

One can go back further than the Enlightenment to find the religious struggle of how we should view the biblical hero. Nahmanides, the Spanish 12th-century exegete, contends that the Jews were punished with slavery in Egypt for 400 years because Abraham lied about his relationship to Sarah. A thousand years earlier the rabbis of the Talmud said that anyone who claimed King David was a sinner was entirely mistaken. Today, dangers of fundamentalism make us wary of whitewashing the mistakes of past and present leaders.

At the same time, present dangers of cynicism and psychobabble make us wonder if we have scraped away too much from our heroes and, in the process, lost important role models. I don't think there is a solution — other than to become sensitive and prolific readers of the Bible. The text itself does not hide from us the faults of our patriarchs (and matriarchs); it expects us to read the entire narrative and to view their mistakes as developments of character guiding the leaders to future greatness.

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Young people need heroes, or at least I did. Despite the fact that my heroes were rabbis rather than sports figures, I was a teenager looking for greatness incarnate. And luckily enough, I found it. I remember feeling sorry for the young Jewish men who had never studied at the feet of a wise scholar. Coming into contact with saintliness has the effect of stretching one's horizons.

More than twenty years later, while I still greatly respect my teachers, I must admit that I no longer idealize them. The world now seems filled with less than perfect people addressing complex problems with flawed understanding. I have discovered that no person achieves all of the human excellences. Achieving one is an enormous accomplishment. Better heroes are those whose lives are recognizable to us, whose footsteps we can actually follow, whose own flaws give us hope that as flawed as we are, we too can make a difference. The idealized Jacob or Moses I once needed would have been better guides for me if their character weaknesses and foibles were admittedly part of the mix.

Noah is called a "righteous man in his generation." Rashi tells us that some people thought that this expression enhanced his greatness, that even in that horrible generation he was good! Others thought it denigrated his achievement. Compared to the wicked people of his generation, Noah's goodness was merely better than the worst. Some say this — and others say that. I side with Rashi.

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Rabbi Schacter's concern about seeing biblical figures in their full human dimension — in particular, their "human faults errors and weaknesses" — puzzles me. Biblical characters have faults and struggle with failures. The "too human" qualities we see are not a diminution of character but rather an opportunity to send an important theological message.

ודע כי אברהם אבינו חטא חטא גדול בשגגה.
רמב"ן על התורה בראשית יב:

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin . . .

Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, Genesis 12:10.

The 19th-century German Jewish scholar and communal leader, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, wrote: "The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men." He explains, "By the knowledge ... of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no ways made lesser but actually greater and more instructive." (*Commentary on the Torah, Gen. 12:10*)

But is there not a danger here in seeing the biblical figures as *too* human? Once the pedestal is toppled, is it not possible that the story of their lives will become equally irrelevant to us? If they too are subject to human faults, errors, and weaknesses, why be interested in their experiences at all? Is not the 20th-century Torah giant, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, correct in insisting that "The holy forefathers ... were the most luminous, loftiest, and purest personalities, the holiest creatures. [We] dare not tamper with their luminous and holy image"?

In short, how does one maintain appropriate respect for the greats of our people while striving to see their behavior as models for our own?

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In his 1956 essay "Biblical Leadership," Martin Buber interprets the two renditions of the creation story. The first, he writes, concerns the creation of nature, and the second concerns the creation of history. God is responsible for both creations, giving God license to change the course of both history and nature.

Although in nature the stronger rule, again and again the Bible teaches that the weak or younger sibling is chosen to rule or carry on the family line. This leadership, contrary to the usual practices of history, demonstrates a theological statement: God, who created both man and history, can thrust His hand in and change the course of His creation.

To claim, as Rabbi Kotler does, that our forefathers were "the most luminous, loftiest and purest" not only denies them the ability to be weak or fail, but even more seriously, it denies weakness and thereby denies God His heroic role of thrusting His hand and changing the course of His creation.

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*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."