

Lessons for Our New President-elect from the Life of Abraham
Parashat Lech-Lecha
November 12, 2016
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Well, here we are, four days into a new reality. America has chosen a new President. I say America, and not, “those who voted for our new president,” because that’s the way it works in a representative democracy: elected officials become the representatives of all of the citizens.

Some of us are pleased with the result; others are not. But all of us have a stake in this presidency, because we all have a stake in our country. We should all, as President Obama recently said, be “rooting for [the President-elect’s] success.”

How do we do that? I am not a political prognosticator, I am not a pundit -- and neither, I would imagine, are most of us. Besides, we’re in shul; we’re not sitting around the dining room table shooting the breeze. What is the classically Jewish way of reflecting on what lies ahead and capturing our hopes and dreams for our new President-elect? The answer is simple: we look into this week’s parashah and see what lessons lie within it that might be of value to our newly elected, though not yet inaugurated, president.

This is not the first time I’ve faced a challenge of this kind.

Twenty-four years ago, about a year after I began to serve as the rabbi of Temple Aliyah, I was in a similar situation. A new president, from the opposing party to the one that had been in power, had just been elected. Coincidentally, the President-elect’s last name back then was none other than Clinton. Much was known about the President-elect, but much, frankly, was unknown. I thought it appropriate then, as I do today, to reflect on the parashah of the week to glean advice for the new president. Coincidentally, it was the same parashah as the one we’re reading today: Lech L’cha! And so I wrote a sermon entitled, “Lessons for our New President from Parashat Lech L’cha” -- the same title I’ve given my remarks today. (You may want to go [on-line](#) and take a look at what I said in 1992



and compare it to what I'm saying today. As you will see, the words of the parashah are the same; it's how we apply them that differs from year to year.)

And so, what I would like to do today is a time-honored Jewish response to what is going on in the world: it's to offer words of guidance, words of advice, for our new president based on the story of Abraham, the great patriarch of our people, about whom we began reading today and about whom we will continue to read for several weeks to come.

So here goes: *What's the first thing we learn about Abraham?* It's simple: Abraham was a migrant. Not only was Abraham a migrant, but he was the son of migrants. Last week, we read about Abraham's father, Terah, who came from Ur of the Chaldeans. We're told (in Genesis 11:31) that Terah took his son, Avram, and his daughter-in-law, Sarai, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan. (Avram's name would eventually be changed to "Avraham"; and Sarai's name changed to "Sarah.") They never made it. They only got as far as the city of Haran, where they settled, and where Terah died. At the very beginning of *this* week's portion, Avram is still in Haran and God tells him to finish that journey, to continue going forth, all the way to the land of Canaan.

Avram does what God tells him to do: He continues the migration pattern of his father; he travels from Haran to the land of Canaan. He doesn't stop there; he then travels throughout the land, from the north to the south, to the east and to the west. He hardly stays put for more than a verse. Before too long (see Genesis 12:10), there was a famine in the land, and Avram is forced to leave his new home; he is forced to go down to Egypt to avoid starvation.

Clearly, Avram is not only the first Jew; he's the first *wandering* Jew.

We can learn a lesson from this. We shouldn't judge immigrants harshly. We Jews (should) understand this lesson very well. We're told repeatedly in the Torah not to oppress the stranger, the resident alien, the one who sojourns among you. Instead, we are told to embrace immigrants, to care for them, ... even to "love them" as ourselves! (See Leviticus 19:34)

So that's the first lesson that we can glean from our parashah that I'd like to offer up to our new President-elect: Try to live up to the expectations set by the Torah. Treat immigrants as though they were the spiritual descendants of Avram and Sarai. Yes, of course, as President, you will have the duty to protect us, to secure our borders against aggression. But don't forget that the hero of our parashah, our ancestor Avram, was an immigrant. Don't forget that members of your own family were and are immigrants. Your paternal grandparents, Frederick Trump and Elizabeth Christ Trump, immigrated from Germany in 1885 and 1902, respectively. Your mother, Mary Anne MacLeod, emigrated from Scotland. Your wife, Melania, emigrated from Slovenia (and in fact your former wife, Ivana, emigrated from the Czech Republic). Keep that in mind as you formulate our immigration policies.

Here's another lesson: as important as it is for our nation to be great, there's something even more important than that.

