

Parashat Lech Lecha

Origins of faith

Our Parasha opens with a colossal vacuum, a bewildering omission. God speaks to the elderly Avraham (he is 75 years old) commanding him to follow Him to a new undesignated land in order to found a new nation. But we know nothing of Avraham's personal past. We all want to know: Why Avraham? What makes Avraham "The One?" How did he gain this unique position in History? What act made him worthy, what?

The world of Midrash has elicited a selection of responses to this question. Many of us are familiar with the story of Avraham finding God via his own intelligence, or smashing his father's idols, Avraham and the fiery furnace. There is virtually no Jewish schoolchild who has not heard these stories¹. (After all, granting legitimacy to child rebellion against parents has to be a wonderfully attractive theme to children!)

ABRAHAM'S MIDRASHIC PERSONALITY

Here are a few tastes of the Midrashic views about Avraham²:

"After Avraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: **"How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself."** He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had attained the way of truth,

¹ I am going to avoid the question as to the historical veracity of these Midrashim. I think there are certainly a variety of possibilities regarding these Rabbinic texts:

a.) They could be historically true. Maybe they come from a Torah Sheb'al Peh Midrashic tradition – a Midrash LeMoshe Misinai. The story of Avraham and the idols is mentioned rather casually by the apocryphal Sefer HaYovlim. That book dates between 2-4 Cent BCE. In other words, well before the written formulation of Rabbinic Midrash, this story was alive and well. And so, there is a distinct possibility that these stories are true and part of a tradition handed through the generations.

b.) They could be stories created and designed to make a metaphorical point, an exegetical or philosophical idea regarding the person/story at hand. In that case, this is an early method of Rabbinic biblical commentary. And seen according with this option, we must take these stories seriously, examining their message and form as we would any Rabbinic text.

And so, in the final analysis, the historicity of these books is not the central issue. We have a duty to uncover their meaning. For an example of the second approach, see Rav Medan's shiur (next footnote!)

² For some in-depth shiurim on these Midrashim, see: Rav Medan - <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/02-65noach.htm>

Rav Amnon Bazak - <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.64/03lekh.htm>

apprehended the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him. He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Avraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, arguing with them and saying to them, "The course you are following is not the way of truth." He broke the images and commenced to instruct the people that it was not right to serve any one but the God of the universe" (Rambam Laws of Idolatry ch.1)

Our second Midrashic approach is from Midrash Rabba:

"Rabbi Hiya bar Beriya said in the name of Rav Ada of Yaffo: Terach was an idolater [idol merchant]. Once he went off to a certain place, and he left Avraham as shopkeeper in his stead. A person came who wished to buy [an idol]. [Avraham] said to him: 'How old are you?' The man replied, 'Fifty,' or 'sixty.' Avraham said: 'Woe to this man, who is sixty years old, and he must serve an idol created just yesterday!' [The man] was ashamed, and went away. Another time a woman came, bringing a bowl of meal. She said to him, 'Take this; offer it to the idols.' [Avraham] got up, took a hammer, smashed all the idols and placed the hammer in the hand of the biggest of them. When his father returned, he asked: 'Who did this to them?' [Avraham] answered, 'A woman came and brought them a bowl of meal; she told me to offer it before them. I offered it before them, and one said: 'I shall eat first,' then another said, 'I shall eat first.' The biggest among them got up, took a hammer, and smashed them.' [His father] said, 'What nonsense are you telling me – do they then have any understanding?' [Avraham] answered, 'Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?!'" Bereishit Rabba (38:13)

According to the Midrash, Avraham's views are self-developed, a product of a thought process that began as a young boy and came to fruition at age forty! He looks at nature, at the world and seeks to find a system a unified cause, and he emerges with the belief in God.

Now, if we look to the personality of Avraham in each of these texts, we can discern certain key characteristics. Avraham is a steadfast believer in God and rejects idolatry. He uses pure logic, rational thought³. He is not satisfied with

³ In the Rambam, it is fascinating the manner in which he maps out the history of belief in God. The Ramban assumes that Adam and his descendents believed in and served God faithfully. At a certain point they said:

"Since God," they said, "created these stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted to them honour, and since they are ministers who minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honour should be rendered them; and it is the will of God, blessed be He, that men should aggrandize and honour those whom He aggrandized and honoured" When this idea arose in their minds, they began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech, and prostrated themselves before them—their purpose,

keeping his views to himself, but engages all around him in debate attempting to prove to them that idolatry is absurd and only monotheism is logical. And we reach the point at which Avraham is a rebel, an insurgent against commonly held views. He uses the power of logical reasoning – precisely the method with which he "found" God – in order to convince all those around him.

