

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [228]

Three Persons Requested Three Things Themselves, and the Three Started with Them ("Be careful What You Wish for!")

Insights into Midrash Tanhuma (Buber Edition) Chaie Sarah 10:5

See also: Bava Metzia 87a

Background to Our Story

Patriarchs



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarchs_\(Bible\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarchs_(Bible))

The patriarchs (Hebrew: אבות, - *Avot*) of the Bible, when narrowly defined, are Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, also named Israel, the ancestor of the Israelites. These three figures are referred to collectively as the patriarchs of Judaism, and the period in which they lived is known as the patriarchal age. They play significant roles in Hebrew scripture during and following their lifetimes.

The Generation of the Flood

The Lord said to Noah: The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the Earth is full of violence on account of them. I am prepared to destroy them with the Earth. (Genesis 6:13)

Rashi explains that the generation of the Flood was guilty of three crimes. The people had adopted idol worship. They had abandoned all parameters of proper sexual conduct and even incestuous relationships were common. Finally, theft accomplished by force and violence was common.

The Text: Midrash Tanhuma (Buber Edition) Chaie Sarah 10:5

English Translation by Rabbi Manes Kogan

ואברהם זקן. שלשה בני אדם תבעו שלשה דברים בפיהם, ומהם התחילו תחילה.

אברהם תבע הזקנה, אמר אברהם אב ובנו נכנסין לעיר ואינן ניכרין איזהו הגדול ואיזהו הקטן, אמר הקבה אתה תבעת זקנה בפך, חייך בך אני מתחיל, שנאמר ואברהם זקן.

יצחק תבע יסורין, אמר יצחק לפני הקבה רבונו של עולם אדם חוטא ואתה פורע ממנו בבת אחת, יסרו קימעא קימעא ואתה פורע ממנו, אילו הבאת יסורין על דור המבול לא היו מורדין בך אלא השפעת להם שלוה לכך מרדו בך, שנאמר ישליו אהלים לשודדים ובטוחות למרגיזי אל (איוב יב), אמר לו הקבה אתה תבעת יסורין בפיך חייך ממך אני מתחיל, שנאמר ויהי כי זקן יצחק [ותכהין עיניו מראות] (בראשית כז א).

יעקב תבע את החולי, אמר יעקב לפני הקבה רבונו של עולם אדם יושב בנחת ונפשו יוצאה ונכנס תחרות לעולם, על זו מתבקש לאדם בידי אחרים, או אחרים מתבקש להם בידו, והוא מת פתאום ותחרות נעשה בעולם, אלא יעשה [אדם חולה] חמשה או ששה ימים עד שיצוה לבניו כל מה שהוא צריך ויסתלק מן העולם, אמר לו הקבה יעקב תבעת את החולי, חייך ממך אני מתחיל, שנאמר ויהי אחר הדברים האלה (ויגד) [ויאמר] ליוסף הנה אביך חלה (בראשית מח א).

הוי שלשת האבות התקינו שלשה דברים הללו, לכך נאמר ואברהם זקן

Three persons requested three things, themselves, and the three things which they requested began with each of them.

Abraham requested that old age enter the world.

Abraham said [to God]: a father and his son enter town and nobody can recognize who is the younger and who is the older!

The Holy One Blessed Be He said [to Abraham]: you yourself requested old age, I swear that I will begin with you; as it is said (Genesis 24:1): *"Abraham was now very old..."*

Isaac requested that suffering enter the world.

Isaac said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He: Master of the Universe. [When] a man sins, you exact retribution from him all at once.

Make him suffer little by little and this will be his retribution. Had you brought suffering to the generation of the flood they would not have rebelled against you; but you had bestowed tranquility upon them and because of that they rebelled, as it is said (Job 12:6): *"But robbers are left in peace, and those who provoke God live in safety."*

The Holy One Blessed Be He said [to Isaac]: you yourself requested suffering, I swear that I will begin with you, as it is said (Genesis 27:1): *"Now it came about, when Isaac was old, and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see."*

Jacob requested that illness enter the world.

Jacob said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He: Master of the Universe, a man is sitting tranquil, and [suddenly] his soul departs and dispute enters the world; [because] people may have claims about something belonging to them that was in his hand, or he might have claims from people about something (owed to him) that was in their hands. And he dies suddenly and dispute enters the world.

Let man become sick for five or six days until he instructs his children about everything he needs and then he can depart from the world.

The Holy One Blessed Be He said: Jacob, you requested illness, I swear that I will begin with you, as it is said (Genesis 48:1): "*Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is sick."*



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Abraham request for old age to enter the world?

? Why did Isaac request for suffering to enter the world?

? Why did Jacob request for illness to enter the world?

Bonus ? Why did God acquiesce to their requests?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What do these three things have in common?

? What do you think was the reaction of the Patriarchs to God putting their requests on them first?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Do you have good ideas, powerful dreams, strong beliefs? You must "own them" first, before you can share them with the world!

EPILOGUE

Our beloved Patriarchs diligently explained to God that Old age, suffering, and illness have a role in the world and subsequently requested that these three necessary evils become part of the human experience. God acquiesced to the Patriarchs' petition but forced them to "own" their requests. In other words, God doesn't tolerate a NIMBY* attitude.

*NIMBY (an [acronym](#) for the phrase "Not In My Back Yard") is a [pejorative](#) characterization of opposition by residents to a proposal for a new development because it is close to them (or, in some cases, because the development involves controversial or potentially dangerous technology) often with the connotation that such residents believe that the developments are needed in society but should be further away.

Examples of projects likely to be opposed include any sort of [housing development](#), [bicycle](#) and [pedestrian infrastructure](#), [skyscrapers](#), [homeless shelters](#), [oil wells](#), [chemical plants](#), [industrial parks](#), [military bases](#), [fracking](#), [wind turbines](#), [desalination plants](#), [landfill sites](#), [incinerators](#), [power plants](#), [quarries](#), [prisons](#), [pubs](#), [adult entertainment clubs](#), [concert venues](#), [firearms dealers](#), [mobile phone masts](#), [electricity pylons](#), [abortion clinics](#), [children's homes](#), [nursing homes](#), [youth hostels](#), [sports stadiums](#), [shopping malls](#), [retail parks](#), [railways](#), [roads](#), [airports](#), [seaports](#), [nuclear waste repositories](#), [storage for weapons of mass destruction](#), [cannabis dispensaries](#) and [recreational cannabis shops](#).

The NIMBY concept may also be applied to people who advocate some proposal (e.g., budget cuts, tax increases, layoffs, immigration or energy conservation) but oppose implementing it in a way that might affect their lives or require any sacrifice on their part.