

D'var Torah Lech Lecha – Nov. 5, 2022

By Dan Caine

Today's parasha is Lech Lecha. After the story of Bavel, we have several verses of begats, tracing humanity from Shem through Avram, ten generations. We learn that Terach, Lot, Avram and Sarai, set out from Ur, heading for Canaan, but that for reasons unknown to us, they stopped and settled in Haran.

And then, the thunderclap:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לְדַלְּךָ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

And the Lord said to Avram, "Go forth from your land, and from the place you were born, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

It comes out of the blue. And there is no indication of why God has chosen Abraham. For Noah, there was a reason: Noah "was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generation." [Genesis 6:9]. But for Abraham? Nothing.

And it's not as if Abraham was the only possibility. From the long list of begats, we know that there is no shortage of Noah's descendants from which to choose.

So why Abraham? We can explore four possibilities: First, was it Abraham's intellect? If the Jews are going to be a smart people, maybe they need a smart progenitor. Second, was it his faithfulness? If each of us each had a nickel for every time God exalts obedience to God, we would all be wealthy. Third, was it Abraham's personal qualities, as later revealed? You want the founder of your religion to be a good person. And, fourth, was there no reason at all? Was God's choice of Abraham just random, and what followed were the reasonable outcomes of that randomness?

Let's examine these possibilities one at a time.

First, the argument for God choosing Abraham for his intellectual prowess. Maimonides thought this was the case.

In Mishneh Torah [Avodat Kochavim, Ch 2], Maimonides argues that Abraham was so intellectually astute, that, on his own, he deduced the existence of the one true God. Maimonides says that Abraham realized that God must exist because someone must have set everything going. Apparently, according to Maimonides, no one before Abraham had had that thought. Maimonides is the one who said that the people around Abraham were idolators, and that Abraham smashed their idols. This is probably what gave rise to the stories we heard as children about Terah having an idols shop and Abraham using that space for batting practice.

The second argument, that God chose Abraham because of Abraham's faith was made in Bereshit Rabbah.

Bereshit Rabbah [39:10] argues that Abraham was a model of faith. It says that we can conclude this, actually, from the begats. It says that God was waiting patiently throughout 10 generations, looking for someone to choose, and that finally God found Abraham. According to Bereshit Rabbah, the very fact that God waited 10 generations before choosing someone tells you that God knew that Abraham was special.

As we have seen, both of these explanations for why God chose Abraham – Abraham's intellect and Abraham's faith -- have some basis in the surrounding Torah text.

But neither of these explanations fits comfortably with the plain face of the text, which simply and abruptly says that God chose Abraham -- no reason given, and no expressed link to Abraham's intellect or the begats of the prior verses.

This brings us to our third argument, that God chose Abraham for his personal qualities. The argument here would be that God recognized these personal qualities, revealed to God in the first 75 years of Abraham's life, and Abraham's conduct after being chosen by God reveals them to us.

So was Abraham a deserving person? What qualities do we see in his subsequent behavior?

We see the quality of generosity, when he offers Lot the choice of places to settle.

We see the quality of loyalty when he goes to liberate Lot who has been captured by the five kings.

We see the quality of bravery, when he goes to liberate Lot with just 318 soldiers.

Later, at Sarah's initiative, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. In these actions, although we may have some ambivalence about them, we do see the very important quality of obedience to one's wife.

And then, finally, when Abraham shows his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, we see his extreme willingness to follow God's command.

These qualities are quite laudatory and quite extraordinary.

In fairness, we must note that there are some things that Abraham does that seem not to be so admirable. He allows Hagar to be mistreated. And he sends his child Ishmael away to die. However, in these cases, there are mitigating circumstances, as not only his wife, but also God is telling Abraham to do these things, with a promise that things will turn out all right for all concerned.

So overall, I think we can say that as Abraham's life unfolded after God chose him, Abraham appears to be a pretty stand-up guy, and that God, knowing this, and being able to see Abraham's character before we do, chose Abraham for that reason.

So, thus far, we have considered the possibilities that God chose Abraham because of Abraham's intelligence; that God chose Abraham because of Abraham's faith; and that God chose Abraham because of Abraham's character.

In considering any of these as the reason that God chose Abraham, however, we have to come back to the inconvenient fact that there is no indication from the text that any of these was the case.

There is still a fourth possibility we might want to consider.

This is the possibility that God actually chose Abraham randomly. There is nothing in the Torah to indicate otherwise. And random selection might actually be the reading that matches most closely with the pshat of the text. In this reading, Avram was just lucky, and if he were here with us today, I might tell him about a game called Powerball.

If that is the case, what do we make of the nobility of Abraham, as later revealed?

Maybe the lucky one was God, having randomly chosen someone who worked out pretty well.

But another way of thinking about this is that God's choice and Abraham's behavior are not independent events. That is, God's choosing Abraham had an impact on how Abraham behaved subsequently in his life.

Perhaps cause and effect are reversed. God did not choose Abraham because Abraham was noble, brave, and obedient. Rather, Abraham behaved nobly, bravely and obediently because he was chosen by God.

This is not so implausible a possibility.

People do tend to behave in a way that is expected of them. If you tell your child that they are a good person, they tend to behave well. Conversely, if you tell a child that they are a bad person, they tend to behave badly. People's behaviors tend to conform to their family's and their society's expectations of them.

Since Abraham knew that he was the chosen of God, he had to behave in a way that conformed to and justified that choice.

For today's purposes, let's go with this fourth possibility. In this case, there may be two ideas in this line of thinking that we can take away today.

The first idea may be for each of us always, to the extent possible, to communicate to our loved ones and our peers that *we* would choose *them* -- that we have faith in them and that we believe they are noble, brave and, where appropriate, obedient. The lesson would be for us to behave in the way we are postulating God behaved toward Abraham.

And the second idea for us may be for us to behave in the way that Abraham behaved. That is, to behave as if we, too, were chosen by God. So that we, too, can aspire to emulate the noble aspects of Abraham's behavior: to be loyal, to be brave, and to follow the ways of God.

Shabbat shalom.