

5779:

There is a curious episode in parshat Vayera in which Abraham, worried that the Egyptians will kill him and seize his wife Sarah, tries to pass off Sarah as his sister in order to safeguard his own life. In the end, the ruse works: Abraham and Sarah profit from it, but the king discovers the truth and sends them on their way. What makes this story even more curious is that it happened before to Abraham and Sarah in last week's parshah, and it will happen again with Isaac and Rebecca in parshat Toldot. In all three instances, the same pattern unfolds: The claim of 'She is my sister,' an increase in wealth for the patriarch and matriarch in question, the discovery of the truth and a final departure.

From one point of view, we can see these accounts as a literary convention, three variants of a single type of story, each involving a different king (Pharoah or Avimelekh with Abraham and Sarah, Avimelekh again with Isaac and Rebecca) or a different couple (Abraham and Sarah the first two times or Isaac and Rebecca a third time). But being able to identify a common literary structure is only a first step toward asking the question of what the Torah is trying to teach us by repeating these stories.

The text does not seem to have a problem with the pretense of 'she is my sister,' or even the danger of Sarah or Rebecca being sexually compromised (which they are not, of course). In fact, it seems quite pleased with the patriarchs. What may be underneath these tales is the Torah's attempt to show us the drama of our people's origins, how a small family quickly became wealthy while escaping danger and fooling the local king. As part of our national mythology, the attributes these stories emphasize are our women's beauty, our men's cunning and the ability of the few and weak to get the better of the powerful. Like modern iterations of a 'heist' movie, these stories get us to root for people who take chances and profit from wealthy people we don't like, even when the heroes seem to act less than heroically. The Torah's emphasis is not always what we would expect as modern readers; that tells us more about how sensibilities have shifted over the centuries than the attributes the text wants us to see in Abraham and Sarah: ingenuity, daring, and faith that their efforts will ultimately result in the blessings of land and progeny promised to them by God.