

## Genesis 12:1-9

Today's reading is seen as a hinge in the narrative, leaving behind the primeval history and launching the patriarchal narrative of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and finally Joseph. If you go back to the last little bit of Chapter 11, right before this reading, it becomes more clear that the hinge begins with loss and grief.

The end of Chapter 11 tells us that Abram had two brothers, Nahor and Haran, and that Haran died before their father Terah did, when the whole family was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, their ancestral home. Terah took his remaining two sons and Haran's son Lot, and headed out toward the land of Canaan, but when they got to a place called Haran, they stopped and settled there. Perhaps I'm reading a lot into this, but it when I think of the terrible grief of a parent whose child dies before they should, it strikes me that arriving in a place that bears the same name as that child might really just end the journey. It's as if Terah had tried to make this move to Canaan but once in Haran, couldn't leave. The family settled there, including Abram and his barren wife Sarai, interrupted and immobilized.

After Terah died, our reading commences with God speaking to Abram and telling him to set out again. But now it feels heavier, like loss upon loss. To go from your kinfolk and your familiar place is a big deal for anybody, and bigger in their culture. To go from your kinfolk after losing your brother and your father is even bigger—you will never visit their graves again, never run into neighbors who knew them and can speak of them. God is asking Abram and Sarai to lose parts of themselves as they begin this journey. The covenant that God makes with them is that God will make of them a great nation and make them be a blessing to the rest of the world. But they begin the covenant journey in grief and loss. And also, with Sarai's barrenness,

absolutely no reason to think that they have the potential to become a “great nation.”

Pondering this position—being charged with becoming a blessing to the world while still reeling from loss, and the prospect of greater loss as they leave Haran—I had to think about how we position ourselves to become a blessing to others. The Ethicist column in the *New York Times* had a question the other day from a law student who has incurred big school debts and has to take those debts into consideration while looking for employment.

*I come from a working-class family. I have worked very hard in school and graduated college with little debt, so when I was given the opportunity to attend an elite law school, I took it — along with a \$150,000 price tag. . .*

*While I entered law school hoping to work in the public interest, I now face the reality of paying back my loans. I took an internship at a big law firm where I am paid very well, and I’ve been invited to work for them once I graduate. The salary would be enough for me to pay off my loans, help my family and establish a basic standard of living for myself — plus maybe own a house or even save for retirement, which would be impossible for me on a public-interest or government salary.*

*But the firm’s work entails defending large corporations that I’m ethically opposed to, including many polluters and companies that I feel are making the apocalyptic climate situation even worse. Even if I only stay at the firm for a short time to pay off my loans, I would be helping in these efforts for some time.*

*I know it is selfish to take this corporate job. But is it unforgivable? Will defending polluters, even for a short time in a junior position, be a permanent black mark on my life? Name Withheld<sup>i</sup>*

Such a terrible and familiar quandary, isn’t it? In order to become a blessing to the world, this person incurred so much debt that they can only hope to pay it off by working for the enemy.

The ethicist, Kwame Anthony Appiah, who teaches philosophy at NYU, is someone I’ve read and admire very much. His answer was gentle and nuanced, pointing out that corporations need lawyers who are competent and morally astute, and that there might be opportunities to mitigate harm. But then he also suggested that by making a ton of money the

letter-writer might be able to give more money to good causes and have more of an effect than if they'd worked directly for the good causes, which strikes me as a really difficult calculation to make in real life. Anyway, he had some other points, but the upshot was that it is indeed possible for this potential lawyer to work for the evil corporations and still do good.

I bring this up because that idea of making a ton of money and giving it to agents who will mitigate the damage of one's own work is such a classic excuse! It's like the robber barons during the Gilded Age financing the building of churches as "fire insurance." It's so flimsy! And yet it's also the reality of so many of God's people, enmeshed in systems that curse, unable to extricate ourselves, and yearning to be a blessing. I want to save the earth too. But I can't figure out how also to maintain my health and well-being without driving around in a car on the regular. What to do?

Abram and Sarai, fresh off of some family losses and now saying goodbye to their community, head off toward Canaan. And you and I know that when their descendants finally get there, there will already be Canaanites living in that land. The last thing on Joshua's mind as he invades Canaan and marches around the walls of Jericho is how to be a blessing to the Canaanites. We ourselves are all too familiar with the price that indigenous Americans paid when Europeans arrived in what they thought was the promised land. As we watch the ritual around Queen Elizabeth's death, we see the people of former British colonies wrestle with the wounds of colonialism.

Rabbi Amy Robertson says that when you find something in the Bible that is awful, you can't change it. It's already there. You don't get to monkey with the text. But you can go wherever in the world the same thing is happening, and do what is better. So there's that. But

it's also the case that Abram and Sarai were sent out to be a blessing to the whole world, and in fact, our calling is often lived out among people with whom the calling is going to be a real challenge, in situations in which the calling is a real challenge. It may be a feature in God's eyes, not a bug. And I will say that despite what the book of Joshua says about exterminating the Canaanites, the book of Judges suggests more plausibly that Israel lived among them, intermarried, sometimes squabbled and sometimes managed to wrestle blessings for everybody out of the whole messy situation. Again, I refer you to the story of Ruth, which although fictional, is clearly a reflection on the experience of internal diversity.

I was interested in the Ethicist column question because there really was no satisfactory answer. The calculus of harms versus benefits is really too subtle, unpredictable, and ambiguous to be able to perform or quantify. Some ethical questions are hard because it's hard to do the right thing, but here it's just hard to figure out what the right thing to do is, and once you've made the decision, a thousand more decisions will flow from that first one. I will say that the position of opposing student debt forgiveness because so many of us had to pay off our entire debts does not seem like a faithful position.

Nothing is clear except that we who see ourselves as descendants of Abram and Sarai are always called to be a blessing. They started their covenant journey fresh off of some losses, and the journey itself meant the loss of community. But when three strangers came to their tents at Mamre, they did not turn them away bitterly because they'd been robbed of community; they welcomed them and made little cakes and killed a calf, and never knew till nine months later that they had entertained angels. To be a blessing is to incorporate our sorrows and injuries into our hopes, to take them as injuries that everybody needs healed, and

to make the wager that God's intentions for each of us and all of us will be fulfilled in generosity, not in fairness.

Let us pray: God of covenant, you promised Abraham land, descendants, and blessing so that he might be a blessing for all. Show us how to honor the covenant, so that we might be a blessing to others. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/06/magazine/law-firm-job-ethics.html>