

Why did God choose Abraham?

Background

- This week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, is all about Abraham:
 - God promises him a bright future if he moves to a new place.
 - He faces a famine there; goes to Egypt; separates from his nephew Lot; participates in the War of the Four against the Five and wins; enters into the Covenant Between the Parts with God; and has a son, Ishmael, by his maid Hagar since his wife, Sarah, is childless.
 - God promises him and Sarah a son, changes his name from Abram to Abraham, and orders him to circumcize himself and his household.

But why does God take an interest in Abraham in particular? We are not told. Contrast with Noah (before him) and Moses (after him):

- Noah introduced as "righteous, perfect":
Noach matza chen b'enei HaShem... Noach ish tzaddik tamid hayya be-dorotav; et ha-Elokim hit-hallech Noach
And Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord... Noah was a righteous man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. [Gen. 6:8-9]
- Moses introduced by actions that show leadership, compassion, and courage:
 - Kills Egyptian taskmaster who is beating a Jew. [Ex. 2:11]
 - Intervenes in fight between two Jews, telling one, "Why do you strike your fellow?" [Ex. 2:13]
 - Defends the daughters of Yitro from the shepherds who drove them away from the well. [Ex. 2:17]
 - Only THEN, God talks to him at the burning bush and gives him his mission. [Ex. 3].

We understand *why* those two were picked. But Abraham?

He is introduced as follows:

Terach fathered Abram, Nachor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot...
And Abram and Nachor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai... But Sarai was barren; she had no child.

And Terach took Abram his son, and Lot [his grandson] the son of Haran...and Sarai his daughter-in-law... and they went... from [their homeland] Ur Kasdim [Ur of the Chaldeans] to...the land of Canaan. And they came to Haran, and lived there... And Terach died in Haran. [Gen. 11:27-32]

This passage is about Terach, not Abraham.

-Why did they want to move to Canaan? We don't know.

Then, suddenly, without transition or justification:

And the Lord said to Abram, "Get out from your country, and from your family, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you; And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you..." So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him; and Abram was seventy five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the souls that they had made in Haran; and they went forth to go to the land of Canaan; and to the land of Canaan they came. [Gen. 12:1-5]

And, a little later, God tells him:

All the land that you see, I give to you and to your seed forever... Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth. [Gen. 13:15-6].

Why? God doesn't say. Abraham doesn't ask. No obvious reason. Why him? Unknown.

The Ramban (13th-century Spain) poses the question thus:

This section of the Torah has not adequately explained the issue. Why should God tell Abraham, "Leave your land and I will extend to you the greatest good that has ever been", without first indicating to us that Abraham was a servant of God or a perfectly righteous individual? Or, the text should state a reason for God's injunction to Abraham to leave his land, namely that he will achieve closeness to God in the new location. The convention of the Torah is to state, "Walk before Me, listen to My voice, and I will reward you"... This is the pattern throughout the Torah:
-"If you will follow My statutes..., then I will provide the rains in their due season." [Lev. 26:3];
-"If you will surely listen to My voice..., then [I] will raise you above all other nations of the earth." [Deut. 28:1]...
But to promise Abraham such reward solely on account of his leaving his land makes no sense.

1-Abraham was chosen by default?

Perhaps God approached others, but they were unwilling to comply. (Abraham's father or brothers?)

-Midrash: God offered Torah to various nations. All turned Him down, except Israel. [Sifri to Deut. 33:2]

We only hear about Abraham because he was the only one willing to obey. Was Abraham by default the best, although not particularly worthy?

2-Abraham was chosen because he was intelligent?

This is the answer given in the Midrash. Abraham proceeded logically to deduce the existence of God and the futility of idolatry, on his own, without revelation:

-R. Chiyya said: Terach was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away somewhere and left Abraham to sell them in his place. A man came and wished to buy one. Abraham asked him, "How old are you?"

"Fifty years", was the reply.

[Abraham] exclaimed, "Woe to [you]! You are fifty years old and would worship a day-old object!"

[The man] became ashamed and left.

-On another occasion a woman came with a plateful of flour and asked him, "Take this and offer it to [the idols]." So he took a stick, broke [the idols], and put the stick in the hand of the largest [idol].

When his father returned, he asked, "What have you done to [the idols]?"

[Abraham] rejoined, "...A woman came with... fine meal and asked me to offer it to [the idols]. One [idol] claimed, 'I must eat first,' while another claimed, 'I must eat first.' So the largest [idol] arose, took the stick, and broke [the other idols]."

-The father cried out, "Why do you make fun of me? Do [these idols] have any knowledge?"

[Abraham] retorted: "Your ears should listen to what your mouth is saying."

-Thereupon [the father] seized [the son] and delivered him to [King]

Nimrod. [Nimrod] proposed, "Let us worship the fire!"