At the very beginning of our parashah, after God tells Avram to go forth to the Land of Canaan, he offers him a promise. God promises Avram -- and I'm sure that Mr. Trump can relate to this -- God promises to make of Avram a **“great nation,”** and he promises to make Avram's name **“great.”** But then he adds something. He says: *“v'he'yeh brachah.”* He adds that Avram should **“be a blessing.”** In other words, it isn't enough to be **“great;”** a person or a nation should also strive to be a **“blessing”**-- that is, for others.

That's an inspiring aspiration for our country, isn't it? In other words, **with great wealth comes great responsibility.** It's true for nations, and it is true for individuals.

The third lesson is a great lesson to reflect on right after a bitterly fought contest, and that is the importance of being magnanimous. There's a wonderful story in Genesis Chapter 13 about Avram and his nephew Lot. The land of Canaan, they discover, isn't big enough for the two of them. So they have to separate. Now, Avram has the upper hand: he's older, better connected, better able to have his way. But instead, he is generous: he tells Lot: here are the two possibilities; you decide which half of the land you want, and I'll take the other half. That's a

wonderful approach to take if one wants to retain the respect, the support and the loyalty of those who oppose you.

Fourth, be bold. Don't be afraid to use military force if it's necessary to free the enslaved. That's what Avram does in Chapter 14: he musters his troops and rescues his neighbor, Lot. But notice that Abraham does this by forming a coalition. He works with others to leverage the strength of each of them. That's good advice in the dangerous world in which we live.

Fifth, and this is good advice for all of us: don't exploit your service for financial gain; and **sixth:** make that clear by being transparent. As Avram swears to the King of Sodom (in Genesis 14:22), "I will not take so much as a thread or a shoelace. No one should ever say, 'It is I who made Avram rich.'"

Avram is very concerned lest people conclude that he rescued his nephew Lot and helped the five kings against the four for personal gain. We should conduct our affairs similarly. We should always strive to keep a proper accounting of all of our personal and professional expenses and we should be sure to pay our proper share of taxes, and be transparent about that. And so my advice to our new president is to follow Abraham's lead, that is, to do all of that and to be sure to let the American people know that you're doing that, so that they can have confidence that you are not exploiting your office for personal gain.

The **seventh** lesson comes from an incident that is related in next week's parashah. In chapter 18, we're told that, apart from any other specific obligations, Abraham has one over-arching obligation. God has singled out Abraham, we read, (Genesis 18:19) to keep the way of the Lord "by doing what is just and right." (*la'asot tsedakah m'mishpat*). Abraham is also told to instruct his children and his posterity to do the same. What does it mean to do what is "just and right"? It means to be **honest**, and to be **fair**. It means that one shouldn't treat people badly or even harshly.

This requires either (a) that one possess a conscience and the commitment to following it; or (b) that one hire people who have consciences whom one empowers to keep one on the straight and narrow.

Eighth: One of Abraham's greatest moments occurs when he challenges God. He challenges God when God informs him that He intends to destroy the city of Sodom. Abraham goes back and forth with God, getting God to agree that if only ten righteous people could be found, the city would be spared.

That's an incredible story of Abraham as a bold, principled bargainer. Abraham, clearly, was a master of the "Art of the Deal." You've similarly been praised for being a great deal maker. Can you, might you, apply your talents as Abraham did on behalf of the marginal members of our society: the weak, the displaced, the poor, the disabled, the elderly? Our tradition—which goes back to Abraham--teaches us to look out for them. Can you apply your skill and might, not to benefit yourself but, like Abraham, on behalf of others? If so, you will really be worthy of Abraham's legacy.

Finally, the **ninth** and **tenth** lessons that we can learn from the life of Abraham come from the Talmud. The Talmud teaches us that someone deserves to be considered a descendant of Abraham if he possesses three traits. One of these we've already examined, namely, the commitment to doing what is right. The other two are "a sense of shame, and a capacity for kindness." (See B. Yevamot 79a)

Up until now, Mr. President-elect, you've been a candidate for President. Now you have the chance to demonstrate, as President, your appreciation of these qualities of Abraham and these lessons that we have drawn from this parashah. I hope and I pray that you will demonstrate that as your term of office begins.

Let me conclude by saying what should be obvious, which is that Abraham should be a role model not only for our next president, but for all of us as well. We all should see in Abraham the paradigm, the model to which we should aspire.

And so, let us do that. Let's "go forth," together, into this new uncharted territory, and, to the best of our ability, strive to "be a blessing."

Shabbat shalom.