

## Between the Lines—Lekh L'kha

Insights from Midrash with Rabbi Andy Shugerman, rabbinic fellow, JTS

Genesis Rabbah 39:1

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מארצך וגו'... אמר רבי יצחק: משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת. אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג? הציץ עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה. כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

“Hashem said to Abram: Go forth from your native land . . .” (Gen. 12:1) . . .

Rabbi Isaac said: This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*. ‘Is it possible that this palace lacks a caretaker?’ he wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said, ‘I am the owner of the palace.’ Similarly, because our ancestor Abraham said, ‘Is it possible that the world lacks a caretaker?’ the Blessed Holy One looked out and said to him, ‘I am the Sovereign of the Universe.’

What inspires one to leave home, to embrace mystery, to seek insight into the nature of our world?

The story of Abram’s physical journey to enter Canaan and his spiritual journey to become “our ancestor Abraham” raises many questions about his life and ours. Like many of the early rabbis, Rabbi Isaac imagines a backstory to explain how and why Abram would respond to a sudden call from God to leave his home for an unknown land. The meaning of this parable, however, hinges on an ambiguous term, *birah doleket*, that describes what caught Abram’s attention and transformed his vision. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel discusses the implications of two contrasting translations—“a palace full of light” versus “a palace in flames”—in his masterpiece, *God in Search of Man*, that deserve equal consideration for informing our own worldview.

In imagining the world as “a palace full of light,” Heschel develops Abram into a personality who discovers through wonder that there must be a Creator who would both design and care for such a stunningly magnificent domain. He posits that Abram’s journey began not just with his sense of awe for nature but with the action he takes in response to God’s answer that such a Source of Life exists.

But towards the end of *God in Search of Man*, Heschel acknowledges an entirely different approach to religion. He asserts that, just as many “sense the ultimate questions in moments of horror,” perhaps Abram looked around himself and saw “a palace in flames,” a world engulfed in an inferno of chaos and evil. God’s answer to Abram’s query represents the still, small voice of resilience that somehow provides for courage and hope in the face of tragedy and destruction. In this light, Abram finds reason to believe in God, the world and himself in spite of seemingly overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Heschel’s dual treatment of this parable captures the full range of awesome and awful emotions that the ancient rabbis express in their love and fear of God. As a modern-day Abraham, Heschel asserted that post-Holocaust Judaism must engage both “radical amazement” and righteous indignation as responses to the beautiful and the terrible experiences we find in life. May we walk with God in both paths with conviction and grace.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Lekh L'kha

Genesis 12:1–17:27

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## Parashah Commentary

**This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School, JTS.**

A wondrous quality of Torah study is that you can link the parashah to nearly any time, place, or subject. This puzzle is enjoyed by rabbis every week—*how can I connect the ancient text to our contemporary context?* I embrace this challenge, yet sometimes it makes me wonder: how much are we gleaning from the text, and how much are we interpolating?

Historiography is the history of history—that is, it examines what a presentation of history says about the author who presents it, and the cultural, political, and personal context in which he or she works. The same is true in our study of biblical interpretation. When reading a commentator it is often possible to discern the context of his or her work from comments made on diverse subjects.

What do our *divrei Torah* teach about us? What will future historians of biblical interpretation discern about our religious, cultural, and political motives? I expect that one thing they will notice is the divide between those teachers of Torah who lived in Israel from those of us in the various Diaspora communities. This divide is particularly apparent in Parashat Lekh L'kha.

This Shabbat in thousands of synagogues across America and other Diaspora communities, rabbis, congregants, and *b'nai mitzvah* will speak about the journey made by Abraham, Sarah, and their family. Just a few decades ago, many of these sermons would have reflected upon the immigrant experience—the journey made from Europe to America, for example. Today, the journey is often viewed in spiritual terms—a passage from ignorance to awareness of one’s purpose in life. American speakers will note the journey from Haran to Canaan, and perhaps even the multiple promises God makes to Abram of his inheritance in the land. But the key components of the story will be the universal themes of providing for family and entering into a relationship with God.

In contrast, many Israelis view Parashat Lekh L'kha as the great Zionist narrative. The spiritual awakening of Abram is linked directly to his decision to uproot from his homeland and make the perilous journey to the Promised Land. Arriving in Canaan, like the early Zionist settlers, he finds circumstances challenging: There is famine, and, like many Israelis to this day, he must leave the land to fundraise. There is war in the land, and Abram, like countless Israelis, must take up arms to defend his family while also preserving his integrity. Most of all, there is the promise of the land. God promises the land to Abram and his descendants four times in our portion: 13:15, 15:7, 15:18, and 17:8. For

a Diaspora Jew, these references blend into the background, but for an Israeli, they are the very core of the portion.

The Israelis have a good point. The climactic blessing, 17:8, reads, “I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.” Rashi, citing a famously Zionist statement in Talmud Ketubot (110b), comments on the final clause, “but one who lives outside the land is like one who has no God.” That is, the land of Israel is not only a nice place to live and to leave as an inheritance, but it is also the essential theater for the covenant between God and Israel. Indeed, the great codes of Jewish law by Maimonides and Joseph Caro both cite this idea to prove that a person should, whenever possible, live in the Land of Israel, even in less comfortable circumstances than those possible in the Diaspora (M.T. Ishut 13:19, *Melakhim* 5:12, and Shulhan ‘Arukh E.H. 75:3).