The big question at the start of Lech Lecha is: Why did God choose Avraham? These Midrashim express the answer: **God didn't find Avraham; Avraham found God!** But we can take this further still. God's command that Avraham leave his "land, birthplace and father's home" was a mere formality. For in the Midrashic mindset, Avraham had left his parental home, his society and his country long before. He confronted his **parents** by smashing the idols, his fellow **townsfolk** by debating with them and even the **king**, the figurehead of his Land.

And so, the Midrash aims to answer the question. Avraham found God! God's calling Avraham was not a surprise; it was a relief.

RESTATING THE PROBLEM.

We have attempted to answer the problem, and yet, I believe that we have merely intensified the mystery. For if these stories represent Avraham's history, his path to faith; his passionate and determined search for God, his persistence and dedication in his resolute stand against his environment, his steadfast belief in truth, his fearlessness in the face of outside threats and internal loneliness, then we simply compound the problem. Of course the Torah should have told us this story! Why does the Torah deny us this information? Of all the personalities in the Torah, we generally receive some background to their persona. With Avraham we have a total blackout. If his history is so important, so exciting and rich, then why are we denied this history?

I shall offer two possible answers.

1. THE INDIVIDUAL PATH OF FAITH

If the Midrashic account is correct, that Avraham speculated and searched, contemplated and thought, and eventually carved his own route to the discovery of God, the Master of the Universe, if that is a living example for us all, then what is the danger of the Torah writing such a thing?

I can well imagine that had the Torah recorded such a story, we would end up with a section of Shulkhan Arukh that would read something like:

a. At age three a child must look at the sun and say "Is this the power that controls the world?"

according to their perverse notions, being to obtain the Creator's favour. This was the root of idolatry"

In other words Idolatry began with good intentions. By a logical argument: the Sun is God's agent and hence I should worship it too! People began to worship the Sun independently. Note then how the Rambam sees Avraham as **taking precisely the inverse route**. He says – there must be something that propels the solar system, the globe and everything around it. And he understands that these cosmic phenomena are merely powers instilled by the Creator. For the Rambam, this also mirrors his own proof of God (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 1:1-6) So for the Rambam, Avraham's "discovery" is far from new, and in fact is a perfect logical response to the errors of the idolaters!

b. The selfsame evening, the child must then behold the moon and recite: "Far from it! The moon has superceded the sun, and hence the moon is more powerful."

Etc. etc.

In other words, if we knew Avraham's route to faith, had the Torah recorded his theological journey for posterity, then we might find ourselves bound to follow his path – but precisely, exactly! Step by step; stage by stage!

And this danger is greater than the absence of a record of Abraham's History, for "as their faces differ; so no two people have the same ideas."⁴ And hence, inevitably each and every individual must carve out his or her own personal path to God. If Avraham teaches us something, it is his unrelenting faith in God, following God even when his current circumstances make those promises seem absurd, illogical. Avraham follows God under the promise of his becoming a great nation, even though his aging wife has no children. Avraham walks to Canaan despite the fact that he does not yet know where he is headed. In order to generate that degree of faith, of relationship with the Almighty, each and every individual must forge his or her own personal unique dialogue with God. And for that, Avraham's Way is useless. I must find my own channel, my unique avenue, my personal mode of communication and belief, of interaction and relationship. Avraham's lesson is to find God – your way!

2. PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE

"Abraham, the great knight of faith, according to tradition searched and discovered God in the star-lit heavens of Mesopotamia. Yet, he felt an intense loneliness and could not find solace in the silent companionship of God whose image was reflected in the boundless stretches of the cosmos. Only when he met God on earth as Father, Brother and Friend – not only on the uncharted astral routes – did he feel redeemed. Our sages said⁵ that before Abraham appeared *majestas dei* was reflected only by the distant heavens and it was a mute nature which "spoke" of the glory of God. It was Abraham who "crowned" Him as the God of the earth i.e. the God of men." (Lonely Man of Faith –Tradition edition pg.32)

In this wonderful piece by Rav Soloveitchik, we read of two dimensions of the God-man experience. One can perceive of God in intellectual terms. That gives you a certain perception of God, but it is distant and impersonal. Rav Soloveitchik talks of the "Covenantal man of faith" as "craving for a personal and intimate relation with God."

There is a dimension of the man-God interaction that rests in the realm of experience, not cognition, of two-way relationship, rather than independent contemplation and thought.

This is a theme brought in the Kuzari where he rejects Faith based in philosophical contemplation and proof. He labels this type of belief as the "God of Aristotle" and he rejects it. For the Kuzari, the only genuine type of faith relationship is when one **experiences** God, when one senses and feels the Almighty, when God involves Himself in our lives. This, he

⁴ Berachot 18a

⁵ **בראשית רבה פרשה נט** ואשביעך בה' אלהי השמים איך פינחס עד שלא הודעתי אותו לבריותי אלהי השמים, וכיון שהודעתי אותו לבריותי אלהי הארץ

entitles the "God of Abraham." Abraham who shares an intimate relationship with God as in our parsha where we see God's delicate concern and worry for Avraham as he listens to Avraham's woes and fears reassuring him with a gentle: "Do not fear Avram, I will protect you⁶;" where in our parsha, Avraham is told, "Walk before me in perfection and I will make a covenant between Myself and you⁷." Avraham and God from the first moment of "Lech Lecha" walk together! It is a living, breathing, interactive relationship with God.

