

Sermon Lech Lecha
TLSE 28 October 2023
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The Torah reading for this week, Lech Lecha, is one of my favourite readings in the yearly cycle, and I've come to appreciate it more over the years because of my own life experiences. Abraham (at this point still called Abram) is seventy-five years old when God tells him to "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you... Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. With this adventurous step, Abram began an engagement with his world that he could not have predicted before he left home.

God's promise to Abram is "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. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed by you." If there is one central lesson to be learned from this portion, I suggest that it is this: what we do matters, today and in times to come that we will not live to see.

Abraham became a great nation not by winning battles (though he did win a few) but by understanding the world in a new way. The Midrash tells us that the young Abram asked many questions about the world. First, he decided that the sun ruled the world. Then he thought it was the moon. Then he realized there was a single, unseen ruler and creator of the world that somehow cared about us, that people could have a real relationship with. Terach, Abram's father, was (according to the Midrash) the owner of a shop that sold idols. One day, Abram's father left him alone in charge of the shop, and he took a hammer and smashed all the idols except for one, the largest, into whose sculptured arms he placed the hammer. When his father returned and saw the shattered idol parts, Abram explained to him that when one woman brought an offering of couscous to the gods all the idols fought over it and the biggest idol was triumphant and destroyed all the others. Abram's father said, "that's ridiculous, the idol is just a piece of plaster. It can't do anything." And Abram replied, "let your ears hear what your mouth is saying." A story, yes, but it tells us what Abraham's blessing to the world really was – Abraham heard what his mouth was saying, and more besides.

I don't have much in common with Abraham, but I have also moved around a lot, born in Chicago and having lived in the United States, Israel, and Canada before moving to the United Kingdom; the reality of my foreignness becomes apparent as soon as I say anything. Abraham became a stranger in the land of Canaan; perhaps his accent also gave him away as a foreigner. Later, when he bought a burial place for Sarah, he described himself by saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead." As a resident alien, he spoke very carefully to the Hittites from whom he bought the cave for Sarah's tomb. As an alien in the land, he had to listen especially carefully to what was being said to him, and perhaps even more importantly, to what wasn't being said – the things that every native knows that the stranger doesn't. And he had to listen to what he himself was saying.

This Torah reading begins something that's easy to overlook: it is the moment when the Torah engages with history. Of course, we don't know if Abraham actually existed, or which, if any, of the stories actually happened, and the Torah is not reliable as a history. But, as Hillel Gruenberg notes, until now, the story has been mostly supernatural, not historical—the creation of the world and everything in it, heavenly gifts and divine punishment, the flood that destroys the entire world, and genealogies of the founders of future nations, whose lifespans number in the hundreds of years. Now the backdrop now appears to be actual places and people. It is no longer a purely mythic story. We discover elements of

the culture, politics, and everyday concerns of the inhabitants of the places Abraham goes. These geographical and cultural elements present a world that we can mostly believe in, and it is much more compelling than fairy tales. We can learn from it on a personal level – Abraham’s family is no more functional than our own families, and he is not always wise in how he deals with the problems that arise. And because the story is embedded in a real world whose boundaries still exist today, it lays the foundation for a relationship with the Promised Land. This relationship is no simpler than the complexities of the patriarchal family. The land may be promised, but the fulfilment of that promise is long in coming, never straightforward, and fraught with struggle, negotiation, complication, confusion, and contradiction. In this respect, it is like the world we live in today.

Abraham was sometimes privileged to hear, and argue with, the voice of God. Perhaps even more important for us who don’t usually hear the voice of God, Abraham could sometimes hear his own voice, the ethical understanding that gave him no choice but to argue – even with God. The Torah doesn’t avoid recounting the times when Abraham failed to listen to those voices, when he himself didn’t let his ears hear what his mouth was saying, when he was uneasy about what he was doing but did it anyway. Abraham’s legacy that speaks to us across the millennia is that what we do matters, and what we say matters, and even though we cannot know the outcome, we can listen to the voice that often tells us what’s true, and what the right thing to do is. The challenge is really to hear it.

And there are times when we need to hear not just our ethical truths but our vulnerabilities as well. Immediately following the October 7 massacre, people asked me how I was doing, and I said, and thought, that I was doing okay. I don’t know about you, but in the last few days, three weeks after the Hamas massacre, I realized that I’m not feeling okay, in fact, quite bad, bad about the indescribable horrors that continue to be revealed, bad about the way the news reports them, bad about many aspects of Israel’s response, and bad about the many reports that range from groups or individuals saying nothing about Hamas while being very happy to criticize Israel, bad about demonstrations calling for the death of all Jews. I have been avoiding looking at more than a few videos of the massacre – it seems almost complicit to look at what the murderers had done. They were so proud of what they did that they sent videos home to mom and dad, like a school project. But not looking doesn’t make me feel better.

And I’m feeling bad – furious, really – about Netanyahu, who is self-serving, corrupt, criminal, brutal, and incompetent. His policies and priorities led to the disaster, and his military response is full of impotent rage and political calculation. Israel’s ferocious response is likely to strengthen Hamas at least temporarily, even among Palestinians in Gaza who resent its authoritarian rule. Netanyahu needs to resign, but he won’t. No one in his government is putting the good of the country ahead of his pointless political career. It makes me sick and sad. I love Israel and it is tragic to see it forced to follow this incompetent leader into even more danger. If you are also experiencing anything like what I am, or something different, and want to talk, please do get in touch.

Shabbat shalom, Am Yisrael Chai.