

Bringing meaning to life*Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy*

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI

03

LECH LECHA

GAINING PERSPECTIVE

‘God said to Abram, “Go for yourself from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”¹ These words are among the most consequential in the history of humanity. With this summoning of one man, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were set in motion. In return for his journey into the unknown and his allegiance to the one God, Abram is promised fame, fortune and the blessing of becoming the father of a great nation with many descendants.² With such guarantees from God Himself, ‘Abram went as God had commanded him...’³ However, immediately upon arrival, ‘there was a famine in the land’ and he is forced to descend to Egypt.⁴ As the story unfolds, Abraham encounters challenges with his wife Sarah,⁵ his cousin Lot,⁶ and he despairs at his lack of progeny.⁷ What happened to all the good that God promised?

Some people who choose to follow religion are in search of instant benefit, expecting that if they do their part, then God will reciprocate. People are attracted by the religious charisma of spiritual satisfaction or communal cohesion or a sense of purpose.

Seeing others who appear to have attained these gems, they believe that in return for rejuvenating their religious practice, they too will merit, and all that is good will unfold before them in an instant. In reality, this is rarely achieved. Abraham too must have been excited by the allure of God’s blessings. Yet as the first initiate into monotheism and the prototype for the future, his trials and tribulations cause him to

become seemingly sceptical, ‘What can you give me seeing that I am childless?’⁸ At this, God: ‘took him outside and said, “gaze towards the heavens and count the stars...”’⁹ Since the Torah does not mention that Abraham was previously inside, and since the word for gazing suggests viewing from above, the Midrash posits that God takes Abraham out of the world in order to gaze upon the stars.¹⁰ When Abraham complains at the lack of fulfilment of God’s promise, God implies that he should figuratively step out of his immediate reality and gain some perspective. Just as the world seems almost insignificantly small from space, one’s immediate situation can be viewed in a similar light, revealing that there is more to life than what is represented in any given moment or place.

Immediately following this lesson in perspective, Abraham again asks, 'how shall I know that I am to inherit it [the land]?'¹¹ It seems that Abraham is worrying about his descendants and how they will inherit the land. In response, God asks him to perform a strange religious ritual, through which He forges a covenant and provides a prophecy of Egyptian servitude and subsequent freedom for Abraham's descendants. Essentially, through this covenant, God is promising Abraham that

The Jewish people will go through troubles and triumphs, but their relationship as a people, as a nation greater than the sum of its individuals, is not contractual; rather, it is covenantal.

Whereas a human contract can be revoked if one party does not uphold its side, the biblical covenant between God and Abraham's descendants, is irrevocable and eternal. God was extending the lesson of perspective beyond the immediate perspective of space, to the historical perspective of time.

With the incredible advancement of technology, we live in a 'microwave generation' where at the click of a button, within seconds we can gain access to or create many things that in the past would have taken extended periods of time.

This instant gratification has opened many doors of convenience and opportunity, but has simultaneously closed traditional doors of patience and perspective.



As Abraham takes his first religious step forward, he too may be expecting the automatic delivery of all that God has promised. Yet God is teaching him and all of his descendants that real and long-lasting gain must take time. Armed with this perspective, we can approach each of life's challenges by seeking out a fresh point of view – one that sheds new insights beyond those readily available in the immediate context. This approach, taught by God to Abraham in his inaugural moments as the leader of monotheism, presents a healthy approach to religion, as rather than generating disappointment, it allows religion to infuse meaning, hope and value into the lives of its adherents.

Notes

¹ Genesis 12:1

² Rashi on Genesis 12:2

³ Genesis 12:4

⁴ Genesis 12:10

⁵ Genesis 12:14

⁶ Genesis 13:7

⁷ Genesis 15:3

⁸ Genesis 15:2

⁹ Genesis 15:5

¹⁰ Genesis Rabba 44:10

¹¹ Genesis 15:8

Parsha Fact:

Did you know that Avraham was born in the year 1948.... from the creation of the world!

Next Week in Vayera:

With ten generations between them, two of our iconic ancestors – Noah and Abraham – exemplify contrasting physiological responses for coping with crisis. These responses are today described as the 'Fight, flight or freeze' phenomenon. Noah responds to the flood by metaphorically 'fleeing', and Abraham, in contrast, responds to the destruction of Sodom by 'fighting'. In any given moment between stimulus and response, lies the opportunity for us to choose. And each of these choices – to freeze, to flee, or to fight – whether we model Noah or Abraham, ultimately dictates the reality we create for ourselves.

שבת שלום