

“Lot: The very first Jewish hostage, and his daring rescue”

Parashat Lech Lecha

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Other than sharing a first name, there is at least one other significant similarity between the first Jew and the 16th president of the United States. President Lincoln was named Abraham, a distinctly Old Testament name, during the Second Great Awakening, a time of religious revival in the United States: An era of circuit riding preachers, soaring numbers of converts, and the creation of social gospels like abolition, which would influence Abraham Lincoln to make history by emancipating American slaves. Of course the original Abraham, the Jewish Abraham is the founder of ethical monotheism, not only the belief in one God, above and beyond nature, but a God who has expectations of us, who commands us to be and to act better than our base instincts. We attribute so much to these founding fathers—one of the Jewish people, and one of a freer, more enlightened America. When you think of the name Abraham, you probably think of someone who is wise, and learned; I’m guessing you also think of someone who is honest, based on several American midrashim about Lincoln’s character. But when you think of Abraham, either in the Torah or in American history, do you think great military hero? Of course Lincoln was the commander-in-chief of the Union Army that won the Civil War. But Lincoln himself had almost no military experience. Jefferson Davis, by contrast, was a West Point graduate, fought in the Mexican American War, even served as secretary of war under President Franklin Pierce. But Abraham Lincoln never saw combat, was not a trained soldier, and had a steep learning curve as a war-time president. When we think of the Civil War we tend to think of its legendary generals Sherman and Pickett, McClellan and Grant...But the truth is that Lincoln assembled a highly accomplished war cabinet and was actively involved in strategy and battle plans. Some say it was because he was not influenced by military dogma that he was able to lead the union to victory in the Civil War. *Avraham Avinu*, the theologian, the pious believer, the great patriarch of the Jewish people whose descendants will be a source of blessing to the nations also reveals himself in our parasha to be an outstanding military commander. Who knew?

Nothing in Abraham’s biography in the Torah suggests that he knew the first thing about warfare. Yet, the very first instance of war in the Bible, and the very first military victory is by none other than Abraham himself. And not only that, the reason that Abraham gets involved in this conflict is because one of his own kinsman, his nephew Lot, is taken hostage. Here’s the story...a confederacy of 5 city-states in ancient Canaan were vassals of 4 larger city-states, paying unfair tributes and being controlled by their powerful overlords. After 13 years, the 5 city states banded together and staged a revolt. They met in a fierce battle in the Jordan Valley on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. The four more powerful kings emerge victorious and continue to conquer and pillage other cities along the way. And they also take hostages, among them Abraham’s nephew Lot who was living in the city of Sodom. The Torah tells us that someone, a fugitive, escapes and flees from Sodom and informs Abraham of the hostage situation. Now here’s the surprising

part...Abraham immediately assembles a militia of 318 men and goes on a rescue mission to save Lot. Now remember that we have not seen our patriarch as a soldier before, not to mention a military strategist. But when a relative is taken captive, he turns into a tactical genius before our very eyes. His platoon pursues the captors all the way to Dan in the north, and then the text says in the middle of the night Abraham divides his troops and attacks the enemy camp where Lot is being held hostage from multiple directions. The shock troops rescue Lot and his possessions, *ve'gam et ha'nashim v'et ha'am*, as well as the women other people who were taken hostage along with him. Abraham's mission is wildly successful, and he is henceforth known not only as a religious leader, but also as a military hero.

Now the truth is that this was Abraham's one and only battle. The Torah does not record him being involved in any other wars or military conflicts. So the question we have to ask is why is this story in the Bible? What are we supposed to learn from Abraham the celebrated warrior? The Ramban said that this is an example of the concept of *ma'asei avot siman le'vanim*, the deeds of the ancestors are a foreshadowing of what will happen to their descendants. But it's more than foreshadowing. It is about applying the lessons of our ancestors to situations that we, their descendants, find ourselves grappling with in our own day. Sadly, hostage-taking would be an offence that would repeat itself throughout history...right up until this very day. As everyone knows by now, exactly 3 weeks ago, Hamas not only massacred over a 1,000 Jews on that single day in Israel, but those terrorists also took 200 men, women, and children hostage deep into the tunnels beneath Gaza. A few have been released since...but most are still in captivity, their families left to worry about them and fear the worst.