As a teacher of rabbis, I am sensitive to the different flavors of Torah in New York and in Jerusalem. This year, nearly a quarter of our student body in The Rabbinical School is studying at our sister school, the Schechter Rabbinical School. The year of Israel study has been a fixture of the JTS curriculum for decades, and rightly so. Extended exposure to the land, and state, of Israel, with all of its blessings and challenges, is an essential experience in the formation of a Jewish leader. It is tempting for Jews in America and other Diaspora communities to disengage from the historical dramas being played out between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Too often we either idealize the country, turning it into a Jewish Disneyland, or demonize it for its well-documented shortcomings. Doing so, we miss the insights available to those for whom Judaism is not just a personal spiritual journey, but a great collective undertaking.

I have not read Israeli insights about Parshat Lekh L'kha for this year, but I suspect that some of them will focus on the video recently released by Hamas of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Given his nearly three-and-a-half years of captivity, Gilad looks remarkably composed, which is of course a blessing. Yet the horror of his captivity is somehow magnified by the calm surroundings of his message. I will admit that, living in comfort here, it is easy to forget the anguish of this young man and his family. Having watched the two-minute video, I won't forget again, and the image of Gilad Shalit will also affect my reading of the portion.

In chapter 14, there is a regional battle in which the King of Sodom is defeated, and Abram's nephew Lot is taken captive. Old Abram doesn't hesitate; his response is immediate and decisive: “When Abram heard that his kinsmen had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers . . . and went in pursuit as far as Dan.” That is, Abram chased the captors across the entire length of the country from Hebron to the northern border, and then beyond to a town north of Damascus, where he surprised the enemy and rescued his nephew.

Judaism lifts up this example of Abram and identifies the commandment of redeeming captives (*pidyon shvuim*) as one of our greatest obligations. Israelis—secular and religious—have accepted responsibility for this mitzvah on behalf of all Jews, and they have been forced to bear the heavy psychological burden of captivity in a fashion that American Jews find impossible to understand.

I anticipate criticism of my wading into a political subject in this *devar Torah*. Surely there are many Palestinians being kept captive without due process by Israel. For that matter, the United States is also holding captives who have not been convicted of any crime. I welcome such observations. Only when one becomes accustomed to attaching religious values to the great and terrible power of statehood does this feature of biblical narrative emerge from the shadows. Captivity is a nightmare, and it is often unjustified. It is the obligation of all free people to inquire about the welfare of all captives and, if there is cause to consider them innocent, then to act legally and decisively to help free them. Without the reality of Israel, this feature of the biblical story would be just another narrative element rather than a message for our own lives.

My purpose in this column is not to lionize Israeli-inflected exegesis or to fault our own. Rather, I think it productive to consider how our cultural context influences which features of the biblical text we focus on, and to encourage us to study the Torah from other points of view. For American Jews, it is good to step outside of our self-referential universe periodically and to consider the collective implications of the Torah portion. This Shabbat, I hope that your study of Lekh L'kha will include thoughts about the significance of the land on Jewish identity, and I ask that your prayers will include sincere petitions for the safe release of Gilad Shalit.

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## **A Taste of Torah**

### **A Commentary on Joseph B'khor Shor by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS**

**Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you.

**B'khor Shor**, “**I will bless those who bless you**,” that is to say, ‘I will love those who love you and I will hate those who hate you’ or in other words, ‘do not let your heart say that I do not have a colleague or redeemer in the land, and if someone hates me, and seeks to do me harm, no one will stand up against him. Or if someone loves me, then who will give him recompense for such love?’ For a person who has close friends—everyone (those friends) supports those who honor and benefit him. I will be for you a lover and a redeemer.

A journey of four thousand years begins with God's command to Abraham. “Go forth,” God urges Abraham, “from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Psychically, one senses the sacrifice inherent in God's desire. And clearly God does not make it easy for his prophet. The three expressions employed by the divine voice make it increasingly more difficult for Abraham to leave—his land, his birthplace, and his father's house. Indeed, the rabbinic mind imagines that leaving one's land is not so difficult. But to abandon one's birthplace and family requires pain and sacrifice. As Everett Fox writes, here Abraham is being asked to give up his past while in the narrative of the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac) he is requested to give up his future. How sensitive is God in asking Abraham to sacrifice his past? What clues are we given in Parashat Lekh L'kha?

In explaining the third verse of our Torah reading, Joseph B'khor Shor showcases God's sensitivity to Abraham. When God declares that “I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you,” there is a profound sense that God recognizes Abraham's existential loneliness in this sacred endeavor. God singles out Abraham. No doubt insecurity and alienation plague the nascent prophet. Rather than avoiding the issue, God addresses the topic head on—saying to Abraham, “you will not be alone—I will be the ally and friend that you crave as you move forward.”

More than that, God's assurance provides a lesson in leadership for the Jewish people. Too often, standing up for what is ethical and moral in this world leads one to isolation. The Jewish people and the State of Israel prove to be case studies in such a phenomenon. We find ourselves, at times, without partners and without friends. God's promise to Abraham, in the words of Joseph B'hor Shor, is one that that is eternal: “I will be for you a lover and a redeemer.” May we always see God as an ally in our sacred work and may it be true that the “families of the earth” are blessed by the loyal descendants of Abraham.

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