

## Lekh Lekha 5778 The Journey To The Self

I think that I have mentioned before that the Torah is notable for having some trouble getting itself started. Indeed, when it comes to the human participants in what is going to become the Jewish story, there are at least three versions:

Humanity 1.1 - Adam & Eve

Humanity 2.1 - Noah

Humanity 3.1 - Avram, not yet Abraham, about whom we know practically nothing at that point save his name and his progeniture, and the fact that he has just made a long journey, from Ur of the Chaldeans to a place called Haran, in which he settles.

So it is odd that Avram's narrative begins by violently dislocating him from this new context. *Lekh lekha meartzecha u'mimoladetkha u'mibeit avicha - Go forth from your native land and from your father's house...*

Each aspect of this phrase bears closer examination.

*meartzecha* - from your land. This seems clear enough - with the rider that the land Avram is in at the outset is already not his land of origin, as I pointed out. In return for leaving one land, he is promised another, though he has no idea what that land is or will be.

*mimoladetcha* - this word gets translated in various ways. Our translation glosses it over, but I think there needs to be a separate word, smaller than 'land' but larger than 'family,' which is coming next. 'Birthplace' is what is needed here, I think, or 'point of origin' - something you only have one of in your life. To leave his *moledet*, Avram has to walk away from something that is uniquely his. Were you to ask him 'where do you come from?' his answer would now be 'everywhere' - or 'nowhere,' perhaps.

Finally, Avram is asked to go *mibeit avikhah* - 'from your father's house.' Even though he has long been married by now, he is being asked to leave his family - his primary social group. This represents yet another dimension of change. Avram must give up the self which is defined by the people around him, against whom, we may assume, he has always evaluated himself. (And at this point he has no children to reflect him.)

And finally, that additional *lekha* - which the text in no way requires. It could mean 'Go to yourself' or 'go for yourself' or even 'go by yourself.' It's not clear which of those three prepositions takes precedence - but we can definitely surmise from the Hebrew that this is a journey in some way connected to the self.

So three kinds of change are required in order for Avram to go to/for/by himself. It was only this year, however, that I noticed that the three changes seem to be in the wrong order. Surely a journey to ourselves begins, well, with ourselves first? Is this just another case of the Torah failing to start off smoothly?

I don't think so. Rather, this paradigmatic journey is the journey of how to become a human being.

The strange order of the call to Avram points us to the fact that even though he is going to change locations physically, that is not the real point of his journey. He is traveling to/for/by himself - learning who he really is and what his real purpose is in the world.

And in order to do that, he first needs to break with his surroundings.

In my last community, I was rabbi to the actor Stephen Tobolowsky. You know him even though you think you don't - he is one of those character actors who shows up in everything and recently won a Jimmy Kimmel 'award' for being 'That Guy From That Show.' But he is also a writer and podcaster. I was reading one of his pieces recently in which he is answering the question, 'how do we become *the person we are*?' And he also identifies a three-part process, of which the first step is to be cut off, somehow, from the person we previously were.

This dislocation is different for everyone. It could be a physical move; or it could be a change of job; it could be a change of personal status. In Stephen's case it was a fall which resulted in a serious injury. We can probably each identify a step like this in our own lives. What they all have in common is that they initiated a greater process of personal growth and change. When we look back, we see a line between a 'before' and an 'after.' Just as the Torah describes, we made a transition from one landscape into another.

But that is only the start of the journey to ourselves, to becoming 'the person we are.' After that first dislocation, there are other stages to be undergone.

The second stage is to move away from our *moledet*, our point of origin. I suggest that for a spiritual journey, this represents the conceptions we hold about ourselves. 'I'm a punctual person,' 'I'm a practical person,' 'I'm impatient' - all of these aspects of ourselves, which we treat as points of origin for our personalities, are fetters when we try to grow. Like a snake shedding its skin, we need to shed these limiting aspects of our *moledet* so that we are free to be better, stronger, different.

And once our preconceptions about ourselves have been abandoned, we have to leave our families. Psychologists, in describing the various inner voices that pull on us, sometimes use the image of parts of ourselves 'driving the bus' - as if, rather like the situation in Little Miss Sunshine, our psyche is made up of a squabbling family taking a road trip. We should ask - who is driving the bus, and do we want them there? Is it our inner parent, perhaps? Is it our inner child? Is it a part of ourselves that is so busy rebelling or being angry that we make bad decisions for ourselves? If we cannot break free of these aspects of the inner family, buried at the deepest parts of our psyche, then even the other aspects of dislocation will not help us to grow.

So what is the Torah really teaching us this week? That in order to become fully human, it is our task to change in just the same way as the paradigmatic human being - Avram - had to change. First, we break with our surroundings. Then, we question the conceptions that define us. And finally we do the work to free ourselves from those most intimate inner forces that might be holding us back.

We should notice that Avram doesn't resist the journey. Perhaps this is an aspect of his greatness. Often our reaction to the demand to grow or change is to complain - but he doesn't. He says nothing; he just gets going.

There is a beautiful Midrash about Avram that compares him to a bottle of perfume. If he had just stayed where he was, he would not have begun to achieve his true potential. He has to be shaken - dislocated, questioned, changed - in order to release his fragrance.

I have always found this Midrash to be consoling. It is not easy to be a human being. It is not easy to grow. But as we undergo our own changes, as we try to become wise from them, it is worth remembering that all of the turbulence only serves to release the potential inside us.

Shabbat shalom.