's image but no one else's.

