

Parashat Lech Lecha 5771, 2010:

Who Really Was Avraham?

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha*, in conjunction with *parshiot* Vayera and Chayeh Sarah, is preeminently the story of *Avraham Avinu* (our father Abraham). We first meet him, however, in the persona of Avram (Abram) at the end of Parashat Noach:

And Terah lived seventy years, and he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. And these are the generations of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. ... And Abram and Nahor took themselves wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. And Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter in law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan, and they came as far as Haran and settled there. (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:26-31, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At first glance, nothing in the passage, with the exception of Sarai's infertility, is particularly notable. It appears to be a rather pedestrian story regarding a small desert-based nomadic family. At this juncture in time, we have no indication that Avram will become Avraham and lead the greatest spiritual revolution in human history. Since this is the case, it is natural to ask: "Who really was Avraham?" I believe this is a crucial question that must be asked in order for us to understand his singular role in and contributions to our people. In my view, much about the *mahut adam* (the essence) of Avraham may be revealed through analysis of his relationship to Hashem.

Avraham's connection to Hashem was unique among the *Avot* (Patriarchs). He is the only one of the three who is called both *avdi* (My servant, *Sefer Bereishit* 26:24) and *ohavi* (My beloved friend, *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 41:8) by the Almighty. On the human level, very close friends are beloved, perhaps, because they know us and understand us. Somehow, they can appreciate and grasp what we are really saying, feeling, and even thinking. Since Avraham was Hashem's *ohavi* and He, in turn was Avraham's *Yedid Nefesh* (Beloved of the Soul or Soul Partner), he enjoyed an unequalled rapport with *Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu*. This enabled him to recognize two of the aspects that Hashem revealed to man.

Avraham was the first to call G-d "Hashem *kale elyon konei shamayim v'aretz*" ("Hashem the most high G-d who possess [i.e. created] the heavens and earth," *Sefer Bereishit* 14:22). By employing this expression, he rejected Malki Tzedek's view of G-d as simply the highest god in a polytheistic pantheon of gods (*Sefer Bereishit* 14:19-20). Avraham's emphasis upon "Hashem" spoke volumes to Malki Tzedek. In doing so, Avraham threw down the gauntlet in defense of the one true faith and declared, as we do each and every day, "*Ki kol elohei ha'amim elilim v'Hashem shamayim asah*" ("For all the gods of the other nations are worthless and false – but Hashem made Heaven!" *Sefer Tehilim* 96:5, translation my own). Additionally, by declaring Hashem to be the Possessor and Creator of the Universe, Avraham was foreshadowing the second appellation that appears in Parashat Vayera, by which he would call G-d, "*Hashem kale olam*" ("Hashem the G-d of the World," *Sefer Bereishit* 21:33)

What exactly is the meaning and significance of the term "*Hashem kale olam*?" Reish Lakish (third century Palestinian *Amora*) in *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 10a-b, suggests that

Avraham used this term as a teaching device to all the wayfarers who stopped by his tent. Avraham's goal was to eradicate polytheism and propagate belief in Hashem. After they would refresh themselves with food and drink, and naturally thank their host, Avraham instructed them in clear and precise language that all of the bounty of the world came from the one and only true G-d, the *oseh shamayim v'aretz* (the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth). Thus Reish Lakish opines:

And he called there on the name of the L-rd, the G-d of the World. Resh Lakish said: Read not "and he called" but "and he made to call", thereby teaching that our father Abraham caused the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be uttered by the mouth of every passer-by. How was this? After [travelers] had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless him; but, said he to them, "Did you eat of mine? You ate of that which belongs to the G-d of the Universe. Thank, praise, and bless Him who spoke and the world came into being." (Translation, *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud* with my emendations to enhance readability)

Rashi (1040-1105) summarizes the preceding passage, in combination with the parallel version found in *Bereishit Rabbah* 54:6, in the following fashion: "... the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, was called 'G-d of the whole world.' After they would eat and drink, Avraham would say to them, 'Bless the One of Whose [food] you have eaten. Do you think that you have eaten of my [food]? [You have eaten of the food] of the One Who spoke and the world came into being!'" Rashi's summation of these Talmudic and Midrashic sources emphasizes the following two elements:

1. Avraham was far more than a mere preacher. Instead, he was a consummate educator who taught by example. As a great teacher, he capitalized on the moment when people naturally wanted to express their gratitude and channeled it in the proper direction: Recognition of "the One Who spoke and the world came into being!"

2. Avraham was incredibly humble. Thus he stated to the passersby: “Do you think that you have eaten of my [food]?” This humility was born of the palpable presence of G-d in his life. In developing this essential *middah* (ethical characteristic), Avraham served as a role model for his great grandson, Yosef who unhesitatingly declared to Pharaoh: “*biladai, Elokim yaaneh et shalom Pharaoh*” (“it is not through my wisdom [Onkelos] that I shall interpret your dreams, G-d will provide an answer that will bring peace to Pharaoh,” *Sefer Bereishit* 41:16)

Make no mistake about it; Avraham’s task was an extremely difficult one. He had to revolutionize mankind’s thinking and teach the essential principal of faith that there is only one true G-d in the Universe. In addition, he had to convince them that the world was created *yaish m’ayin* (out of complete and absolute nothingness) and that it is not eternal. The Rambam (1135-1204) gives this idea extended treatment in his philosophical *magnum opus* known as the *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Moreh Hanavuchim*). Therein he writes:

The first opinion, which is the opinion of all who believe in the Law of *Moses our Master, peace be on him*, is that the world as a whole – I mean to say, every existent other than G-d, may He be exalted – was brought into existence by G-d after having been purely and absolutely nonexistent, and that G-d, may He be exalted, had existed alone, and nothing else – neither an angel nor a sphere nor what subsists within the sphere. Afterwards, through His will and volition, He brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are, time itself being one of the created things.

Maimonides underscores the doctrinal import of this belief, and its origin in the thought of Avraham, when he states:

This is one of the opinions. And it is undoubtedly a basis of the Law of *Moses our Master, peace be upon him*. And it is second to the basis that is the belief in the unity [of G-d]. Nothing other than this should come to your mind. It was *Abraham our Father, peace be on him*, who began to proclaim in public this opinion to which depth-level analysis had led him. For this reason, he made his proclamation *in the name of the L-rd, G-d of the world*; he also explicitly stated this opinion in saying: *Maker of heaven and*

earth. (The Guide of the Perplexed II:13, translation, Shlomo Pines with my emendation, pages 281-282)

The Rambam's trenchant explication of Avraham's contribution to the religious thought of mankind enables us to recognize and appreciate our forebear's role on the grand stage of world history. He was, in this sense, truly an "*av hamon goim*" ("the father of many nations," *Sefer Bereishit* 17:5), as well as our great spiritual progenitor. He was not only *avinu* (our father); he was, and remains until this day, one of the greatest teachers and spiritual leaders of all time. Whenever we follow in his footsteps by declaring the unity of G-d and His creation of the world *ex nihilo* (out of absolute nothingness), we bear powerful testimony to the monotheistic revolution *Avraham Avinu* initiated. With the Almighty's help and guidance, may we continue his mission and serve as a light unto nations (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 42:6 and 49:6) so that all mankind can recognize the one true G-d. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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