

Sparks

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Abraham: The Master of Personal Transformation

In reading the Torah's (Bible) account of Abraham, we cannot but be surprised and disturbed by the obvious omissions. Abraham appears upon the stage of history as a virtually anonymous character, without lengthy introduction or background or any real character references. The Torah recounts his genealogy and the migration of his family from one Mesopotamian city to another. It mentions his wife Sarai (who is later renamed Sarah) and her barrenness. It also mentions the death of his father and brother. But these are all mundane vital statistics that do not hint at Abraham's spiritual status.

Suddenly, yet in an oddly matter-of-fact way, the Torah relates a momentous revelation, one of the most crucial scenes in the entire Torah. G-d bursts into the personal life of this one man, calling to him, demanding of him a radical renunciation and promising that he will become prosperous, famous, the progenitor of a great nation which will be no less than the conduit of blessing for all of humanity. In just a few words, this relatively unknown character becomes the father of the future "chosen people," the origin of the most fascinating national history, with far-reaching universal implications.

So it is remarkable that prior to this astounding revelation there is no mention of Abraham's personal merit, special character traits, or unique innate qualities. We meet a man with a meager past who is transformed, virtually overnight, into the father and leader of a nation with a pivotal future, centrally significant to the entire world's history.

The Midrash, tells us that Abraham belonged to an idolatrous society. In fact, he was the son of a successful idol distributor. Although an heir to a prosperous business, Abraham was a troubled soul, unable to accept Divinity attributed to statues made of wood and stone. He did his best to convince people not to buy idols. Eventually his thinking led him to action — he smashed the idols in his father's shop and even set fire to the royal idol collection of King Nimrod. A seeker of truth, through rigorous contemplation of the natural world, Abraham realized the existence of one G-d, abstract and universal. A valiant spokesman, he called public assemblies to proclaim the truth of one indivisible Divinity. An astute educator, he composed books with four hundred chapters, demonstrating the futility of idol worship.

Regarding all of this, however, the Torah is strangely silent. It mentions nothing about Abraham's personal past nor does it make any reference to his great spiritual status that would warrant his special mission.

Perhaps that simply is not the Torah's style. But in Genesis, we have a disturbing precedent. In introducing Noah, the previous principle character in the narrative, the Torah states, "Noah found favor in G-d's eyes... Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation. Noah walked with G-d." Only after thus spelling out his spiritual credentials is G-d's revelation to Noah recounted. How surprising that the Torah would so laud Noah's spiritual status and never mention Abraham's!

This obvious evasion of Abraham's past clearly indicates that Abraham's chosenness was not based on his past. A careful reading of the text tells us all we need to know:

"And G-d said to Abraham, 'Go from your country, your birthplace, and your father's house, to a land that I will show you.' And Abraham went as G-d told him."

In these few words — "As G-d told him," — we discover that the essence of Abraham's choseness belongs not to his past, but to his willingness to respond to the call of G-d in the present.

G-d said, "Go." and Abraham said, "Yes." Without hesitation he immediately picked himself up, taking his wife and his entire family, and left. Furthermore, he did not even know where he was going, except to some unspecified land that G-d promised to show him. Still, he asked no questions. For Abraham, it was enough that G-d asked. The only answer he was willing to give was "Yes!" The Torah tells us not who Abraham was prior to the Divine calling, but who he chose to become after his human response. In fact, it is not the Abraham of the past who is chosen, but the Abraham of the present and the future, who, in saying, "Yes," transformed himself into the "chosen."

CHOOSING TO BE COMMANDED

What is it that is so impressive about Abraham's going? After all, G-d almost bribes him, promising to make him a great nation, to bless him and to make his name great. G-d offered him power, wealth and fame. Isn't Abraham just an adventurous entrepreneur and clever opportunist? Would it not be more impressive if G-d said to Abraham "Go," without mention of any remuneration?

Again we must realize the precise connotation of these few words, "Abraham went just as G-d told him." He did not just go, but rather he went as G-d told him. He did not go because of these pro-offered rewards. He went because G-d said, "Go." This is in essence an act of love.

The exact translation of G-d's statement, *Lech Lecha* is "Go for yourself" which means, as Rashi, the 11th century Biblical commentator explains: "Go for your pleasure and your good." In other words, "Go for yourself not for Me." One might think that this interpretation signals Abraham's greed. Was he merely going for himself, to better his position? The answer is No. Abraham understood that the way to true self-fulfillment is through selfless devotion to G-d. Abraham chose to be commanded.

The opportunity to fulfill G-d's will offers the profound pleasure of identification with He Who is the Greatest Good. Although G-d told Abraham about future benefits, the Torah testifies to the purity of his intentions. Despite the temptation to go in order to have, Abraham succeeded in going in order to be in a relationship with G-d. In this act, he established the very foundation of Judaism, realizing that a person's ultimate gift from G-d and fulfillment in life is to love and bond with G-d.

The Torah does not tell us about Abraham's unusual metaphysical acumen, nor his ingenious philosophical realizations, nor even his determined challenge and defiance of the idolatrous beliefs of his times. We are not introduced to a wise sage engrossed in rigorous study, seated in a study hall, nor even a spiritual master meditating upon a mountain, absorbed in a mystical experience of G-d. We are introduced to a human being devoted to being in a relationship with G-d, going into exile for the sake of his love for G-d.

When Abraham turned his journey of self-discovery into a service of G-d, it blossomed into the odyssey of love.

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