

**Seven lessons from Gen. 11:26-32
on the Occasion of the Installation of Rabbi Lisa Gelber
at Congregation Habonim**

by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

One of the first things we learn about Abraham and Sarah is that they do not have children:
LESSON ONE: “Sarai was barren, she had no child.” Sometimes it’s precisely when we feel most stuck that there’s actually the greatest potential for real change.

Their inability to have children follows an account of nineteen generations (between Bereshit and Noah) of each generation easily and readily “begetting” the next. In other words, one of the first things we learn about the people God chooses to found and lead a whole new way of being in the world is that what’s natural and easy for everyone else is really hard for them. Maybe it’s even precisely their challenges and non-normativity that equip them (and us) for the mission. Especially salient in our times, Abram and Sarai seem to be non-normative with respect to gender. Though 75 years old, and despite the fact that Sarai has not given him children, Abram remains married to her and only her -- this is quite countercultural for its time. Is it possible that he is a man able to see women in a different way than the surrounding culture does? To value them for something other than childbearing? More strikingly, the Talmud (Yevamot 64a-b) deals with Sarai’s barrenness by saying that both Abraham and Sarai were *tumtumim* -- born of ambiguous or indeterminate gender, and that they acquired masculinity/femininity (or masculine and feminine sex characteristics) later!

LESSON TWO: God works through challenge and non-normativity; Neither God nor the sages were afraid of difference - don’t be afraid of yours.

It’s actually Abraham’s father, Terah, who begins the journey away from Ur Khasdim and to the promised land (Gen. 11:31), a detail that’s easy to miss if we begin our focus on Abraham with Lekh Lekha. It’s tempting to see Abraham as a first-generation rebel - the maverick who goes it alone. Actually, his father did some of that before him.

LESSON THREE: No one is “self-made.” Whenever someone claims to be a self-made person, it’s wise to look further - especially when you yourself are the one claiming it. The story is almost always more complicated than it appears.

Many of the midrashim demonize Terah in order to highlight Abraham’s greatness. The text doesn’t do that. It’s possible that Terah himself intuited the need for change, beginning the process of abandoning idolatry. He just wasn’t capable of or ready to go all the way, so he gets as far as Haran and stops there.

LESSON FOUR: No generation does the work alone. We build on the work of our forbears. We may never get to the promised land, but we can begin the journey -- or do the next leg -- so our children can go further than we did. The same is true for leadership. As Ruth Messinger taught me: people say the work of social justice isn’t a sprint, it’s a marathon. But it’s not a marathon either. It’s a relay. So don’t get demoralized if you, or your generation, or your rabbi, can’t do it all.

Genesis 11:32 reports that Terah died in Haran at the age of 205. Then the parashah ends, and Lekh Lekha begins. We know that Abraham is 75 at the time of the Lekh Lekha call, which means his father is still alive, and will live for another 60 years. So why is his death recorded now? Rashi (citing Bereshit Rabbah) says that it’s so that the matter shouldn’t be publicized to everyone, so they would say, “Abram did not fulfill honoring his father, for he abandoned him aged and went off.” If it’s not supposed to be publicized, why is Rashi telling everyone?

LESSON FIVE: There's an appropriate time and place to reveal certain sensitive things, that require a context of nuance and genuine inquiry. "Now," Rashi is saying, "in the context of study and thoughtful reflection, I can tell you this. But as a matter of street gossip, in casual conversation, no."

Rashi's source in Bereshit Rabbah is even more evocative. It portrays Abraham expressing fear that he will bring dishonor on God's name, because people will believe he left his father in old age.

LESSON SIX: Pay attention to interstices, to what's not said. The sensitivity to the unspoken in text is also a good model for how to read life. Without it, we're likely to badly misjudge each other.

Perhaps most beautifully, LESSON SEVEN:

Leadership, Judaism, emerges from wrestling with tensions - conflicting values or mitzvot (either Abraham intuiting that disrespect for parents is *hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name, or following the principle of "there is no early or late in the Torah", Abraham was already fulfilling mitzvot). Here, it's the tension between honoring one's parents and following God's call. Normativity/halakhah or the personal spiritual path? Faithfulness to father/tradition or forging a new way? To what extent do we remain true to our parents' values -- their Judaism -- and to what extent do we -- and our children after us -- have to go our own way?

The Torah begins us and leaves us with these tensions; there is no clear path or answer that applies at all times. It teaches that this is what it means to be a Jew -- to sit with these tensions and try to discern the path forward. To live with the challenge of not being able to fulfill everything at once. It's messy, and it's hard. So find leaders who are themselves capable of that discernment, that holding of tensions, so they can help you. Partner with them.

Mazal tov on having found one in Rabbi Lisa Gelber. Shabbat shalom.