

בראשית פרשת לך לך פרק יב
ז וַיֵּרָא ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְזַרְעֲךָ אֶתְּנָה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וַיְבַן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה'
הַנְּרָאָה אֵלָיו

במדבר רבה (וילנא) פרשת נשא פרשה י

צריך להעלות עולה לה' על בשורה טובה כשם שעשה אברהם בשעה שא"ל
הקב"ה (בראשית יב) לזרעך אתן את הארץ הזאת מיד בנה אברהם מזבח על
בשורה טובה שכן כתיב ויבן שם מזבח לה' הנראה אליו ואין מזבח אלא קרבן

Genesis 12:7

And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said: 'Unto thy seed will I give this land'; and he built there an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him.

Numbers Rabbah on Parashat Naso Parashah 10

(We are taught) That one must bring a sacrifice to God on account of good news, just as Abraham did at the hour that The Holy One blessed be He said "Unto thy seed will I give this land." Immediately, Abraham built an altar on account of the good news, as it is written "And he built there an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him." There is no altar without a sacrifice.

I really like what we find here. The midrash seems to be pointing out that we can learn from Abraham: we are to give a gift to God when we receive good news. How do you give God a gift? In Abraham's time there were sacrifices, but we no longer have such offerings. In truth, we see this type of gift giving to God all around us. When we make tribute donations to our synagogues in honor of a *simhah*, when we encourage b'nai mitzvah to commit to a mitzvah project, we are giving gifts to God in honor of good news.

It is lovely to find a custom where we celebrate our good fortune by sharing it with others. And while we are familiar with these customs, it is even nicer to think that they date back to the first Jew, Abraham, in the moment that he gets his charge here in Lekh Lekha, making it (midrashically, anyway) one of the first mitzvot. I hope we all have good news coming our way and that we remember to give gifts of celebration.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Lekh Lekha

Genesis 12:1–17:27

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

What does it mean to be someone's brother or sister, beyond a biological fact? In Genesis, the answer seems to be: not much. Every story involving brothers is one of violence, discord, enmity, or deceit. Cain murders Abel; Ham shames his father and is doomed to serve his brothers. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers—we all know how those relationships played out. Even the moments of reconciliation are poisoned sooner or later by fear and distrust. Jacob promises to follow his brother to Edom but in fact remains in Canaan. After Jacob breathes his last breath, Joseph's brothers invoke their father's dying words—possibly the product of fabrication—to ward off any murderous act of vengeance by Joseph.

In fact, the only brother who comes to his brother's aid is not actually his brother: it is Abraham—then Abram—who rides to the rescue of his nephew Lot: "When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan" (Gen. 14:14). Employing a clever military maneuver, he catches the superior forces of the four kings by surprise and is able to return Lot and his fellow captives to the safety of their homes.

It is noteworthy that Abraham risks life and limb to save his nephew. The midrash emphasizes this by imagining a conversation between Abraham and his men, who argue, "The five kings [of Sodom and its sister cities] could not defeat [the five kings] and [yet you believe that] we will prevail against them?!" Abraham replies, "I will go forth and [if necessary] fall in battle in sanctification of God's name (Genesis Rabbah 42:14).

What had been a spontaneous act of bravery on Abraham's part was transformed by the Sages into a universal obligation, the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim*. Over the generations, Jews have frequently been held hostage or forced into slavery by pirates and thieves, dukes and kings. In response, Jewish communities the world over have expended time, money, and energy to free their coreligionists from captivity. It is impossible to document each and every instance of *pidyon shevuyim*; a few examples will have to suffice.

According to the famous legend of the four captives, four prominent 10th-century

rabbinic scholars set sail together from Italy and were taken captive by pirates. Jewish communities in Spain, North Africa, and Egypt each redeemed one of the scholars (the fate of the fourth is said to be unknown). In each community, the scholar it had redeemed became one of its greatest rabbis and teachers. Frequently when Jews were taken captive, rabbinic leaders wrote open letters to the communities exhorting them to contribute funds. Maimonides, in several letters discovered in the Cairo Genizah, called on Jews of Egypt to help redeem Jews taken captive in Eretz Yisra'el and elsewhere. R. Nossou Notch of Hanover, in his *Yeven Metzulah*, a chronicle of the 17th-century Khmelnitzky massacres, speaks of the redemption of some 20,000 Polish Jews by Jewish communities in Constantinople, Salonika, and Venice; many Italian Jewish communities contributed toward this cause as well. Even a 12th-century Jewish apostate of Prague, who was imprisoned for repudiating his conversion to Christianity, was apparently redeemed for the enormous sum of 3000 pounds of silver and 100 pounds of gold by his coreligionists.

