

Be Like Eliezer

Parshat Lech Lecha 5784/2023

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel, Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein

Let me begin by offering a warm welcome and Shabbat Shalom to everyone, and especially to our many friends and guests this Shabbat. Last week, I implored our congregation to call on our friends, colleagues, neighbors and supporters during this difficult time for Israel and the Jewish community.

Our Torah portion this morning began with Avraham answering God's call, and indeed there are many people here whose presence today is an emphatic answer to our community's call for support.

I especially want to welcome the honorable Melissa Conyears-Ervin, the City Treasurer of Chicago and our alderman, Alderman Bennett Lawson who represents the 44th ward of Chicago. Also welcome our Lakeview neighbor, Rector Daphne Cody from St. Peter's Episcopal Church. A warm welcome to Judge Debjani Desai and Judge Megan Goldish, and to Whitney Siehl and Lauren Tuckey, the current and past presidents of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, and to all the other community leaders here today.

Finally, and this is a bittersweet welcome, but we welcome back our dear friends, the Smoler family, who had planned to spend this year in Israel. We are happy to see you and can only imagine what the last few weeks have been like for your family. For many reasons, we hope that you are able to return to Israel soon to resume your family's year of learning and growth as planned.

Our Torah portion this morning included Breishit [Genesis] Chapter 14, which tells the story of a hostage rescue, amidst what is known as the war between the four kings and the five kings.

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-כָּל-רֶכֶשׁ סְדֹם וְעִמְכָּר וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲכָלָם וַיֵּלְכוּ: וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-לוֹט וְאֶת-רֶכֶשׁוֹ בֶּן-אֲחִי
אֲבָרָם וַיֵּלְכוּ וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּסְדֹם:

[The invaders] seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, and his possessions, and departed; for he had settled in Sodom.

Recently arrived from Ur, Abraham is quickly thrust into regional conflict. His response, and the rabbinic interpretations of these verses are fascinating and hint to a spiritual message for all of us during difficult circumstances.

Verse 14 tells us of Avram's response:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו וַיִּרְקַח אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו יְלִידֵי בֵיתוֹ שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂר וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וַיִּרְדּוּ
עַד־דָּן:

When Abram heard that his kinsman's [household] had been taken captive, he mustered his followers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Avram in this moment is not the great theologian or the clarion call for justice. Avram here is a tactician, a commander who acts with alacrity to rescue his family member Lot.

The rabbinic commentaries, even the close readers of text, wonder about one phrase in particular in this verse: וַיִּרְקַח אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו - *he mustered his followers*. Who was this exactly?

The great medieval interpreter Rashi noted that the Hebrew word *chanichav* is actually written in the singular and not the plural. Thus, Avraham mustered not many followers but one follower in particular, a longtime and trusted servant who had become more like family to Avraham: Eliezer.

We also know that later on, this same servant will be entrusted with the vital task of finding a partner for Isaac, and thereby ensuring the continuation of Avraham's descendents.

Rashi goes even further (14:14) suggesting that Eliezer was dispatched alone since Eliezer's name in Hebrew has the numerical value of 318, the same number as those dispatched to rescue Lot.

Who was this mysterious servant that Avraham trusted with the most important tasks? The answer may surprise you:

The *Targum Yonatan*, one of the early Aramaic interpretations of the Torah, fills in the picture a bit more: *And when Abram heard that his brother was made captive, he armed his young men who were trained for war and had grown up in his house; but they willed not to go with him. And he chose from them **Eliezer the son of Nimrod**, who was equal in strength to all the three hundred and eighteen; and he pursued unto Dan.*

Two important pieces of information about Eliezer emerge from this source: first, that he had the strength equivalent to three hundred and eighteen men! Second, that he was the son of Nimrod!

Nimrod is a notorious character in the Torah and in Jewish thought. Nimrod, who the Torah describes (10:8-9) as “גִּבּוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ, the first mighty person in the land, a mighty hunter by the grace of God.”

Nimrod was more than a skilled hunter, he was a regional despot. The great 12th Spanish commentator Nachmanides notes that Nimrod was the first person in human history to proclaim himself a king. Nimrod is determined to build an empire and make something out of himself, no matter the cost.

In the rabbinic imagination, it was Nimrod who was the king of Babel, who suggested (114): “let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.”

He sought to make a name for himself, through power and strength and to inspire others to do the same. Beneath these ambitions to be something, however, lay a deep anxiety: Nimrod was that his name would be neither regarded nor remembered. He was afraid that he would be inconsequential, that he would be a “nothing”.

How could it be that a son like Eliezer is born to a father like Nimrod?!

Eliezer, like many children, must have watched his parents closely. He may have recoiled against his father’s desires for conquest, seeking to do the exact opposite.

However, the opposite of a power-hungry despot is not a life of anonymity. The opposite of a life of violence and is a life of purpose and consequence, a life devoted to service and justice and morality, to being somebody who makes a positive impact and brings the presence of God into this world.

Our patriarch Avraham exemplified these values and it was these virtues to which Eliezer felt inspired and aligned. That is how the son of a king became *eved* Avraham, Abraham’s most trusted servant.

In our current moment, we are all called to be like Eliezer, to stand up against violence and terror, to do anything we can - with superhuman strength perhaps - to help free those being held captive; and to attach ourselves toward meaningful service.

We must remember what Avraham stood for, for Avraham's mission then guides our community and Israel to this day.

Next week, we will read Breishit [Genesis] 18 which offers the following encapsulation of Avraham's calling, and the mission of the Jewish people:

And Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him, for I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his descendants to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right, in order that God may bring about for Abraham what has been promised him."

When so many of us have felt singled out as Jewish people, let us remember what we were originally singled out for:

to steward a relationship with God, in order to bring God's presence into this world;
to live lives pursuing holiness, peace (yes, that word and concepts still exists, please God speedily in our days), morality, justice and dignity for all people, Jews and non-Jews, Palestinian and Israeli alike.

Finally, in this moment when our community feels alone, let us remember that we are not. We have many friends here today - many Eliezers - in this city and in this country who stand with us and support Israel. We are grateful for these friends who will partner with us in the days and weeks to come, helping us fulfill the holy mission given to Avraham so long ago.

