

Parshat Lech Lecha
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D'var Torah Friday Evening
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Think back to your favorite adventure stories as a kid. Even though we all might be thinking of thought of different stories that filled our dreams and warmed our hearts, they probably share one thing in common. Whether it is the Wild West, a fairy tale kingdom, a land of mythical creatures, or a story of battles to be won, they all share one thing in common: the journey. It is not simply a way to get from Point A to Point B—that could hardly be the kind of travel to capture the imagination. When the main character goes on a journey, he or she arrives at the end profoundly changed, full of new knowledge and experiences. To understand the nature of the journey, the reader or listener also must attempt to understand why the journey began in the first place. Was it a fight with a loved one? Is there a mission left to fulfill? Did the journeyer need a change, an opportunity to break free? Did some trick of fate or nature push their lives in a different direction? It is at this crucial moment, at the dawn of a new beginning, that we meet the great ancestor of our people, Abraham.

In this week's Parsha Lech Lecha, the text is not particularly helpful for us who want to understand why Abraham's journey begins. The story jumps right into God's command to Abraham to "Go forth from your land, from your kindred, from your father's house to the land that I will show you." In the text, there is no explanation of why Abraham is chosen. There is no endorsement of all Abraham's good qualities, or a story to explain Abraham's journey to finding the One God. This is also not the norm at all in the Bible—with Moses and King David and King Solomon, the text lets us know that the right man has been chosen for all the right reasons. At the moment of the birth of the Jewish people, we are given no explicit reason to identify with Abraham or to admire him. He obeys, and his journey begins just with God's words of command. So, as rabbis are bound to do from generation to generation, many scholars have tried to understand the "whys" of this story. Why Abraham? Why did this journey begin at the point in Abraham's life when it does? Let's explore the meaning of this journey together.

Maybe Abram's journey was a part of a larger, greater scheme. Bereisheet Rabbah, the classical collection of legends and texts about the Book of Genesis, teaches that Abram is God's last chance. After the generations of Adam and Noah failed, where God tried to redeem all of humanity, God must again begin anew. God decides to single out one people to be a blessing to the Earth, to try and heal humanity—a beautiful way to talk about Abram's story and the role of his descendants, the people of Israel. We still have no idea why.

Other legends take it even further, creating an entire past for Abraham. He is a dreamer, an iconoclast, a rebel. He finds the true God, the one God. He smashes his father's own precious idol statues, and all the idol worshippers around him hate him. Therefore, he must leave to seek his future elsewhere. This too can be unsatisfying. If Abram was so wonderful and he is our forefather, wouldn't the Torah want to tell such an inspiring story? Is that really what we are supposed to learn from Abram?

A final interpretation, told by the great modern female Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz based on the writings of the medieval master Maimonides, suggests that the Torah was not interested in Abraham in relation to his family and his past, but ONLY in his role as the ancestor of the Jewish people and the messenger of the Divine. God chose him, so we must accept that he is worthy to be chosen. We don't need to understand his spirituality, his struggles, or his past. We only need to know Abraham through his leaps of faith, his trials, and his relationship to the God of Israel.

When I read these various midrashim, stories and legends to fill in the blanks, I found the last part particularly interesting to consider. When embarking on a journey, whether it is an epic journey of the hero with trials or a transition to the next phase in our own lives, how do WE want it to begin? Is it better to start from the past, or is the best beginning found in the present and the hope of the future? I am sure we have all heard that famous saying about journeys—"A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote these timeless words in his masterpiece the Dao De Ching, the main text for Taoist philosophy. However, some have suggested that this translation actually isn't quite right. A better way of capturing the Classical Chinese is actually "A journey of a thousand miles begins

beneath one's feet." I think it changes the whole meaning. Instead of looking at the action, it sees the starting point as where we are when we begin, the moment we have right before we take that first step. We can feel the ground solidly beneath our feet, face what is ahead, and we make the choice simply to move at all. It doesn't matter what's behind us or how we arrived there. It is all about moving forward.

In moving forward, we want to be defined by where we are going, not where we have been. Sure, it is easy to be who we always were or to let old kinds of relationships and experiences identify who we are today. When you have been timid since childhood, you can always be the shy one in a crowd. If you were an athlete or musician, it can be comforting to reminisce about the good old days when you were on top of the world. It's more comfortable and easier to understand. Some of us may have done this ourselves, or have a friend or family member who is only concerned with their past wrongdoings, their regrets, their memories, and who chose to live by inertia. Let's be honest though—these are not the people who make the risky choices. They don't establish nations or initiate change or take the big steps. They don't see the ground beneath their feet, and they don't embark on a dramatically new phase of life. Abraham is the leader who defines a movement, a people, and a new religion. What does the past matter, when all we need to know we learn from the story we have right in the Torah's text? He has faith in God's promise and establishes a place for his descendants in the world, who will be a blessing to all humanity with God's help and guidance.

Think back now to that story I asked you to think of a few minutes ago. I wanted to share one of my favorite fictional journeyers with you now. One of my favorite movies of the last ten years was a film with Julia Roberts entitled "Mona Lisa Smile." In the beginning of the movie, a young, vibrant and thoroughly unconventional art teacher comes to a conservative women's college in the 1950's. The journey she takes with her class of Introduction to Art History students is emotional and full of depth. Both the teacher and the girls are transformed by a school year together and learn from each other. One particularly judgmental and nasty student, Betty, has one of the biggest conversions we witness. After trying to have the professor fired and scorning how much the other girls admire their teacher, she finally understands her teacher's passion and influence. When the professor decides it is time for her to

leave and her taxi pulls away from the school with all the girls running behind it, Betty wraps up the movie with the words of her final message about what she learned to love about her wise teacher who defied all the rules: “Not all who wander are aimless. Especially not those who seek truth beyond tradition, beyond definition, beyond the image.” Like Abraham our Father, and Moses, and the great revolutionaries of modern times we know and admire, what the groundbreaking professor did on her journey was what mattered most. The ability of a leader to influence and forge ahead is not solely based on where they came from. Their journey forward is what helps them create new traditions, shape new definitions, and reimagine the image of what is right, good, and inspiring for all of us. When we hear the call of Lech Lecha, to get up and go on a journey, let us not dwell in the past and think of how it might damage who we already are. Let us each be open to the possibilities, to have faith, and to envision the person who we need to become. Shabbat Shalom.