

BOOK REVIEW

The Ethics of Genesis, Rabbi Dr. Abba Engelberg, New York: Kodesh Press, 2014, 313 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

This book deals with various questions, primarily ethical, that arise when reading the Book of Genesis. The questions are those which a thoughtful adult may wonder about while reading the weekly portion, yet are generally not addressed by those classical commentaries who focus on a localized, verse by verse explanation of the text. These questions include: How can a blessing be effective if it is bestowed on the wrong person? How could the brothers have been so brutal towards Joseph? Why are only two women listed among the seventy members of Jacob's family who entered Egypt? Did Jacob ever find out the truth about the sale of Joseph? Answers to these questions are not readily available in a short comment by Rashi, for example, and the author provides a chapter long discussion to cover all aspects of each of these issues. The author puts together his approach based on traditional sources, from the Talmud and Midrash through contemporary rabbis such as Yaakov Medan, Avigdor Nebenzahl and Jonathan Sacks.

Although the author uses many and varied sources to create a complete approach to each issue he deals with, it is when he proposes his own ideas that the book is most interesting and thought provoking. For example, when dealing with the question of whether innocent people were killed in the Flood, the author suggests that this may very well have been the case, because if only the sinful adults were killed and all the innocent children remained alive, there would have been a need for a long term miracle as a mechanism for looking after and providing for them, something God does not generally do (p. 46). He explains that there are a number of instances in the Bible "in which innocents were included in a decree of total destruction", such as the idolatrous city (*ir nidahat*) of Deuteronomy 13:13-19, especially according to the commentary *Migdal Oz* which the author cites (p. 48). It is only in the World to Come that true justice exists.

In another bold interpretation, the author proposes (expanding an idea published by Malcom Schrader in an article in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32:4,

Simcha Rosenberg is an educator living in Gush Etzion, Israel. He teaches Tanakh in many post high-school programs in Jerusalem.

2014) that the true test of the Akeida was whether Abraham would challenge God's unethical demand of human sacrifice, a test that Abraham actually failed. The author suggests that Abraham "thought there might be a valid reason, which he himself was unaware of, for Isaac to be punished" (p. 74). While Abraham is commended for deferring to God's omniscience, still, as Rav Kook states in *Mussar ha-Kodesh*, "it is forbidden to permit fear of God to overshadow moral values, for then the fear of God is impure" (p. 77).

The book concludes with a number of chapters dealing with matters that arise from reading the totality of the Genesis narratives, and are not confined to one particular Torah portion. These include a chapter on the Jewish work ethic as presented in the Bible, with particular emphasis on the propriety of devoting oneself exclusively to Torah study, and another chapter on whether there is a commandment to live in Israel.

Who is this book meant for? On the one hand, the book seems to be geared towards beginners, as the Introduction explains the concept of *parashat hashavua* as well as providing a short review of the contents of each portion, and the cover art is a cute painting of Rebecca giving water to the camels at the well. On the other hand, the questions the author deals with involve serious ethical, moral, and theological issues based on a very mature reading of the Bible. It would seem that the book is most appropriate for a reader of the English language, perhaps looking at the Bible anew with fresh eyes, who is looking for a way to understand the deeper issues and broader questions behind the narratives in Genesis.