What are we to learn from Abraham's heroism? Why does our Torah want us to know that he risked his life to save a relative and a fellow Jew? Perhaps it is to teach us that undertaking similar danger to rescue our brothers and sisters in modern captivity is worth the risk. The Israel Defense Forces has a unit dedicated to finding missing persons, called Eitan, an acronym that stands for *Itur Ne'edarim*, which translates to something like the Location of Missing Persons unit. The value of "no soldier left behind" is fundamental to the US military code of honor as well. Jewish Law considers it a *mitzvah gedolah*, not "just" a mitzvah but a great mitzvah to redeem captives. Listen to the words of Maimonides, the Rambam in his code of Jewish law the Mishneh Torah:

The redemption of captives is more important than feeding the poor or providing them with clothing. *Ein lecha mitzvah gedolah mi'pidyon shvuyim*, because there is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives...For a captive is among those who are hungry, and thirsty, and unclothed and in mortal danger. The Shulchan Aruch rules that every moment that one delays in redeeming captives when it is possible to do it, *havei k'ilu shofeich damim*, it is as if their blood is being spilled. This is how urgent this mitzvah is considered to be!

Communities in antiquity through the Middle Ages had to grapple with how to prioritize scarce resources and money when faced with redeeming captives. The Rambam teaches that the first

obligation has to be to spend the money to secure their release. More recently, the State of Israel has had to contend with the cost-benefit analysis of redeeming captives in exchange for releasing prisoners, sometimes even terrorists from incarceration. In 2011, Israel released 1,027 mostly Palestinian prisoners, 250 of them serving life sentences for planning or carrying out terror attacks, in exchange for one captive Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. To many people's horror, one of the architects of the Hamas attack three weeks ago, was among those released 12 years ago in exchange for that one soldier. While Jewish law considers redeeming captives to be so paramount, it also considers what it would mean to financially bankrupt a community, or to put a community at greater risk by encouraging future hostage taking, or releasing dangerous criminals for captives. These decisions are the most heart wrenching any army or government or leader ever has to make.

One of the assumptions of the ground invasion that is mustering along the Gaza border is that Israel is going in to rescue the remaining hostages. Prior to entering Gaza, the army has been clearing the way for its ground forces, and the media has made sure we see every picture of that operation on the front covers of our newspapers. But while Hamas documented their barbaric attacks on civilians with their Go-Pros, the IDF endeavors to warn civilians to flee ahead of a strike. Does any other army telegraph its battle plans to the enemy ahead of time? There is an astonishing midrash from around the 7th Century called *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* in which Abraham expresses concern and despair that in the course of rescuing Lot from captivity he may have killed innocent people along the way. These are the very concerns that the IDF, Israelis, and you and I are wrestling with right now! No Jew, from Abraham to today wants any innocent person to die! This has been our value system since the very first Jew rescued a hostage. It is tragic to see any collateral damage, any civilian loss of life. And it is another one of the nearly impossible conundrums of war. In that Midrash, by the way, God musters a line from this morning's haftarah to comfort and reassure Abraham. *Yirdefeim ya'avov shalom, orach be'ragalav lo yavo*...the prophet Isaiah said (41:3) "He pursued them, and goes on unscathed. No shackle is placed on his feet." At face value this verse seems like a description of a warrior who returns home physically unscathed. For the rabbis, it serves as a reassurance that Abraham did not commit any wrongdoing or cause the death of any innocents in his mission to save Lot.

I recently read¹ about a group of combat soldiers who gathered together in a makeshift minyan last Friday night to welcome Shabbat. Their commander asked each one to go around and share something they were carrying in their hearts over these past challenging days.

Some said they were praying for safety and protection from the dangers of war; to be returned home safely to their families, physically, mentally, and emotionally. But the overwhelming number of soldiers said that their greatest fear, even more than their own personal safety, was they they may cause unnecessary harm or death to innocent civilians when fighting.

¹ *Avraham the Warrior*, by Rabbi Kenneth Brander, Ohr Torah Stone, Parashat Lech Lecha 5784

How remarkable that today's Jewish soldiers share the same concerns as the very first Jewish soldier. These incredibly well trained, brave, and heroic fighters also possess such a strong value system, moral compass, and hearts of kindness. Nothing could stand in starker contrast with the enemy than these IDF soldiers.

May God protect them in their mission, so that they come home safely. May the hostages be returned to the loving arms of their families. And while the Jewish people rightly undertakes great risk to redeem captives, may civilian casualties be minimized, and may we never lose sight of the commitment going all the way back to our patriarch Abraham that innocent life, that all life has sacred value.