

Parashat Lech Lecha, 5780, 2019:

*Avraham Avinu: Greatness Personified*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins the narrative of *Avraham Avinu* (our father Abraham). It is a grand story that resonates until our own historical moment, for without *Avraham* there never would have been a Jewish people. My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, describes our founding father’s remarkable import in this manner:

Abraham left such an indelible imprint upon our unfolding historic destiny that he has been integrated into our historical consciousness; he is so singular a motif of our historical emergence that the whole paradoxical, complex experience of our charisma would be impossible if we denied the reality of the Abraham-personality. The narrative about his life...activates our great historical experience and lends it meaning and worth. (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 3)

How did *Avraham* attain his status as the progenitor of our people? Part of the answer is found in his willingness to reject the ubiquitous *avodah zarah* (idol worship) of his time, his drive to discover the Almighty and his passion to bring others under G-d’s divine protection. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) discusses this in the first chapter of *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim*:

His [that is, Abraham’s] father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding.

Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one G-d who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other G-d among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth. (*Halacha* 3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

At this juncture, the Rambam describes *Avraham's* quest to bring monotheism to the world:

Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path. He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the G-d of the world. To Him [alone] is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations, so that the people of future [generations] would recognize Him...[Then, in Charan] he began to call in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one G-d in the entire world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan – where he proclaimed [G-d's existence the entire time].

*Avraham* was the world's first exponent of monotheism and an authentic religious revolutionary. He repudiated the cultural and religious values of his time, and dared to proclaim that polytheism was categorically false and devoid of all value and meaning. This heroic gesture took consummate belief, as well as endless courage and determination. Truly, as the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once declared, *Avraham Avinu* was the ultimate "Knight of Faith."

*Avraham's* entrance onto the grand stage of world history was a tremendous comfort to Hashem, as he was the first person to acknowledge, love and worship Him in heartfelt devotion. Little wonder, then, that he is the sole individual in Tanach to receive the dual appellations, "*avdi*" (*Avraham* My servant, *Sefer Bereishit* 26:24) and "*ohavi*" (*Avraham* My beloved friend, *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 41:8). Rashi (1040-1105), in his *Commentary on Sefer Yeshiyahu*, explains *ohavi* in a manner that parallels the Rambam's thoughts in *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim*: "For he did not

recognize Me as a result of rebuke (*tochacha*), nor as a result of having been educated by his forebears to do so. Instead, he did this purely out of love.” (Translation my own)

On measure, *Avraham Avinu* ever remains our model and inspiration for developing and expanding our role as the Jewish people. As the Lubavitcher *rebbe* (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson *zatzal*, 1902-1994) said:

*Avraham Avinu* gave us as a nation, and as individuals, the ability to bring light to the world and to begin everything anew. Because of *Avraham*, we have nothing whatsoever to fear as we go forth into the world with our torch [Torah and truth]. Beyond a doubt, [our task] is to enlighten the world and to bestir the hearts [and minds of all humankind]. (Summary of *Sichot* for the first night of Succot, Rabbi Shmuel Riskin, translation and brackets my own)

With Hashem’s help and our heartfelt desire, may each of us, in our own unique way, strive to be like *Avraham Avinu* and bring the light of Torah and truth to the world. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.