

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

But why would Israel be different? God knew that Avraham would teach his children to do justice and righteousness (Bereshit 18:19), but also took precautions. R. Hirsch explains (Shemot 22:20) that one pitfall is "the view of the nations" that national minorities have no rights. God sent us into slavery to rid us of this idea: "Therefore be you careful – this is the language of legal warning – lest you establish human rights in your state on anything other than pure humanity, which rests in the heart of every human being as human being. Any discrimination against human rights opens the gate to arbitrariness and the victimization of humans; It is the root of the abomination of Mitsrayim."

Slavery in Mitsrayim was designed by God to engender a radical new self-understanding among Avraham's seed. R. Hirsch explains further (Shemot 1:14): "The quality of the law in the state is measured...by the justice that is meted out to the defenseless stranger. Total equality between the stranger and the citizen is a foundational element of Jewish law. In Jewish law, it is not the state that bestows human rights, but rather human rights that bestow the state!...This principle separates human dignity from the accidents of birth and fate..."

Paradoxically, many anti-Semitic European nationalists in the 19th century shared R. Hirsch's analysis, but from the opposite end. They believed that not shared humanity but rather *Blut und Boden* – blood and soil - are the basis of state power. Since they believed that their homeland is owned by those who share their blood, they believed in "the view of the nations" that minorities - who have the 'wrong blood' - also have no rights. And they fully agreed with R. Hirsch that Jewish identity is the very antithesis of this idea.

As ideologies of blood and soil again raise their ugly heads across the globe, we gain further insight into the deep meaning of **Lekh Lekha**: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house..." God's mission required that Avraham remove himself from his "natural" context of blood and soil. His community would be built not on "blood" but on a shared commitment to human dignity. And God's promised land would not be 'national property' from which minorities are excluded but rather *holy* - consecrated - to educating humanity that "...it is not the state that bestows human rights, but rather human rights that bestow the state." Only thus, teaches R. Hirsch, can we be faithful to the divine mission of Avraham our father.

Rav todot to Rabbi Jonathan Kligler whose Kol Nidre sermon this year inspired this interpretation.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Lekh Lekha

October 20, 2018 | 11 Heshvan 5779

Annual | Genesis 12:1-17:27 (Etz Hayim p. 69-93; Hertz p. 45-60)

Triennial Genesis 16:1-17:27 (Etz Hayim p. 69-93; Hertz p. 45-60)

Haftarah | Isaiah 40:27-41:16 (Etz Hayim p. 94-98; Hertz p. 60-62)

D'var Torah: The Father of Human Rights

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this week's Torah portion, Avraham is commanded to leave his homeland and father's house to journey to a foreign land. Why did Avraham need to leave? It is often assumed that Avraham needed to be removed from a corrupt environment. But what if it was the opposite? What if something needed to be removed from Avraham?

God chose Avraham to get humanity back on track. After a string of disasters - the exile from Eden, the first murder, the flood and the Tower of Babel – God needed a new strategy to redeem humanity. R. Ovadia Sforno, in his introduction to the Chumash, explains it like this: "...when it was apparent that there was no longer any hope that the human race as a whole would repent...God then chose a pious man from among the entire species, Avraham, and his seed, to attain through them the goal intended by God from the moment humanity had been placed on earth." The idea was, in the words of R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsch (on Shemot 19:6), that "...there be one nation unique among all nations that will not live for her own glory...but rather to establish the Kingdom of Heaven...This nation will not seek greatness in power, but rather in the

absolute rule of law – divine morality – for this is the meaning of 'holiness'".