[Abraham] replied, "Let us rather worship water, which extinguishes the fire."

"Then let us worship water!"

"Let us rather worship the clouds which bear the water."

"Then let us worship the clouds!"

"Let us rather worship the winds which disperse the clouds."

"Then let us worship the wind!"

"Let us rather worship human beings, who withstand the wind."

[Nimrod] exclaimed, "You are just bandying words. We will worship only the fire. Behold, I will cast you into [the fire], and let your God, whom you

adore, come and save you from it... [But] when Abram descended into the fiery furnace, he was saved...

[Gen. R. 38:13]

So Abraham derived the truth on his own. Talmud goes further:

Rav said: Our father Abraham kept the whole Torah. [Yoma 28b]

So Abraham observed the Torah before it was revealed because he figured it out. Basis is Torah itself: God tells Isaac that he will receive blessings...

...because Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. [Gen. 26:5]

But why doesn't the Torah tell us his merit, as it did with Noah and Moses?

-Ramban (13th-century Spain): Torah did not want to dwell on the terrible things Abraham witnessed in Ur. This would publicize idolatry.

-Yet Torah lists later what practices are forbidden.

-Yet Torah does speak of wickedness in time of Noah:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. [Gen. 6:5]

-Maharal (16th-century Prague): Others had only one-time missions:

-Noah: Build the ark and save each species

-Moses: Free the Jews, teach them Torah, and lead them to Israel

But Abraham's mission was for eternity. "I will make you a great nation" -- God was choosing the progenitor of a nation, not just one individual.

3-Abraham was chosen because he was obedient?

He did things without questioning. He had faith they were right.

That's what God wanted at the time, for that mission.

-God was not looking for a righteous man (like Noah) or a compassionate man (like Moses), but an *obedient* one.

-*Naaseh venish'ma* -- do first, understand later. [Ex. 24:7]

Torah could not say at first that Abraham was selected because he was "obedient", because he had done nothing yet to prove that. But he proved it:

-The strange commandment, "Leave everything and go", was followed without question.

-Later, the order to "Sacrifice your son Isaac", was followed without question.

-(However, Abraham did argue against the destruction of Sodom, so righteousness was important to him).

God says of Abraham:

...I know him: He will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice... [Gen. 18:19]

Mishna: God tested Abraham to make sure he was the right one:

With ten tests Abraham, our father, was tested; and he passed them all, in order to show how great his love was. Peace be upon him. [Avot 5:3]

The Rambam's list:

1. God orders him to leave his homeland for Canaan. [Gen. 12:1]
2. When he gets there, he faces a famine. [Gen. 12:10]
3. The Egyptians capture his wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh. [Gen. 12:15]
4. He must fight in the battle of the Four against the Five. [Gen. 14:14]
5. He sleeps with Hagar after not being able to have children with Sarah. [Gen. 16:3]
6. God orders him to circumcise himself in his old age. [Gen. 17:24]
7. The king of Gerar captures Sarah, to take her for himself. [Gen. 20:2]
8. God orders him to send Hagar away after their son Ishmael was born. [Gen. 21:12]
9. He becomes estranged from his son Ishmael. [Gen. 21:12]
10. God orders him to sacrifice his son Isaac. [Gen. 22:2]

Some lists include:

-God tells him that his children will be enslaved in a strange land. [Gen. 15:13]

Other lists exist, include Midrash stories.

-E.g., he is thrown into a fiery furnace.

Abraham got to work right away

Abraham wasted no time spreading the message, without being commanded. Midrash:

-Abraham made converts, for it is written, "And Abraham took Sarai his wife... and all the souls that they had made in Haran." [Gen. 12:5]

-R. Eleazar observed in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: If all the nations assembled to create one insect, they could not give it life, yet you say, "And all the souls that they had made in Haran!"

-It refers to the converts. Then let [the Torah] say, "That they had converted". Why "That they had made?" That is to teach you that if one brings a convert near [God], it is as though he created him.

-Now why does it not say "That he had made" instead of "That they had made"? Said R. Hunia: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women. [Gen. R. 84:4]

Avot prayer in Amidah begins by calling God “God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob”, but ends with calling God "*Magen Avraham*" -- "Shield of Abraham".

Why not “Shield of the Patriarchs”?

- Because Abraham was different: He was the first. He was the enabler.

- He taught his children but no one taught him. [Rambam, Hilkhos Avodat Kokhavim 1:3].

- He grew up among pagans, but his children did not. He is called "*bechir ha-avot*" -- "the best of the patriarchs". [Midrash Sekhel Tov on Gen. 33].

Conclusion

- God chose Abraham because he was intelligent and obedient.

- He had reached knowledge of God on his own, without revelation, and did as told.

That was the combination God needed.

Shabbat shalom.