When does God emerge from the shadows in order to build this mode of relationship with Avraham? I would think that it is the moment that God actually addresses Avraham, when Avraham begins to act together with God, responding to His call, interacting with Him. In this perspective then, the command of "Lech Lecha" is THE watershed moment in which God transformed from being distant to close, from anonymity to familiarity. It is the critical beginning of the relationship. **That moment that Avraham hears the words: "Lech Lecha" is the start of his living experience of God.**

For Rav Soloveitchik, we are uninterested in the story prior to the great moment of God's revelation to Avraham. Why transcribe the perception of the inanimate, remote, distant deity of Abraham's theoretical postulations, his philosophical meanderings? No! **We begin Abraham's history at the moment that he begins to experience the true God relationship; the intimacy of God. That is the beginning of the story.**

But how does the story continue?

The story unfolds with a steady interaction between Avraham and God, in which God responds to Avraham's concerns about his future and reassures him time after time.

Let us explain.

ZERA AND ARETZ

At the very moment at which Avraham fulfils God's initial command, arriving at his destination, Eretz Canaan, God informs him:

"To your seed will I give this land" (12:7)

Here is a promise of offspring and the bestowing of territory.

And yet, virtually everything that transpires in the parsha undermines that promise, that pledge. Even before we have heard the promise of ZERA, we know that "Sarai is barren, without child." (11:28) This double statement drives home the improbability, or rather the impossibility of Sarah bearing children. Under these conditions, ZERA is something of a cruel tease. Likewise, ARETZ. The same verse states: And Avram arrived in the land ... and the Canaanites were in the Land." In other words, the land is already fully populated. This is not a wide open empty colony, an empty expanse waiting to be settled and civilised. This land already has a name – Canaan – which indicates the people who reside in it. What will be with the promise of ARETZ?

Likewise the stories that follow:

Ch.12 – the famine – is the land habitable?

Ch.12 – Sarai is taken by Pharaoh. Without a wife, where is the promise of "zera?"

Ch.13 – Lot (who is Avraham's heir and possible "zera") abandons him and the Land of Canaan.)

Ch.13 – God reinforces and repeats the promise "all the land which you see, I will grant it to you and your offspring"

Ch.14 – a land ravaged by international invasion and warfare

What is Avraham to think of his promises? All the evidence, every episode seems to make God's promises seem more improbable; a mere fantasy.

In Chapter 15, Avraham voices his doubts to God:

"O Lord God, what can you give me seeing that I shall die childless? And the one in charge of my household is Eliezer of Damascus! Avraham said further: You have not given me offspring, will my steward become my heir?" (15:2-3)

The repetition gives us a sense of Avraham's exasperation!

A few verses on, Avraham challenges the second promise, the promise of the Land:

"O Lord God, how shall I know that I shall possess it?" (15:8)

In other words, Avraham can talk to God. He can voice his fears and concerns to the Almighty. And in both instances, God moves to reassure Avraham that the promises will come to fruition.

How does God respond to Avraham's inner fears? How is God depicted in this text? He is portrayed as responsive and caring. God acts with utmost immediacy, almost, if we can talk of God in such terms, seemingly to rush to Avraham's side and allay his fears. There is an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness, of care and love between God and Avraham. But what does God say? How does he calm Avraham?

Two visions are offered. The first takes Avraham outside to look at the spectacle of the nighttime sky. The stars here are used as a metaphor for Avraham's progeny. His descendants are to be as numerous as the stars that fill the heavens. Avraham's response:

"He put his trust in God, and it was reckoned to his merit." (15:6)

To the second fear, God responds with a covenant, a "brit", upgrading his promise to something more substantial, more binding. The vision of the Brit bein Habetarim informs Avraham that the promises are not for now. They are part of a four-hundred year process in which his descendants will leave Canaan, and eventually return as a nation.

RELATIONSHIP

I have narrated this process to illustrate the second theory. "Lech Lecha" is not the culmination of Avraham's finding God; it is the START of a relationship in which God instructs, and Avraham obeys, Avraham questions, and God reassures. In this model, the true drama only begins at the inauguration of the active interaction, the advent of the relationship between Avraham and God.

Shabbat Shalom!

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⁶ 15:1 and see also in 13:14 where God would appear to come to reassure Avraham and console him "after Lot departed from him."

⁷ 17:1-2