

This Week in Torah *Lech L'cha*

Often we aspire to emulate the behavior of biblical figures. While not perfect, their virtues surely outweigh their flaws. Abraham is a perfect example--- as our *parasha* opens; it is easy to be drawn to his faith and faithfulness. But his majesty is how those virtues mature as the *sedra* progresses. Even as we read the parts that are easily overlooked—the ones about Abraham as the warrior—we can learn from the rabbis about his merits.

There are military campaigns that Abraham engages in and when successful, he rejects any financial gain offered because he engaged in the campaign because he gave his word. Elsewhere in the *sedra*, he prepares for battle when Lot and other kinsmen are taken hostage. Abraham is seen in the latter chapters of the portion as righteous but a strong man... a noble and ethical warrior.

This is not how many of us identify him. The sages have sought to use these battles as allegories to show Abraham as a man of *rav chesed*, great kindness and whose military adventures were done to preserve his morality and his perception of justice. He is called one who *notzer chesed*, guards the value of kindness by his action. This image is explored in Genesis 14:14— “When Abram heard that his kinsman’s [household] had been taken captive, he **mustered** his retainers who were born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.”

That verb “mustered” is not a completely accurate translation. RaSHI defined the verb *v-yirak, gird*, as in putting on a sword or sheathing a spear. A group from the 12th and 13th French/German commentators called the *Da’at Z’khenim* wrote that Abram “mobilized those whom he trained”—as if he was a teacher. The 12th century Spanish scholar Ibn Ezra believed that the verb was like the one seen in Genesis, meaning emptied as well as an Aramaic version of the root which implied an arm.

Permit me the chance to combine ALL of these ideas into one thought! Using the notion of an allegory, what I see here is that Abraham was armed with kindness as he pursued others. He mobilized those who taught and they emptied their values/weapons with sincerity and dignity. This is hardly a military image of a war, rather an assertion of the core value of kindness, in keeping with Abraham as the one who guards it [*notzer*

chesed]. The text might not project this idea on the surface, but good *drash*/interpretation uses the text as a jumping off point! [Or as my father would say—don't let the truth get in the way of good story! in this case, don't be tied to a traditional understanding of the text to miss a good homily!]

For us, it is an important image. When we speak with someone who does not agree with us, don't demonize them as if we were in battle. Use the weapons that we have been girded with thru-out our tradition—these are not violent ones, but rather rooted in kindness and dignity. Use words of rationality. Listen to another perspective and point out the flaws in their logic with kindness and respect. Remember the overriding value of justice as proclaimed in Deuteronomy: “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Draw from images from within Torah to guide us as we engage:

Be like Abraham who ran out to greet strangers with **kindness**.

Be like Abraham who **rationally debated** with God as he did for the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Be like Abraham who **created space for others** to administer justice.

Be like Abraham who **interpreted** and translated ideas into a rational and systemic plan for the benefit of a society.

Be like Abraham who **advocated with courage** for a people with sheer determination even though he was afraid.

O, this list can continue... but for now, acknowledge that we hold an arsenal of values that can be used to pursue justice. We have seen them used by Abraham when his kinsmen were attacked and when he gave his word to stand up for another.

As his heirs, we are obligated to fulfill his destiny.