

Torah Sparks

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

October 16, 2010 – 8 Heshvan 5771

Annual: Genesis 12:1-17:27 (Etz Hayim, p. 69; Hertz p. 45)

Triennial Cycle: Genesis 12:1 – 13:18 (Etz Hayim, p. 69; Hertz p. 45)

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:27 – 41:16 (Etz Hayim, p. 95; Hertz p. 60)

Prepared by Rabbi Joseph Prouser

Baldwin, New York

Torah Reading Summary

With this parashah, the Torah shifts from the primordial history of the world to the particular experience of Israel. Abram and his wife Sarai are now the focal characters of the biblical text. God calls upon Abram to leave the land of his origin, promising him a life of blessing and greatness. Abram and Sarai leave Haran for Canaan, where God appears again to the patriarch, reaffirming their covenantal bond and promising him the land as his own. Abram constructs an altar at Beth El, “calling on the name of God.”

A famine in Canaan impels Abram, Sarai, and Lot to travel to Egypt. Sarai is taken into Pharaoh’s household, where, following Abram’s express instructions, she identifies herself not as his wife but his sister. Abram benefits materially from this deception, although God afflicts Pharaoh and his household with plagues. A dismayed Pharaoh returns Sarai to her husband.

Abram, Sarai, and Lot return to Beth El. In time, a conflict develops between Lot and Abram. The two kinsmen go their separate ways at Abram’s suggestion. God renews His covenant with Abram, promising him the land in perpetuity and a legacy of innumerable descendants. Despite the earlier falling out with Lot, Abram goes to war, with an armed force of 318 troops at his command, to rescue him. Lot has been taken captive in a conflict pitting four kings and their nation states against five similar powers. Upon his victory and Lot’s safe return, Abram exchanges diplomatic pleasantries with Melchizedek, but refuses material consideration or spoils of war – both to preclude political indebtedness and to emphasize the providence of God in securing his success.

God’s repeated promises of blessing, land, and progeny are followed by the dramatic “Covenant between the Pieces.” Abram’s long-awaited offspring arrives with the birth of Ishmael. His mother is Hagar, Sarai’s servant and “surrogate.” The covenant of circumcision is prescribed. God changes His covenant partners’ names to Abraham and Sarah, signifying their elevated stature and chosenness. When God assures him of the birth of a second son, to be named Isaac, who will become heir to the covenant, an aged Abraham laughs at the prospect of further fertility. In response to Abraham’s paternal concern – “Oh that Ishmael might live by Your favor!” – God bestows a blessing on Abraham’s firstborn: “He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.” Abraham and Ishmael are circumcised, signifying their covenantal status and fealty, together with all the men (the servants) in Abraham’s household.

Theme #1: “For Richer or Poorer”

“Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold... Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together. And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and those of Lot’s cattle.” (*Genesis 12:2, 5-7*)

Derash: Study

1. “Fulfillment of the divine blessing (‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you’) now begins. Abram enjoys great affluence, though how he acquired it is not stated. The possession of metals by pastoralists was particularly important in Canaan. In time of famine, silver and gold, being media of exchange, afforded a measure of security and protection.” (*Nahum Sarna, JPS Commentary*)
2. “‘Very rich’ – in Hebrew, kaved – literally, heavy. That is to say, the great wealth weighed heavily upon Abram, for to the righteous, wealth is a greater test than poverty. The tzadik Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz would wash his hands ritually after touching money.” (*Rabbi Yonatan Eyebeschutz, Tiferet Yonatan*)
3. “Although Lot originally seemed to be committed to a life of spiritual pursuits to the point of self-sacrifice, his attitude changed when he acquired wealth. Suddenly he became consumed with an inordinate desire for

material abundance. No longer could he continue to dwell with Avraham, for this would unduly restrict him.... This submission to the material realm is a malady that can affect anyone at anytime, if he is not vigilant. It is a disease that consumes some of the finest and most dedicated individuals..." (*Rabbi A.L. Scheinbaum, Peninim on the Torah*)

4. "Money often costs too much." (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*)
5. "I wonder... whether it is not too easy for a rich man to despise money... I have never yet known a man admit that he was either rich or asleep: Perhaps the poor man and the wakeful man have some great moral advantage." (*Patrick O'Brian, Master and Commander*)

Questions for Discussion

Did limited resources come between Abram and Lot, or was it an overabundance of wealth that doomed their relationship?