D'var Haftarah: Avrahamic Leadership

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

As is well known, the Jewish tradition has different ways of reading a text. Among them are the *pshat* or plain meaning of the text and *drash* – the rabbinic interpretive way of reading the text. In this week's haftarah, we are presented with a verse which meant one thing in its historical or plain meaning context and something totally different for the rabbinic tradition. The haftarah is set in the period of Shivat Zion – the return from Babylonian exile. The human "hero" for the Jews of that period was the king of the Persians – Cyrus (or Koresh as he was known in Hebrew) since he was responsible for both conquering the Babylonians and permitting the Jews to return to their homeland after 70 long years of exile. His role is described in the verse: "Who has roused a victor (Cyrus) from the East, summoned him to His service (*tzedek*)? Has delivered up nations unto him and trodden sovereigns down? Has rendered their swords like dust, their bows like windblown straw?" (41:2) Here, God is praised for raising up Cyrus as the "savior" of God's people.

For some in the rabbinic period, this verse, when taken out of its historical contexts and read a bit differently, matched their vision of Avraham, the founder of their religious tradition. They read the verse this way: "Who awakened [people's awareness of God]? The man from the east. Righteousness (*tzedek*) he called to attend his steps", resulting in the following midrash: "Rabbi Reuven said: 'Because the nations of the world were asleep (ensconced in idolatry), they did not come under the wing of the Divine Presence. And who awakened them to come under the wings of God's Presence? Avraham. And not only did Avraham awaken the nations to recognize God; he also awakened *tzedakah* (righteousness) as well. How so? Avraham opened an inn with entrances on all sides in order to welcome wayfarers who came and went.'" (adapted from Midrash Tehillim 110:1 Buber edition p. 460)

The sages saw Avraham as an exemplar of kindness and hospitality and that these values represented God's vision to the world. When people saw and experienced the behavior of Avraham and his wife Sarah, they realized the preciousness of their beliefs. These ancestors are meant to serve as a paradigm for our behavior. We are intended to act in a way that exemplifies God's vision for the world. This is what should be happening in our private lives, in our homes and especially in our synagogues. Following Avraham and Sarah, we should welcome and treat all with love.

In memory of my friend, Rabbi Sam Frait, rabbi emeritus of Moriah Congregation, Deerfield, Illinois – a rabbi who led with Avrahamic vision.

Parashat Lekh Lekha Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this parashah we begin to focus on Avram. He journeys with his wife Sarai to an unknown land, is forced to leave temporarily due to a famine, receives a promise from God that he will become a great nation, and has his name changed to 'Avraham'; all while desperately longing for a child.

1) Avram, at God's instruction, leaves Haran and heads to the land of Canaan. He takes with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all their property, and "all the persons that they made/acquired in Haran" (12:5). Who do you think these people are, and what does that add to your picture of Avram and Sarai?

2) Avram seems to have entered the country from the north or the center and is traveling southward. By Sh'chem God promises him the land for his offspring, and Avram builds an altar. Near Beth El he builds an altar and "calls by the name of the LORD" (12:6-9). What is the significance of the altars?

3) Sometime after Lot has left Avram to move to Sodom, a luscious oasis by the Dead Sea, a war breaks out in which Lot and the other town's people, along with their property, are taken captive. Avram gives chase and rescues them (14:11-24). The king of Sodom (who had escaped) approaches Avram with a proposal: "You keep the property but give me the people." What does it teach you about the [potential] fate of people during war in biblical times? What do you think about the king's offer?

4) Avram seems very concerned and finally admits that he is worried about not having a child. God takes him out to look at the sky. Avram is told to count the stars – "so shall be your seed" (15:2-5). What do you think Avram experienced as he looked at the night sky? (Think about the night sky away from the "light pollution" that we experience in cities today. Consider also Van Gogh's "Starry Night" painting.)

5) In an attempt to give Avram the child he longs for, Sarai gives him her handmaid Hagar as a wife, and she gives birth to Ishmael (chapter 16). When God later announces to Avraham that Sarai will have her name changed to Sarah and she will bear him a son, Avraham laughs at the biological improbability of the offer. He also says "may Ishmael live in Your presence" (17:15-18). What do you think that Avraham meant by that? What was he feeling?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

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