

5. Loyalty and love

The fifth principle becomes apparent as soon as we notice a strange feature of the book of Genesis. We normally think of Judaism as Abrahamic monotheism, and monotheism itself as a rejection of and protest against the polytheism of the ancient world. Yet Genesis contains not a single polemic against idolatry. Other than an obscure reference to Rachel stealing her father's *terafim*, "household gods" or "fetishes" (Gen. 31:19), there is not even one mention of it. Yet there is no doubt that the story of Genesis from chapter 12 to the end is about a single and singular family that lives differently from the nations and cultures that surround it. Of what does this difference consist?

There is a connecting theme. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves the matrix of the family, he or she encounters a world of sexual anomie. Three times Abraham and Isaac are forced to leave home because of famine and on each occasion feel themselves to be in danger of their lives. They will be killed so that their wives can be taken into the royal harem (Gen. 12, 20, 26). When two strangers, who turn out to be angels, visit Lot in Sodom, the people of the town surround Lot's house demanding that he bring them out for the purpose of homosexual rape. When Dina goes out to visit Shechem, she is abducted and raped by the local prince. When Joseph, in Egypt, is left alone with his master's wife, she attempts to seduce him and when he resists has him imprisoned on a false charge of rape.

Even the members of Abraham's family themselves become corrupted when they live among the people. Lot's daughters get their father drunk and have an incestuous relationship with him. Judah, who has left his brothers to live among the Canaanites, feels no qualms about having sex with a woman he takes to be a prostitute.

A truly remarkable idea is being formulated here: that there is a connection between idolatry and sexual lawlessness. And there is a corollary principle about the Abrahamic faith, that the relationship between God and humanity, and specifically between God and the people of the covenant, is one of love – love moralised, love as deed, love as commitment and mutual obligation. The biblical word *emuna*, usually translated as "faith," does not mean this at all. It is not a cognitive attribute, meaning something you believe to be true. It belongs to an entirely different

sphere of discourse. It is a moral attribute and means *faithfulness*, as in a marriage. Faith in the Hebrew Bible is the story of a love – the love of God for creation, for humanity, and for a particular family, the children of Abraham, a love full of passion but one that is not always, or even often, reciprocated. Sometimes, as in the Mosaic books, it is described like the relationship between a parent and a child. At other times, particularly in the prophetic literature, it is envisaged as the love between a husband and an often faithless wife. But it is never less than love.

Judaism was the first moral system to place interpersonal love at the centre of the moral life: love of God “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5), love of “your neighbour as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), and love of the stranger because “you know what it feels like to be a stranger” (Ex. 23:9). This was later adopted by Christianity and remains a distinctive element of the Judaeo-Christian ethic. All moral systems have at their heart a principle of justice, or reciprocal altruism: do as you would be done by. But love is something different and more demanding.

Hence the fundamental importance of sexual ethics in Judaism, and of the sanctity of marriage and the family as the matrix of society and the place where children are inducted into the moral life. This is announced early in the biblical story. In the only place where the Torah states why Abraham was chosen, it says, “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Gen. 18:19). Hence also the significance of circumcision as the sign of the covenant, as if to say that holiness has a direct connection with the way we conduct our sexual relations. It seems that the Torah sees the Darwinian drive to pass on one’s genes to the next generation, and with it the phenomenon of the alpha male who dominates access to females, as one of the prime causes of violence within a society. Judaism is as much about the moralisation of sex as it is about the moralisation of power, and the two are connected.