



Parashat Lech Lecha
Extinguishing the flames

by David Katzenelson on Friday October 30, 2009

12 Heshvan

Genesis 12:1 - 17:27

Our parasha starts with the first words G-d explicitly says to Abraham. These words are also the first commandment given by G-d to a member of the chosen people, a nation that will later adopt the name “Jews.” They embody both the first commandment given to the chosen and the act of choosing itself.

Authors of earlier Torah Queeries have pointed out “Lech Lecha” means “go to yourself.” I wish to focus on a different issue. Why does G-d say these words to Abraham of all people? Why and how is he chosen? And what is he chosen to do?

The sages were aware of these questions and about the lack of a clear answer to them in the Torah. Bereshit Rabba comments this through a midrash or fable attributed to Rabbi Isaac.

A man was traveling from place to place. He sees a building on fire by the side of the road. Our traveler stops and wonders if there is no owner or caretaker to extinguish the fire. The owner of the building looks out (from inside the burning house!) and says “I am the owner of this building”.

In the same way, Abraham is on a spiritual journey through life. He notices that the world is full of wrongdoings and pain. While others just ignore this fact, he takes the time to wonder who is in charge. Then G-d calls out to Abraham and says “I am the Guide and Master of the universe”. Abraham recognizes G-d and understand that it is us humans who must correct the wrongdoings of this world. G-d is not going to do it for us.

This makes G-d desire Abraham, like a king desiring his new bride. Then G-d says to Abraham “Lech Lecha – go to yourself”.

End of Midrash. A goldmine for discussion and interpretation.

G-d did not single out Abraham. All people are offered the same opportunity. Our world is still a house on fire, full of wrongdoings and pain. We are still passing by. What made Abraham different?



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Abraham cared enough to stop and wonder who is in charge. He was wise enough not only to recognize G-d as being the owner, but also to recognize that G-d is either unable or unwilling to extinguish the flames. That is our job. Recognizing this makes G-d desire him. G-d can desire us in the same way.

What happens next is even more interesting. Abraham is standing there, having recognized that he must extinguish the flames. He has gotten the owner's trust. The sensible thing would be to start throwing water around. But then G-d commands him "Lech Lecha – go to yourself" and Abraham leaves on a journey to the land of Canaan.

What happened here?

As Jews, our religious life is colored with a desire to make this world a better place. Modern Judaism called this *tikkun olam* (mending the world), based on a metaphor of the world as a broken vessel. But here the metaphor is that of a house on fire and extinguishing the flames is taking action to make the world a better place.

We all want this world to be a better place. Some of us have recognized that we have the responsibility to take action. But at that point it is important to take a little stop and "go to ourselves." The first step in *tikkun olam* is the one we take with ourselves. We cannot have a positive effect on the world if we are not whole in ourselves. First of all we have to know and love ourselves. And we have to honestly be ourselves. It is our responsibility to achieve this.

This is relevant to all people, not only LGBT Jews. Not all aspects of this journey have to do with sexuality. But the commandment is particularly profound to us. Rabbis, parents and even politicians have told us that we cannot be who we are. Here, the Torah uses G-d's first words to Abraham to state clearly that we can, and we must.

The journey to one self can be scary, as it is a journey to the unknown. G-d does not tell Abraham where he is going. Only that it will be "the land that I will show you". When one gets there, one will know it. We are not told whether Abraham was scared. But we know that Abraham went on his journey. The journey took him into places, situations and actions that were unexpected, difficult and probably painful. And the journey is what made him our forefather and role model.

May we all be blessed to be ourselves and to love ourselves.



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