

SERMON Lech L'cha

Rabbi David Edleson Temple Sinai, Burlington, VT Oct 20, 2018

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ־עֵבֶר וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָךָ:

Vayomer Adonai el-Avram: Lech-L'cha me'artz'cha umimoledet'cha umibeit avicha el-ha'arets asher areka.

And Adonai said to Avram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your ancestral home and go to the land that I will reveal to you.

This is how the story of Abraham and Sarah begins.

This is how the story of our tribe's family line begins.

These are not universal ancestors like Adam, Eve and Noah, but rather, this is how the covenantal relationship that we call Judaism begins.

לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ־עֵבֶר וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָךָ

Lech-L'cha me'artz'cha umimoledet'cha umibeit avicha el-ha'arets asher areka.

Leave everything you know and go, but you're not going to know where you are going until later. Ever felt like this?

Somehow this very ancient text managed in very few words to express the human condition of human beings in the modern world. We are every day, it seems, leaving what we knew, what we thought we knew, and boldly heading toward a destination that is entirely unclear.

I want you to imagine a time in your life when have you felt called, felt pulled to leave the familiar and the comfortable to go be somewhere different, go do something different?

What was it that called to you? What was it like for you to take that first step?

Although the simple reading, the *pshat*, here is that Abraham knows that God means head to Canaan, but God will have to text him exact locations when he gets closer. And this is how commentators like Ibn Ezra read it.

But other rabbis go much deeper and say the journey Abraham took is one that calls to all of us, to go to learn who we are.

The rabbis ask how Abraham got from growing up in a culture of idol worshippers to being able to hear the call to a new way of seeing the world, of moving toward a belief in One God who created and cares for the world. Imagine what a radical shift in paradigm that was in 2000 BCE.

We all know the beginnings of the famous midrash of Abraham growing up in an idol factory. In *Breishit Rabba*, we learn that Abrahams father made idols, and when customers would come in, Abraham would point out to them why it made no sense to worship idols that had just been made by human hands. Then he finally took a hammer and smashed all the idols, and put the hammer in the hands of the biggest idol, and when he father screamed ‘what have you done,’ Abraham could say, “he did it.” Of course, his father said, “that’s not possible,” and Abraham said, “Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?”

I love that line. I’ve used that line.

In the Midrash HaGadol, *The Great Midrash*, Other rabbis ask how Abraham came to realize what no one around him seemed to realize.

It tells us that bored at the shop as a young man, his mind would roam, and he would start asking uncomfortable questions. (sound familiar to any of you?) First he realized that the idols could not be divine since they didn’t create life, and this lead to a cascade of questions, a disorienting crisis where one new idea leads to another and another. He asks if it shouldn’t be the earth that is worshipped. But without rain, the earth could not produce life, so shouldn’t we worship the heavens and waters. But the heavens themselves are in a cycle with the sun and moon and stars, so shouldn’t we worship them? Who then controls those? It is at this moment of epiphany that God calls out, “Lecha Lecha.”

Maimonides paints a *gentler process*. In his Mishneh Torah, in the section on Idol Worship, the Rambam writes of baby Abraham:

As soon as Abraham was weaned his mind began to roam around and ask questions. In his infancy he wondered day and night, and would ask: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no leader—and who, indeed, causes it to revolve, it being impossible that it should revolve itself? Moreover, he neither had a teacher nor one to help him learn, for he was stuck in Ur of the Chaldeans among the foolish worshipers of stars, and his father,

and his mother, like all the people, worshiped stars.

Little by little, Abraham questions and when he turns 40 he has the “Aha” moment: there is One God, and that the whole world was in error, and this error was keeping their consciousness from realizing the truth.

For Maimonides, it is a slow, gradual process of enlightenment, but for the Midrash, it is more of a cascading crisis of belief with one question coming after another.

I want to ask you to think of a time in your life when you began to question some of the assumptions you had grown up with and those around you believed. Was it gradual or sudden? What was it like for you to leave, in terms of belief, what was familiar and venture out without knowing exactly where the questions would end up? (Share)

Anyone who has ever ventured out like Abraham and Sarah knows this feeling of taking a leap of faith, of feeling called to take a risk.

Our tradition begins the story of our people with two people taking that exact risk. We think of religion as telling people exactly what to believe and how to think, but that is not how our story begins.

Our Torah portion this week begins with the command to leave, and it ends in the covenant with Abraham and with us. A covenantal relationship with God, a strong sense of your spiritual life, your spiritual worth – these don’t have to tell us what to think, but instead our faith, our relationship with the divine can help keep us grounded, calm, and more secure that we are good and we are held and loved, even when we don’t know where we are heading; even when we are swimming upstream, even we are on an unknown path with an unclear destination. We are always connected to something Eternal and enduring.

לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָרָאָךְ

Lech-L'cha me'artz'cha umimoledet'cha umibeit avicha el-ha'aretz asher areka.