Two aspects of this practice deserve mention. The first is that in frequently ransoming their fellow Jews at exorbitant prices—in effect these Jewish captives were regarded as slaves who were being sold—these Jewish communities largely ignored the Mishnah's teaching: "We do not redeem captives for more than their market price" (Gittin 4:6). The wisdom behind this teaching was that to do so would encourage future captors to ask for even larger sums. But it seems that Jews could not accept the notion that a price could be put on human life. Each life was invaluable, and every Jew was entitled to the best efforts of his fellow Jews to redeem him.

This principle is already inherent in the Abraham narrative. When Abraham returns to Sodom, its king proposes that Abraham surrender the captives to him—presumably rather than keeping them as slaves—while the booty would remain in Abraham's possession. Abraham responds by taking an oath that he will not take even one item, so that "you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich'" (Gen. 14:23). What is it exactly that elicits Abraham's aggressive response? Some commentators suggest that because God had promised to grant him wealth it would be wrong for him to seek enrichment from flesh and blood. However, perhaps what animates Abraham's response, as Nahum Sarna suggests, is his aversion to being seen as a mercenary who saved the captives mainly out of the desire for personal gain. Moreover, accepting money in exchange for having returned the captives would amount to regarding them as commodities to be bought and sold rather than as human beings.

Second, in helping Jews wherever and whenever they were in distress, the redeemers not only emulated Abraham's example but also broadened its application. In many of the requests for funds, the captives are referred to as *ahenu bene Yisra'el*, which translates roughly as "our Jewish brothers." Those who worked for the captives' release saw all Jews as their brothers and sisters. Consequently, it was not only duty that motivated them, it was also love and concern for the members of their extended family. Their actions, like Abraham's, were an unspoken declaration: "Yes, I am my brother's keeper."

One final reflection: in redeeming captives, we are not only following in the footsteps of Abraham, we are walking in the ways of the One who first spoke to him in Haran. The greatest Redeemer in our history loosened the bonds of slavery that held us captive and led us out of Egypt. The People of Israel were born through a divine act of *pidyon shevuyim*; we ought to do no less a mitzvah for our fellow Jews—in fact, for all of humanity—whenever and wherever they call out from their places of bondage.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Last night, I had the privilege of celebrating the beginning of a new partnership in Jerusalem among The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC), and the UJA-Federation of New York (UJA). To its great credit, the UJA has invested in a joint Israel initiative between JTS and HUC, one that will deepen our rabbinical students' connection to Israel and give them the tools to inspire and shape meaningful conversations in North American communities about our relationship to Israel.

In so many ways, it is striking that this program was initiated this week, the week in which we read Parashat Lekh Lekha, the Torah reading narrating the first Zionist journey. God commands Abraham to leave the known world of Ur Kasdim and travel to the uncertainty of a land that God will reveal to him. While we are often quick to note the profound sacrifices made by our forefather and his family, God makes a generous promise to these pioneers, declaring, "I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great; and you will become a blessing!" (Gen. 12:2). How may we understand God's promise juxtaposed to the reality that Abraham encounters once he arrives in Israel?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, "It is evident that Abraham was to receive back from God everything that he had given up and indeed in a considerably enhanced measure. By renouncing his land, he gave up his nationality. But instead of having to attach himself to another one, God says that he himself is to be the founder of a new one. By giving up his birthplace, he is not to miss the civic rights which are the natural source of prosperity—in God will he gain the right to prosper on earth. And inasmuch as he forsakes his family and gives up the respect and honor given to well known old families, in Abraham a new name is to grow to great renown." (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 225)

As admirable as God's words and Hirsch's observations are, one cannot help but notice the gap between the promise and the reality that Abraham encounters. Upon arriving in the Land, Abraham is forced to wrestle with famine, flight, barrenness, and dissent. Placing ourselves in the shoes of our ancestor, one wonders: whatever happened to the divine promises of prosperity?

While the reality he encountered in the Land of Israel could easily send our ancestor back to Ur Kasdim, the challenges instead serve to deepen his commitment. Despite the considerable gap between the ideal and the real, Abraham is nurtured by the journey, and God's promises do come to fruition, albeit with much time and patience. I hope and pray that Abraham's experience may serve to inspire JTS and HUC rabbinical students and the entire Jewish world. Today, we recognize the many challenges and opportunities faced by the modern State of Israel (or, in plainer words, we see and feel the divide between our ideal vision of a Jewish State and the messiness of sovereignty). We hear the ancient call of *lekh lekha*. The challenge for us is to model the determination and patience of Abraham. By remaining deeply engaged with Israel, we, like our ancestor Abraham, will become the heirs of an ancient blessing.

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