



Lech Lecha

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27

Those of us who are convinced that the modern rebirth of Israel is the beginning of the redemption are following the model of Abraham.

This week's Torah portion begins with God's commandment to Abraham to leave his country, his birthplace and his father's home and go forward to "the land that I will show you" (verse 1). Verse 3 contains God's promise to bless all those who bless Abraham and to curse all those who curse him:

And I will make you a great nation; I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you. (Genesis 12:3)

Abraham arrives in the Land of Canaan and then, for the first time, God promises "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). The drama of this first section of the chapter is incredible. In these few verses, the stage is set for the entire relationship between God, the Nation of Israel and the Land of Israel that is the predominant theme of the rest of the Bible. However, in truth, Abraham's departure for the Land of Canaan does not begin with Genesis 12, but begins in the previous chapter: "Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there" (Genesis 11:31).

Terah, then, is the initiator of the journey to the Land of Canaan. Of course, he didn't actually arrive in Canaan, because along the way he stopped in Haran and settled there. However, the opening verses of Chapter 12 make it sound as if God is originating something different, a journey never before embarked upon, when in actuality, Terah had already begun the journey on his own, without God's intervention.

The Midrash is replete with stories that explain the sequence of events that involve both Terah and Abraham's journey. There is an ancient tradition of Abraham confronting Nimrod, King of the Chaldeans, where Nimrod represents the pagan beliefs of the time and Abraham, the belief in one God. Nimrod, angered by Abraham's refusal to believe in his gods, throws Abraham into a great furnace, but Abraham miraculously walks out unscathed. Some of the stories, therefore, see Terah as leaving Ur right after this event, with Abraham and the entire family in tow, in order to avoid the continued wrath of Nimrod and the Chaldeans. It is clear, however, that Terah himself is an idol worshipper, both from the Midrash stories and from Joshua 24:2. Another Midrash describes God's commandment to Abraham taking place only in Haran, with God specifically commanding Abraham to leave his father's house so as to separate himself from his father and neighbors, all idol worshippers. This does not explain, however, God's commandment to Abraham to leave his birth place, as he had already done that when he left Ur. There are those who believe that God actually spoke to Abraham in Ur.

It is not clear to me whether God spoke to Abraham in Ur or in Haran. But I believe that there were two separate motivations for traveling to the Land of Canaan. Terah clearly did not leave Ur in order to obey God – he was interested in protecting his family, seeking greater fortune, or whatever ordinary motivations would lead someone to move to a different land. Abraham, on the other hand, left only because God commanded him to do so. It is possible that Abraham initially left Ur with his father, following along with no other motivation than to join the family. And it is possible that God already spoke to him in Ur. What is clear, however, is that God's message to Abraham was unique, and it is this message we have carried with us ever since.

It is interesting to note that both the Christian monk who divided the Bible into chapters and the Jewish

traditions that divided it into weekly portions, started Abraham's story where it is today. Really, it could have begun in verse 27 of the previous chapter, with the language of "These are the clans of Terah." But instead, both Christian and Jewish traditions believed that Abraham's exit is the true beginning of the story – Terah's exit is something far more ordinary and far less significant.

There is an important lesson for us today in this study. When the Jews first began to return to the Land of Israel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most were probably more similar to Terah than to Abraham. They did not hear the call of God, but they did feel the pain of anti-Semitism, not that different from Nimrod's burning hot furnace. The modern State of Israel has always struggled with an ambivalent identity, a safe haven for the Jewish people or the beginning of our national and spiritual redemption as promised by God and foretold by the prophets.

Terah's journey is recorded and it is worthy of note. It is the journey that began Abraham's journey and was relevant to it, otherwise the Bible would not have noted it. Likewise, even the most secular Zionists contributed greatly to Israel. But the focus of Abraham's journey is God's commandment and Abraham's own absolute obedience to that commandment. Today, those of us who are convinced that the modern rebirth of Israel is the "beginning of the flowering of the redemption" as we recite in our prayers each Shabbat, are following the model of Abraham. And even as we hold on to parts of the land that are controversial, our motivation is the very message that Abraham heard from God, in the center of Samaria: "To your offspring I will give this land!" It is Abraham's story that begins the chapter and the Torah portion – it is this story that really counts.