

**“Who Was Abraham?”**  
***Parashat Lech Lekha***  
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Today we were introduced to one of the most mysterious people in the Bible: Abram or Avram, later to be called Abraham or Avraham.

I say mysterious because although Abraham is singled out at the beginning of the parashah when God calls out to him, we never learn precisely why. We really don't have any idea what it is about him that ever made him special.

Aware of the lack of detail, and the difficulty of relating to Abraham when we really don't know much about him, the Jewish tradition has sought to fill in the details. And so in the Midrash, in the vast literature that arose around the Torah in an effort to expand upon what's written in it, we get some theories about what he was like.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that in the Jewish midrashic tradition we really have three separate and distinct portraits of Abraham.

**The first is the image of Abraham as an iconoclast, literally, a breaker of idols.**

According to this midrash, Abraham's father, Terach, was an idol maker. Abraham was put in charge of selling his father's idols. He wasn't a great salesman. Here's why: Once, when a haughty, self-important person came in, he insisted on the biggest, most powerful god in the store, and Abraham gave it to him. The man asked, Is this indeed the most powerful god you've got? Abraham asked him: How old are you? 70, he said. Woe is you, Abraham said. You're 70 years old and you can't wait to bow down before a statue made only yesterday! The man threw the statue back, took back his money, and departed.



Then a woman came in and asked for a humble god, for she herself was very poor. Is this indeed a humble god, she asked? Abraham asked her: How old are you? Very old, she said. And yet, he said, you bow down to a statue made only yesterday! She threw it back in the basket and went off in a huff.

Seeing that he was so incompetent at selling idols, Abraham's father and brothers decided to make him a priest. And what does a priest do? He offers food to the gods. So Abraham set food and drink before the gods, and spoke gently to them: "Here, please take some of the food and in return provide some good to human beings!" But they didn't move. So he began to recite a verse: "Mouths they have, but they don't speak; eyes they have, but they see not; ears they have but they don't hear; noses they have but they don't smell; hands they have but they don't feel; feet they have but they don't walk." (Psalm 115:5 - 7).

Then a woman came in with a basket of fine flour and said: "Offer it to the gods!" After she left, he put it down before the largest of the idols, picked up a hammer, smashed all the other idols, and put the hammer in that idol's hands. His father came in and said: "What happened?" And Abraham told him: "The woman came in, and offered the flour, and then the idols quarrelled, each one insisting that he eat first. And so the biggest of them all smashed the others so that he could have the food."

Abraham's father said: "What are you talking about? They can't do anything of the kind!" And so Abraham said: "May your ears hear what your mouth is saying!"

The great Bible scholar Everett Fox, who teaches at Clark University in Worcester, comments that, every semester for over 25 years, students would bring up this story, and ask why they weren't reading it in the Bible. He thinks it's remained popular because it has a child disagreeing with and besting a parent, which is a very popular idea.

**The second image that the Midrash gives us is of Abraham as a religious philosopher.**

Abraham wonders: “Who created the heavens and the earth and me?” He goes outside and feels the strong rays of the sun, and so he prays to the sun. But then, the sun sets in the west and the moon rises in the east. And so he says: this one must have created heaven and earth and me. And the stars must be the moon’s princes and servants. So all night long he stood in prayer to the moon. But in the morning, the moon sank in the west and the sun again rose in the east.

And so he said, “Neither is stronger than the other. There must be a higher Lord over them. To that God will I pray, before that God will I bow down.”

Both of those stories see Abraham as responsible for a religious revolution in God-consciousness.

**There is a third portrait of Abraham -- a portrait of a person who cares for others, who stands up for decency and justice.** It comes across in the following story, one of my favorite ones in all of midrash:

The midrash tells us that if we want to understand Abraham, we have to imagine a man walking along who sees a *bira doleket*, a palace in flames. The man looks at it and says, “Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?” The owner looks out and says, “I am the owner.” Similarly, Abraham said, “Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?” God looked out and said to him, “I am the ruler.”

This is a really strange story. It compares God to the owner of a palace who seems to be incapable of putting out the fire by himself and seems to be waiting, as it were, for someone to come by to help him do that.

As strange as it is, that story fits in very well into one of the great tales of the Abraham cycle.

We’ll read about it next week.

In next week’s parashah, when God is ready to destroy Sodom, he first stops to discuss it with Abraham, inviting him, as it were, to partner with him, to share

responsibility for the city's fate. And Abraham famously argues with God, but in the end, acquiesces.

And there are hints to this quality of Abraham in this week's parashah as well. We read the story of Abraham saddling up his donkey and going off to rescue his nephew, Lot.

This seems to be what God had in mind when he chose Abraham. For, when God tells him to go forth he adds a charge: "Be a blessing," he said. "*V'heyi brachah.*" And then God says, "And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

In other words, Abraham is supposed to be a paragon of virtue. He's supposed to be someone whose presence is a source of blessing for those around him. He goes on, next week, to be more specific: "I have singled him out," God says (18:19) so that he will instruct his descendants to ... do what is just and right." In other words, to be a worthy descendant of "Avraham Avinu," or "Father Abraham," as our Protestant neighbors refer to him, you have to do what is just and right. That's how you become a blessing to and for others.

So this image of a person who NOTICES and who RESPONDS is very compelling. Like Moses later on in the book of Exodus, we see that Abraham cares. He isn't just focused on himself.

This is, in my view, a very appealing aspect of Abraham. He stands up for "truth, justice, and the American way." (See:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2l4bz1FT8U> .)

**Finally, there is one more aspect of Abraham that is quite unusual and one that we don't usually dwell upon but which is prominent in the story.**

Everett Fox points out that it's one of the most challenging aspects of the Abraham cycle from a literary perspective -- yet it may be perhaps the most revealing aspect of all.

At the beginning of the Abraham cycle, God says to Abraham, “Go forth!” And Abraham does. He doesn’t say anything, he doesn’t question anything. He just goes. He’s a model of **submission**.

Similarly, after so many of the Abraham tales, in chapter 22, God again appears to Abraham and says, “Go forth,” and again Abraham submits to God’s will.

Those two “Lech Lecha’s” or “Go forth”’s are, in Everett Fox’s opinion, the key to understanding Abraham. Yes, in retrospect we can see him as independently going forth, leaving his father’s home. Yes, we can see him as a religious iconoclast, but most of all, we should see him as submitting to God’s will.

That’s undramatic. And it isn’t easy. **Yet it is what distinguishes this most unusual of heroes.**

So often, in our society, we’re invited to be true to *ourselves*. We’re invited to address *our needs*, and to fulfill *our destiny*. Yes, that’s all very important. But although it’s less popular, we should also be asking ourselves: “What’s right? What does God demand of me? What *should* I be doing? How should I behave?” And then, we should, like Abraham, follow that path. That’s what Abraham did, and if we want to follow in his footsteps, we should not only be as conscious as he was of the role God plays in the universe, not only as willing as he was to partner with God in pursuing justice, but also -- and perhaps this is hardest of all -- willing to submit to God’s will, when called upon to do so.

Shabbat shalom.