

Lech Lecha – 5783

I love historical fiction. I love to read it and I love to watch movies with themes that arise from history. One can learn so much about a different period in history through the settings, the small details used to illuminate the main plot and the characters in the story. In a way, much of the Torah can be accused of being historical fiction because we have discovered so few artefacts that can back up the details of its stories. That's very different of course from the books and movies that comprise the genre I am describing. However, if we look more closely at the ways in which the different stories are told we can "read into" some more easily than others.

Compare the information, the historical facts, provided at the beginning of the story of Moshe Rabbeinu with those we get about Avraham, the focus of this week's parsha. We read, directly from the text, much about the Moses story and his early beginnings. We are told where he was born what life was like at the time of his birth, who his parents and siblings were, and how he ended up in the court of Pharaoh. We even know more or less how he ended up in Midian and then returned to Egypt to become the saviour of his people who were enslaved. Compare that to what little we know about Abraham and his family and how he ended up hundreds of miles from his original home.

What we know now as opposed to what we know from just reading the text comes from Midrash, stories the sages of old told to fill in the gaps of information lacking in the text of the Torah. The problem with that though is that one can find Midrashic texts that provide somewhat different interpretations of what exactly happened and why. I will extend that problem further to my own desire to study and interpret Torah which only began for

me several years ago. My knowledge of the Midrashic texts is scant to say the least so when I approached the actual text of today's parsha I found it very episodic, and it left me with more questions than answers.

We begin the parsha reading that HaShem calls to Moses and tells him to take himself away from his home and follow the calling of HaShem to find his way to the land that he will be given, and his progeny will be as plentiful as the stars in the heaven. We know that at the beginning of the parsha his name is Avram, and his wife's is Sarai. With very little detail provided we learn that there is a famine and Avram and Sarai, now very successful shepherds, go to Egypt where Avram asks Sarai to pretend to be his sister, lest Pharaoh cause Avram harm. Never mind that Sarai's purity is jeopardized because she is a beautiful woman and the text intimates that Sarai will be found to be attractive to Pharaoh. Somehow tragedy is avoided, and her purity remains intact, but the text reveals no details as to just how that comes to be. Next, we read about some difficulties between neighbouring kings who capture Lot, Avram's nephew, and Avram saves Lot somehow, again, not many details provided. Immediately after that, now, we are told that Avram and Sarai are having trouble conceiving a child which, to our modern ears is no surprise given their ages. But Sarai's generosity of spirit by sending Avram her slave, Hagar, to Avram's tent to be a concubine results in a pregnancy and jealousy of not being able to conceive herself. But Avram solves this complex problem between Sarai and Hagar by naming the child Ishmael which somehow makes everything right. Finally, after this rollercoaster ride of goods and beds, Avram finds favour in the sight of HaShem, who commands Avram to circumcise himself and Ishmael and all the other men in the camp, and this circumcision becomes an eternal symbol between HaShem and the man now called Avraham, of their compact, by

which Avraham accepts HaShem as the one and only God and agrees to live a life far different from the one he grew up in.

I hope you gleaned from my recap of Lech Lecha the ups and downs of the story and left you with as many questions as I am left with just by reviewing the text. My point is to suggest that what is missing are all the little details that are added by a thorough knowledge of the Midrashic material expanding on this story and its components. I am new to Torah study, and I am forever left frustrated by my lack of knowledge of all the other supporting texts yet understand that's because I became an educator and not a rabbi. However, what can be understood without all the supportive details from Midrash is that Avraham in this parsha becomes the father of the three world religions that are founded on what Avraham did at the very beginning of his story.

I have made the case that Avraham follows Adam and Noach at the beginning of Bereshit as attempts by HaShem to find a partner to Letaken HaOlam or to work with HaShem to perfect his creation. Adam failed because he did not listen to the first instruction given to him by HaShem. Noach failed because after all that HaShem had done to protect Noach and his family and position him to recreate a world better than he found it prior to being on the ark, he shamed himself and did not understand or have any insight into what HaShem expected of him. Unlike those two, Avraham not only understands that there can only be one God with the power to cause events to happen or not. But he also accepts instinctively that he has a role to play and without thinking it through completely, understands his role is to be a partner and to try to do good. We see Avraham making errors in judgement in this week's parsha but also taking steps personally, without really being told, to make the world a better place for him and his family.

HaShem has finally found someone with enough insight to understand that to be human is not to be perfect but to struggle to find perfection in the world or to make more perfect that which he or she sees. That is what it means to have free will and to use it wisely. It doesn't always mean it is easy, but it is what we have to do. Shabbat shalom.