Lech Lecha 2004
Abraham: Father of All?

Everything in life is clearly a matter of perspective. And to state the obvious: a person's perspective depends on their personal opinion.

I am reminded of the story about the baseball umpire who suddenly in the middle of a hotly contested game entered the stands and sat in the sixth row behind home plate. Asked by the fan whose seat he had taken, what he was doing, he said, "Since you've been complaining the whole game about my calls, I thought maybe the perspective on the strike zone was better up here from where you sit."

Where we sit or stand will definitely affect how we perceive things. Sometimes visitors to our synagogue will come up to me after services and comment on how traditional our service is. Other times people will tell me how liberal our service is. Usually the people who seem most content are the ones who say, "This is exactly the kind of service I was used to when I was growing up." What they mean is: we sing Adon Olam with the melody they remember and like which is, of course, the correct, or as they put it, "the traditional melody."

It is all a matter of perspective.

Perspective was never more evident than this past week. A commentator noted the two different feelings and emotions in Boston and New York. Ironically, although they were down by seven runs in the ninth inning, New York Yankees fans were more confident they were still going to win than Boston fans, who were worried that somehow, even though they were up by seven in the ninth, their team would still find a way to blow it in the seventh and final game of the American League championship series.

How is that for confidence, or lack thereof?

But what it points out is how different people can view the same empirical evidence, the same situation and come to very different conclusions about the identical situation. It is, as they say, why there is chocolate and vanilla. Even more than that, it can call into question the whole notion of reality, reliability, and truth.

This week's torah portion launches Jewish history, for it tells us of the wanderings of Abraham, the very first Jew. As we all know, and as we heard today, Abraham was chosen by God, singled out for a unique mission. He is told to journey forth to an unknown land, and that he and his offspring shall become a blessing to the world.

For me, as a Jew, the story is a powerful one. It forms the paradigm for my point of reference of the beginnings of my people's story. It teaches me important insights about how I should understand our early beginnings and of what is the nature and essence of our calling, mission and purpose in history – all of which contributes to my understanding of what it means to be a Jew and how I should act.

From Abraham, I learn the importance of being concerned with justice for all, not just for our fellow Jews.
From Abraham, I learn the importance of courage and of being willing to stand up and challenge God when necessary.
From Abraham, I learn that part of being a Jew is to understand the significance of acting with kindness, mercy and decency to all.
And from Abraham, I learn that being a Jew entails a commitment of faith and willingness to sacrifice for our ideals and our heritage.

There are countless midrashim created, written, and passed down by the rabbis throughout the ages which seek to understand our patriarch better, which are designed to shed light on his character. Through these stories, he becomes a more familiar figure. Some of them make him more human, and some make him more mythical.

Questions of Abraham's existence have never concerned me. For me, he is real. The lessons our sages teach about him make him come to life, and form my perception of what it is that God demands and expects of me, as a Jew, a descendant of Abraham.

With today's reading, and with Abraham, there began a profound change in the spiritual nature and direction of the human race. This man who concludes that God is one does not just differ from those who came before him, by mathematically reducing the number of gods. He created a system in which there is a fixed standard of morality. As the Etz Hayim commentary notes, "In a world of many gods, the issue is not 'what does God demand of me?' but 'which god can best reward and protect me in exchange for my loyalty?' The revolutionary claim of monotheism is not only that one God alone exists but that God summons us to freely choose what is good."

Clearly, from a Jewish perspective, Abraham is a unique and significant figure. So, what then are we to make of attempts by others to expropriate Abraham? I am referring to those who see Abraham as the father of all monotheistic faiths. Some take it even further and deny that Abraham should be viewed as the patriarch of the Jews. Rather, he should be seen, according to some recent writings, as the single figure who is the patriarch of all. He is linked to Christianity and Islam, religions which are recognized as offshoots of Judaism. Rather than view them then as descendants whose origins came hundreds and even thousands of years after the time of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, some writers attempt to jettison their founding so that Abraham is more than just the spiritual father, but in some way, actually more directly connected to their founding and message.

It is, however, much more than just a matter of perspective.

I must tell you while it is true that imitation is the highest form of flattery, I am uncomfortable with those seek to somehow de-Judaize Abraham. I am all for understanding, universalism, and finding points in common to serve as a bridge to understanding.

But the attempt to say that the role of Abraham is the same for all three faiths is reminiscent of the movement in the late 19th century of wissenschaft, the scientific study of the Torah, which sought to deny any divine role in the transmission of torah. Many of the scholars from that school of thought were primarily interested in trying to show the inferiority of Judaism and to reject or negate any Jewish claims of chosenness.

Similarly, those who try to make Abraham the father of all are, I am afraid, guilty of blurring the distinctive contribution of the Hebrew Bible and of the Hebrews to monotheism. The underlying sentiment is one which denies the uniqueness of Abraham his role as a Jew, and thus also seeks to belittle the Jewish connection to him.

We all share universalistic ideals, and long for world peace and reconciliation. But it need not come at the expense of sacrificing or distorting historic reality.

Abraham can be a source of inspiration to many. He can be admired. But let him still be recognized for what he was, the first Hebrew.

Of all the midrashim about Abraham, my favorite is the one that asks why was he called an Ivri? A Hebrew? The midrash says: He was called an ivri, because, he was willing to stand alone, on the other side, me'ever la'olam, all alone, on the other side of the world.

At a time when the rest of the world worshipped idols, and insisted on being able to see their gods, Abraham was willing to courageously stand alone.

Last week in the story of the Tower of Babel, we were warned about the ominous consequences of misplaced efforts at wiping out the distinctions among humans.

Rather than seizing Abraham and taking him out of the pantheon of Jewish heroes and as the father of our people, let good-willed people stand with Abraham's descendants and be supportive of his message and his people. Let them celebrate what we share and our common faith, while recognizing the unique role he plays in the history of the people of Israel.

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