

SELECTED SHORTS ON LECH LECHA

Rabbi Eliot Malomet October 30, 2020 12 Cheshvan 5781

We turn to our own story now. Bereishit was the story of creation, the first human beings, the emergence of consciousness, the story of the fratricide and the proliferation of humanity; Noah tells the story of the dissolution of the world and an attempt to re-create humanity. In Lech Lecha we enter the life of Abraham and Sarah, our family story. When we read this story and the ones that follow, we rediscover who we are and where we come from. We re-encounter our purpose: to be a blessing to the world.

בראשית י"ב:א-ה'  
(א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לְדַלְתָּ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמְּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹמְרָאָה: (ב) וְאַעֲשֶׂה לְגוֹי גְדוֹל וְאַבְרָכָךָ וְאַגְדֹּלְךָ וְשָׂמְךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: (ג) וְאַבְרָכָה מִבְּרַכְיָה וּמִמְּלָלָה אֲאַר וְנִבְרָכְוּ בָךְ כָּל מְשִׁפְחַת הָאָדָמָה: (ד) וְיִלְדָה אֲבָרָם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו ה' וְיִלְדָה אֶת־לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בְּרִחְמֵשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן: (ה) וַיִּקַּח אֲבָרָם אֶת-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לוֹט בְּרִאשֹׁנוֹ וְאֶת-כָּל-רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת-הַגָּנָשׁ אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן:

Genesis 12:1-5

The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (2) I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (3) I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you." (4) Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. (5) Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. They arrived in the land of Canaan...

What was God's objective in choosing Abraham? Why did God tell Abraham to "go forth?" What did God mean by "You shall be a blessing?" Why did Abraham take Sarai and Lot, all his possessions his entire retinue of people?

God wants goodness in the world. The creation of human beings was God's great experiment. While we get the impression from Genesis 1 and 2 that God "completed" creation, evidently there was plenty yet that needed to be finished. And human beings were to be God's partners in the completion of creation. The only problem was that, being endowed with free will, human beings could make disastrous choices, act cruelly, and direct their

consciousness to evil. The early generations disappointed God to the point that God decided to undo creation restart humanity with an exemplary and righteous person who will imprint goodness, righteousness and morality onto all of his descendants. But clearly, that didn't work out either. So, God changes tacks: God takes another individual, Abram, and enters into a relationship with him, a covenant. God will make Abram the father of a nation and that nation will become a blessing to all humanity. The details are not spelled out here, we are only at the beginning of the story. But we sense that at the core of this relationship there is a strong measure of mutual trust. Abram trusts God and agrees to go where God will lead him; God trusts Abram that he will emerge from this experience and become a blessing to humanity.

We learn very quickly that Abram is a formidable character. Compressed in these lines is a whole novel: who is Abram? Where is he from? Why has God chosen him? We learned at the end of last week that he has a father, Terah. He has two brothers, Haran and Nachor. We learned that Haran dies, which most likely changed the trajectory of his life, as all loss inevitably does. We learn that he has a wife, Sarai, who is not capable of having children. The text doesn't tell us what made Abram unique. To the rabbis, Abram is the first one to understand and articulate the evils of idolatry; that idolatry is simply an extension of self-worship; that idolatry is simply the adoration of power. Abram is the ultimate iconoclast, and in order to become known in the world he will have to sever his ties from the spheres of influence in his life: his "land", his "birthplace" and his "father's house," which can be understood as his geography, his culture and his family. It is only by establishing a new nation in a new land that God will be able to bring the blessings of freedom, morality and human dignity, to the world.

The Bible understands something fundamental about human nature: human beings are mimetic creatures, that is, human beings imitate and emulate each other. Typically, this occurs most often in the context of family, where human culture is incubated, knowledge and wisdom are transmitted, and children learn from their parents how to interact with the world. The individual's impact on his or her family radiates to clan, tribe, community and society.

Emotions are contagious. So are attitudes, behaviors, habits, and morality. If you are around good people, chances are goodness will rub off on you. It is not an accident that the rabbis saw being a good friend or a good neighbor as one of the great attributes a person should attain. "Keep us far from bad people and a bad friend," is what we say every morning following the morning blessings.

Underlying God's selection of Abram is the hope Abram would become a person of influence for the world. Initially, the sphere of his influence is very small: he, his family, his retinue of people, and the various people he encounters. God's charge to Abram contains a promise: If you admire him, for his character, his faith, his determination, and his exercise of freedom, you yourself will be admired. If you despise him, because you despise his values, you yourself would be despised. As the story of Abram unfolds, we learn that he is not perfect. Yet despite his flaws, he will be the one to create a family "through which all the families of the earth will be blessed."

בראשית ט"ז:

(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם ה' אֱשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֵת לְךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

**Genesis 15:7**

(7) *Then He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession."*

Attentive readers of the Torah will recognize that the phrase used here is similar to the first line of the Ten Commandments:

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

*I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. What*

could be the Torah's implied connection here? The Jewish people was founded by two fundamental departures: one from Mesopotamia and the other from Egypt, the two great powers of antiquity. Both of those societies were defined by the power of the state and the veneration of the sovereign as a god. Abraham, a shepherd, represents radical freedom and autonomy, and is not dependent on any sovereign. As an exemplar of the belief in one power, a Sovereign of the Universe, Abraham would eventually differentiate himself and his descendants from the other civilizations of the world. That both Egyptian and Mesopotamia receded into history, but that Abraham's ideas still animate much of human civilization testifies to the enduring power of God's covenant.

בראשית י"ז:

(יז) וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבִּי הֲלָבָן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל הִבְתִּיתִּישָׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד:

**Genesis 17:17**

(17) *Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"*

God has just promised Abram that he will have a child, at the age of a hundred! He is incredulous! Sarah is ninety! Abraham's reaction is simply the natural reaction that anyone would have upon considering this possibility. Why doesn't God just go with Ishmael, the son of Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden? It is to reward Sarah. "And I will bless her as well," God says. Rabbinic legend portrays Sarah as the devoted partner to Abraham. She herself was righteous, converting women already back in Ur Kasdim. Despite the difficult moments she has with Hagar, and the times she is less than gracious to her, Sarah is blessed for having shared the journey with Abraham. The midrash says that God restored her to her youth. Despite her advanced years, miraculously she will now have a young woman's body. Denied the ability to have children in her younger years, she will be able to bear children. Read as fact it is a tabloid. Read as poetry, it expresses the deepest yearnings of the soul: the wish to be restored to the vigor and health of bygone years. In this manner, Sarah will withstand the physical challenges of childbirth and motherhood yet remain Abraham's true partner in age and emotional maturity.