

SHEPHERDING AS A METAPHOR

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Why does the Bible specifically indicate the shepherding occupation of so many biblical figures? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob are all described in the Bible as shepherds. Jacob's sons give shepherding as their occupation and that of their forefathers (Gen. 47:3). Later, Moses and David are also denoted as shepherds. While it is true that shepherding is an appropriate occupation for the nomadic Patriarchs, what message does the Bible convey by pointing out this fact?

Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Neriah mentions the merits of shepherding in his comments to the verse, *Three times a year – on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Booths – all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed* (Deut. 16:16). He cites TB *Hagigah* 3a, "Rava expounded: What is the meaning of the verse: *How lovely are your feet in sandals, O daughter of nobles!* (Song of Songs 7:2). [It means:] How comely are the feet of Israel when they go up on the festival pilgrimage." Rabbi Neriah writes, "The beauty that accompanied the soles of the feet included . . . *O fairest of women, Go follow the tracks of the sheep* (Song of Songs 1:8) – go and walk in the footsteps of your holy forefathers (*kodashim* or *kedoshim*?) who went and walked there with their sheep."¹

R. Neriah explains that shepherding is considered a lofty occupation because it was that of the biblical forefathers. However, this does not explain why they were shepherds in the first place. With all the occupations available, why choose this one, and why point it out in the Bible? Keeping sheep was known as a job for an ignoramus – a young boy and a dog could undertake it. Biblical commentators write of shepherding as a task leading to solitude and contemplation,² thus making it an appropriate lifestyle for a religious individual. I think there is another reason why the Bible points out that many biblical heroes were shepherds.

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The standard midrashic explanation for Moses and David being shepherds is that taking care of sheep was a prelude and, in a way, a training ground for leading the Israelites. *Exodus Rabbah* (2:2) presents God observing the leadership capabilities of both Moses and David through their shepherding skills. Regarding Moses, the Midrash famously tells how a little lamb ran away while he was tending Jethro's flock. Moses chased after the lamb and found it drinking at a spring. He then exclaimed, "I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty! You must be tired." He then lifted the little lamb and carried it on his shoulders back to the flock. Owing to this display of compassion, God declared, "Since you have mercy while leading sheep of flesh and blood, then by your life, you shall also shepherd My sheep, Israel." Similarly, regarding David, the Midrash states that he kept the big sheep penned and let the little ones graze first, allowing them to eat the softer vegetation. Next, he released the old sheep to graze on the medium vegetation, and finally the strongest sheep were released to graze on the toughest vegetation. God then declared, "Whoever knows how to take care of sheep, each one according to its strength, he is the one who shall come and shepherd My people."

The connection between leadership and shepherding is also made in *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Beshalah*, 15), where many parallels are listed between the way God and Moses looked after the Israelites. For example, a shepherd takes care of his sheep even if they run off, just as God and Moses did not abandon the Israelites during the forty years of wandering in the desert, despite their constant complaints and rebelliousness.

While this midrashic understanding of the significance of shepherding applies to Moses and David, leaders of the nation, and even to the Patriarchs who can be seen as the leaders of all future generations of Israelites, it does not take into account the very first case of a shepherd mentioned in the Bible, namely, Abel. He is by no means a leader, and in fact the Bible explicitly states that he *also brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock* (Gen. 4:4), following the lead of his older brother Cain, who had brought God an offering *of the fruit of the soil*. I suggest that Abel, the first shepherd, is in fact the archetypal biblical shepherd and the key to understanding the significance of this occupation.

The Bible records Moses saying to the wicked Pharaoh, *'You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the Lord our God; our own livestock, too, shall go along with us – not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of the Lord our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there'* (Ex. 10:25-26). From this we see that the standard mode of Israelite worship was through animal sacrifice. Throughout the Bible we find that the Israelites were deeply involved with sacrifices, for example: *Saul answered, 'They were brought from the Amalekites, for the troops spared the choicest of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to the Lord your God. And we proscribed the rest'* (I Sam. 15:15).

This form of worship was already established with Cain and Abel, where the shepherd's animal sacrifice is accepted and the farmer's offering is rejected (Gen. 4:3-5). Although it is specifically noted that Abel brought *the choicest of the firstlings of his flock* (Gen. 4:4), implying that the vegetable sacrifice was rejected because it did not represent the best Cain had to offer, the fact is that after this episode burnt offerings became the main form of sacrificial service. Animal sacrifice was performed by Noah upon exiting the Ark (Gen. 8:20); and it continued with Abraham and his descendants. It should be noted that animal sacrifice is not the only valid form of sacrificial service. The Bible also refers to meal offerings and libations of wine and oil. However, the very first sacrifice ever accepted in the Bible was an animal brought by a shepherd.

From the first sacrifice reported in the Bible, the shepherd's offering is considered the appropriate one, thus validating that occupation in the context of bringing the correct sacrifice. Emphasizing that many biblical heroes were shepherds is, fundamentally, a way of categorizing them as holy – individuals who were, in practice, capable of bringing the right kind of offering to God.

NOTES

1. *Ner la-Ma'or* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sefarim, 2012) p. 436.
2. "Abel chose shepherding sheep, which leads to solitude [*hitbodedut*], as did many prophets such as Moses, David and their like, in order to offer from them a sacrifice to God" (*Keli Yakar* on Genesis 4:3).