How have trying economic conditions placed a strain on the Jewish community and local congregations, and how might such pressures motivate the Jewish community to draw yet closer together?

What would the tzadik mentioned in Tiferet Yonatan, who washed his hands after handling money, say in response to Professor Sarna's comment that Abraham's wealth was a sure sign of God's covenantal blessing?

Is material wealth an inherent good to be pursued? An evil to be avoided? A morally neutral opportunity? Do the poor, indeed, have a moral advantage, as Patrick O'Brian quips?

Tiferet Yonatan focuses on the term "kaved" – understanding it to describe an onerous or unwelcome burden. The same root, however, gives us "kavod" – honor, dignity. How might this nuance of the Hebrew affect our reading of the text?

Does Abram's behavior and comportment later in Chapter 13 evince a burdened soul or a dignified man of honor and principle?

What is the significance of Sarna's comment about the unknown source of Abram's affluence? Does this support his contention that the patriarch's wealth was a divine blessing? To what extent must Jewish communal organizations investigate how the financial resources that are offered for their support were earned or generated in the first place?

Theme #2: About Faith!

"And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness." (*Genesis 15:6, King James Version*)

"And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit." (*New JPS Translation*)

Derash: Study

1. "Our father Abraham came to recognize his Creator, the Master of the Universe, all on his own. Independently, he came to understand the reality of God and the unity of the Creator. Nevertheless, the Torah praises him for his faith alone: 'He BELIEVED in the Lord, and He counted THIS to him for righteousness.' This is to teach that the essential, the most fundamental principle, is faith." (*Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chayim*)
2. "He (Abraham) counted it to Him (God) for righteousness: He recognized God's goodness and kindness in imbuing him with the ability to reason and to understand, to believe in God, and to achieve complete faith." (*The Magid of Koznitch*)
3. "Abram was exceptional not only in his faith in God, but also in his ability ultimately to instill that faith in his children. (This point is based on a grammatical analysis of the word he'emin – believed – a causative form, indicating that Abram caused others to believe in God)... Thus the sages called Israel ma'amanim b'nai ma'amanim – believers and the children of believers (Talmud, Shabbat 97a) – referring to the faith that was instilled in them by their ancestor Abram." (*Rabbi Moses Schreiber, the Chatam Sofer*)
4. "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish He didn't trust me so much." (*Mother Teresa of Calcutta*)
5. "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." (*Martin Luther King, Jr.*)
6. "Faith must be enforced by reason... When faith becomes blind it dies." (*Mahatma Gandhi*)

Questions for Discussion

Compare the King James and JPS translations of our verse: What is the difference between “believing in” God and “putting one’s trust in” God? Which phrase better describes your own faith?

What relative emphasis should be given to personal belief in God in the religious education of Jewish children? Compared to ritual observance? Compared to knowledge of Jewish history? Hebrew language? Liturgical fluency? How should this balance shift in programs of adult Jewish study? Should it shift?

What opportunities does congregational life afford us to emulate Abram and make our belief “causative” – that is, to instill our personal beliefs in others? How do we balance this mandate with the respect for religious differences demanded by a pluralistic and diverse society?

Is it wrong or dishonest for those of uncertain faith, or those who reject belief in God outright, to engage in Jewish religious observance or public worship? How might we relate the definition of faith provided above from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to this question?

Gandhi’s assertion that “faith must be enforced by reason” seems very much in keeping with Jewish tradition’s emphasis on study and critical analysis, and its openness to religious debate, inquiry, and questions, even by young children. How does this compare to the approach of other religious faiths we encounter? Is it true that reason and critical thought strengthens and preserves faith? What areas of Jewish belief do you consider absolute, not subject to rational defense or refutation?

Halachah I’Maaseh

“It is a positive commandment to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Included in this mitzvah is the obligation to attract human beings to the worship of God, and to make Him beloved among His creatures, as did our father, Abraham, peace be upon him, as it is said: ‘The souls they had acquired in Haran.’” Chafetz Chayim, Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Ha-Katzar

Historical Note

We read in Parashat Lekh Lekha of Abraham and Sarah’s first faithful steps toward realizing God’s promise of a “great nation” – a homeland and refuge for the Jewish people – on October 16, 2010. On this date in 1948, the Jews of Moscow demonstrated en masse to honor Golda Meir, who was visiting the Soviet Union as ambassador of the six-month-old State of Israel.