

Lech Lecha The Shaken Flask

This week we encounter Abraham, the source of our national story as the Torah tells it. Twice every day we bring him into the service with us, using words from the parashah: *magen avraham* and *el elyon*.

We can think of Abraham as humanity 3.0. Adam and Eve began the plan but it didn't work out. It looks as though Noah didn't meet expectations either. But ten generations down from Noah, Avram - Abraham, as he will come to be called - appears.

What makes him different from what came before?

There are many possible answers to this question.

The book of Bereishit is not only the longest book of the Torah by verses; it also spans the longest time and covers the most ground. And it is Abraham who is largely responsible for that. He begins in Haran, passes through present day Syria, goes down to Egypt and ends up in Canaan, covering something like 2500 miles in total. That's a long way even in today's world. No human being in the Torah prior to Abraham travels anything like as far.

Perhaps it's this personal mileage that inspires questions about the nature of Abraham's wandering.

For example, Rambam, Maimonides, wrote in his own Mishneh Torah: *When this spiritual giant was weaned, whilst yet in his infancy his mind began to rove hither and thither, day and night; he pondered and wondered, "How is it possible for this sphere to revolve continually without a motive force propelling it since it is impossible for it to revolve itself?" He had neither teacher nor guide, but wallowed in Ur of the Chaldees amongst brutish idolators, his father and his mother and all the people serving the stars, he among them, until he arrived at the true path and perceived the line of righteousness from his own right reasoning...*

For Rambam, it is Abraham's journey of the mind and his ongoing quest for meaning, not his physical journey, that make him unique.

Dr Avivah Zornberg carries this idea even further. In her book on Genesis she notes that Abraham's journey is not only enormous, it is also demanding - as much travail as it is travel. The special Hebrew word *tiltul* describes this experience, she teaches: *tiltul* is a kind of *harrassed, distracted, even confused movement...like a ball which is caught in the air and can never touch ground, or like a dove that never rests, folds one wing at a time and flies on.*

Yet, Dr Zornberg argues, *tiltul* has a positive aspect. She brings a Midrash that describes Abraham as a flask of myrrh wrapped in wadding and placed in a corner so that no fragrance could escape from it. But when it was carried from place to place - *tiltul* - its fragrance wafted out.

So here is another answer to what made Abraham unique. His reaction to dislocation, to travail, was not to break down, not to decide to stay still, but to waft out fragrance.

What can we learn today from asking this question of Abraham's journeys?

Well, who here today originally came here from somewhere else? And who here today feels that in the past, they have made some kind of journey? We might have gone through events that even if we have been within the same geography all our life, turned our lives upside down, emotionally as well as physically. (Today is the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht and the 30th anniversary of the fall of Berlin wall...) And even if our geography has not been disturbed, even if we have not had to deal with an experience that deeply shook us, the current climate of fear could be making us feel unstable. We might feel we are living in a time of crisis, when our big questions are being avoided or buried or simply go without clear answers.

Abraham's journey teaches us that with dislocation, with travail, comes both a search for meaning and the possibility of benefit. Abraham's wondering about the great Source of all things led him into a way of making sense of reality and even of - at least sometimes - challenging what he perceived to be the one in charge of that reality. Through these experiences he clung to meaning and it gave him a kind of inner fortitude. And his *tiltul* - his travel that was also travail, his sense of being dislocated and shaken up, ultimately brought benefit. The image of the

shaken flask teaches us that even if our dislocation cannot fit within our own understanding, it might be the key for helping someone else. Perhaps the bitter experience that shattered us internally is precisely the one that will fire our own vocation or help us bring healing to those around us.

I have shared before that I believe all these Biblical characters represent aspects of our own inner reality. The asker of big questions, the shaken flask, exist inside each of us. Each of us can choose to let them shape our journey so that like our ancestor we, too, can be a blessing.