

It's Been Done Before

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

One of the things about being a Jew is that no matter what you do, one of your grandfathers or grandmothers has done it already.

If you discover the truth of the one G-d and sell half the world on it -- Abraham did that. Be thrown into a fiery furnace, have your wife abducted, raise cattle, fight a war, rescue your nephew, pray for a child, have your son rebel, have him return to you, make a fortune and give it away, traverse the globe, stay home for 60 years, dig a well, farm the land, study half your life in a yeshivah, become an exile, fall in love, be cheated, work yourself to the bone, run away from your father-in-law, be the victim of sexual assault, take revenge, sell your brother into slavery, be thrown in jail, survive a famine, rule an empire -- it's been done.

In the words of Nachmanides: "Everything that happened to the Patriarchs is a signpost for their children. This is why the Torah elaborates its account of their journeys, their well-digging and the other events [of their lives]... These all come as an instruction for the future: for when something happens to one of the three Patriarchs, one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants..."

To some, this can be very frustrating. How can one ever do anything original with such ancestors?

(Which brings to mind an interesting difference between a Torah scholar and an academic scholar. Imagine an academic scholar laboring for years on a thesis only to discover that the very same arguments and proofs have been made years earlier by another scholar. It would be a catastrophe! For the Torah scholar, it would be the high point of his career and the ultimate validation of his legitimacy.)

It's good to be original. It's a blessing to be creative. (In fact, according to the Chassidic masters, the entire point of being created in your Creator's image is to be creative yourself.) But originality and creativity does not mean doing something that hasn't been done before. It means re-creating 4000 years of Jewish marriages in your marriage -- and then adding to that your own special something. It means raising your child with all the wisdom of 100 generations of Jewish parents and educators -- and enhancing that with your own unique insight. It means giving of yourself with the generosity of a million philanthropists -- and then inventing your own special brand of charity. It means facing adversary with the courage and integrity of martyrs and heroes of every era and continent -- and then achieving your own personal victory.

When embarking on your adventure, you have a choice. You can ignore the signposts, and end up doing exactly what some other hapless wanderer did sometime, somewhere else, your "originality" intact only because you never heard about that other guy. Or you can follow the signposts to a true understanding and experience of your path, which will then become your foundation and platform upon which to play your own distinct role as G-d's partner in creation.

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Parashat Lech Lecha

Shabbat Begins: 5:53 pm

Shabbat Ends: 6:52 pm