

Lech Lecha 5781 *Avram Ha-Ivri*

This is a big week - for everyone in this community and in this country and in the world. An election always feels like a fulcrum - a place with a 'before' and an 'after.' And this year, it feels even more that way.

And this is the week that we read Lech Lecha - the parashah that records Abraham being called to take a journey into the unknown, and his first adventures there.

I've spoken before about how I like to read the characters of the Torah as aspects of our inner selves. Rather like the little creatures inside eleven year old Riley in the Disney movie *Inside Out*, I believe we can understand Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, the patriarchs and matriarchs as dimensions of our psyches - sometimes in harmony, sometimes in raucous argument, but always with something to teach us, and always there for us to consult at challenging times.

So as we go to the polls this week - if we haven't already - what does Abraham have to say to us?

I want to start with a midrash. It's on Bereishit 14:13 and it describes the news of the kidnap of Lot being brought to *Avram Ha-Ivri* - usually translated as 'Abram the Hebrew' - the first occurrence of that word in the Torah. *Ivri* comes from the root *avr* which basically means 'to pass' or 'to cross.' But because it's a new word, our teachers seize on it and of course they offer various interpretations. Here's the Midrash:

ויגד לאברהם העברי, רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה ורבנן, רבי יהודה אומר כל העולם כולו מעבר אחד והוא מעבר אחד. רבי נחמיה אמר שהוא מבני בניו של עבר. ורבנן אמרי שהוא מעבר הנהר, (ושהוא משיח בלשון עברי. (בראשית יד, יג

He said to Avram Ha-Ivri - Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nehemiah and the other Rabbis all disagree about this. Rabbi Yehuda teaches, *ivri* means all of the world was on one side - *ever ehad* - and Avram was alone on the other. Rabbi Nehemiah teaches, *ivri* means Avram was a grandson of *Ever* [who was the great grandson of Shem = Noah's great-great-grandson] . And the other rabbis say that Avram came from over the river - *me'ever hanahar* - and that he spoke the Hebrew language *lashon ivri*.¹

Let's take a closer look at these descriptions.

The first one is probably the most familiar to us. Given that the Torah doesn't tell us anything about the first 75 years of Avram's life, our tradition rushes to fill in the gap. Many of us have probably heard stories about Avram the iconoclast - it literally means 'idol attacker' - and I've spoken before about the mysterious sequence of stories that describe him both as a wanderer in space and a wonderer in his mind. Abraham - as he will be named - comes to represent a place where consciousness and conscience come together, someone who is countercultural, who questions the very framework of the reality in which he is living and is not frightened to take a stand. And as such, perhaps our encounter with him is reminding us to seek widely and deeply at this time prior to taking our own stand. What do we truly believe, what do we truly want, what do we truly hope and dream for in the four years that are coming?

The second description looks simple, but it isn't. On its primary level, it's telling us Avram's genealogy - that he has a background, a context, a family lineage, a sort of clan. Perhaps this is prompting us to think about the various families, the groups, to which we belong - our immediate families, our Shir Chadash community, our colleagues, the community of this city, the allegiances that we have to other communities across the country or across the world. It's as if when we enter the voting booth (or its equivalent) we should not forget that we are multiple, that we are connected inextricably to each other. Maybe nobody ever really votes just as themselves.

¹Bereishit Rabba 42:8

But if we dig down a little further, we find that Ever wasn't just anyone in our tradition. Our teachers understand that he and his own great-grandfather - Shem - founded the very first *bet midrash* of our tradition. They imagine the two of them presiding over a center of learning that hosted - among others - Isaac after the Akedah and Jacob on his flight from Esau. And this *bet midrash* also serves as a department of heaven for Torah scholars after they leave the world.

So when we say that Avram could trace himself back to Ever, we are also saying that he valued all the things we associate with Jewish learning - a dedicated search for the truth, a respect for healthy argument, all the skills of critical thinking. And of course those are as relevant to this particular moment in history as they can be.

And finally, the third description. I find this the most interesting of all. Avram is described as 'speaking the Hebrew language' - but the word used isn't the more common 'amar' or 'dibber.' *Mesiah* carries with it the sense of dialogue, a kind of to and fro of discourse. This is why the word gets used to describe prayer, sometimes. And when you add that to the various meanings of *ivri* - moving across, moving past, moving beyond - it becomes clear that the discourse isn't intended to take place in a vacuum but that it should be dynamic, that it should in some way cross over.

I hope and I pray - and I mean that - that this time next week we will all of us still be capable of being *mesiah* with each other. There are so many forces that are drawing us apart. But in this divided world, *Avram Ha-Ivri* reminds us that we are both independent and multiple; that we come from a tradition that respects disagreement if it is for the sake of getting to a greater truth; and that at some level we are always in dialogue, even if - especially when - it stretches us.

I want to close with the first two paragraphs of a prayer written by Rabbi David Seidenberg. It's intended to be recited just before voting. It's a long prayer and might not be everyone's cup of tea, but I love the place where he chooses to begin.

Behold, I am intending
through my vote | through my prayer
to seek peace for this country,
as it is written (Jer. 29:7):

"Seek the peace of the city
where I cause you to roam
and pray for her to YHVH (Hashem/Adonai/God),
for in her peace you all will have peace."

May it be Your will, YHVH, that votes
be counted faithfully
and may You count my vote
as if I had fulfilled this verse
with all my power.

- Rabbi David Seidenberg, <http://www.neohasid.org/resources/votingprayer/?fbclid=IwAR1MkpJnr0Lm-e8RUYUjdmcm20Rgvv9FFPOMONluek-Ho7OIDZ-VVN3yLJ1E>

I add my *kavvanah* to Rabbi Seidenberg's.

Shabbat shalom.