

The Road Less Travelled

In this week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, God speaks to the future patriarch Abraham as follows:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרָאָה:
Leave your land, the place where you were born, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. [Genesis 12:1]

What a strange request! All the stranger because this is the first time God speaks to Abraham. The Torah gives no evidence that Abraham knew God. He was the son of a merchant in idols, raised in an idolatrous land – the only kind that existed. And Abraham was not a young man looking for adventure and better opportunities either. He was a wealthy, settled, mature, married man of 75 with an extended family and deep roots in his birthplace. He was not being persecuted either, so he had no need to flee. So we would have expected him to tell God: "You've got to be kidding! Go *where*? Tell me *now*. And *why*? And to begin with, who *are* you?"

But, even stranger than God's order is Abraham's response. He quietly obeys and sets out without further ado, without asking any questions! The Torah says:

[Abraham] went forth as the Lord had commanded him ... [He] took his wife [Sarah] and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out... [Genesis 12:4-5]

What would *you* have done if you were Abraham? A look at Jewish history will show how incredibly unusual his response was. People don't move easily. People resist change. People fear the unknown.

First, consider the Exodus from Egypt. When Moses freed the Israelite slaves with God's guidance, the Midrash tells us that 80% of them refused to go and died in the plague of darkness [Tanhuma, Beshallah 1]. The remaining 20% may have joined the Exodus, but they grumbled nonstop about going back, and some even staged an open revolt. They preferred the devil-they-knew, slavery, to the devil-they-didn't-know, the uncertainty of the desert

and a radically new way of life. Yes, life in Egypt was supremely painful, but Egypt was also home; it was also familiar. They worked hard as slaves for people who beat them and despised them, but they had life, food, shelter, clothing, protection, regularity, predictability. They did not want to face problems they never had before. Witness what the Torah says:

The [people] said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done to us, to take us out of Egypt? [Didn't we tell you: ...] Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert?" [Exodus 14:11-12]

And later:

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread!" [Exodus 16:2-3]

And later:

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? [Exodus 17:3]

And later still:

The Israelites ... said: "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now... we have nothing but this manna..." [Numbers 11:4-6]

The Midrash even says, if you can believe it, that the Israelites also complained that, after Moses split the sea for them, the ground wasn't dry enough and their shoes were getting muddy! [Exodus Rabbah 24:1]

In case this sounds incredible, I can testify that this pushback also happened in the Second Exodus, which included me. The Jews of modern Egypt were forced out after the creation of Israel. The uprooting was excruciatingly painful to the heads of families, who faced another kind of desert: A new land, a new culture, a new language, having to acquire new skills, and with no assets because they had been thoroughly dispossessed. Yet they continued, to their dying day, to wax nostalgic about their life in Egypt. They may have been harassed, persecuted, dispossessed, and finally forced out, but they glossed over all that and frequently said, "Well, at least they didn't kill us!" As if not being quite as bad as the Nazis was a virtue that exonerated the Egyptians! Fortunately, I was only eighteen when I left, and I was certainly eager to "leave my land, the place where I was born, and my father's house".

Second, consider the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. Seventy years after the destruction of the First Temple and the Exile, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and told the exiles: "Good news! You can go home and rebuild your Temple!" But the vast majority, born in exile, did not

want to go. They had built comfortable lives for themselves and did not want to move. A group of Jews returned, but did not make a mark. Almost a century later, a second expedition, led by capable, strong-willed, visionary Ezra the Scribe, was more successful. Together with Nehemiah, Ezra rebuilt Judaism on a strong foundation. But, all told, no more than twenty percent of the Jews went back.

Third, consider the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Only five percent of *post-Holocaust* Jewry was there to start the state: 600,000 Jews fighting for independence, out of 12 million worldwide. Even with the Holocaust at their backs and with antisemitism very much present at home, 95% of the surviving Jews were too comfortable where they were to physically join in this epic rebirth.

People strongly reject the advice to move *even* when dark clouds loom on the horizon. When Naziism was on the rise, the rabbis of Europe counseled against leaving home. They said Hitler was just so much noise and would blow away. They said that Jews should especially avoid going to America, where they will assimilate; or to the Holy Land, where they will be ensnared by godless secular Zionists. Most European Jews accepted this advice with relief at the time. They were too comfortable to move. When they opened their eyes, it was too late. Night descended on them, and most perished in the Holocaust.

Let's get back to Abraham. Sure, the Talmud and the Midrash fill in the gaps and tell us that he had figured out the existence of God on his own when he was a small boy, that he converted many people to monotheism, and that he even followed the Torah before it was revealed. This may explain his total and unquestioned obedience to the direct call of God, but it is not in the written Torah. In the written Torah, all we see is that Abraham had the courage to follow his instinct and take the road less travelled. And that has made all the difference.

Shabbat shalom.