

Abraham's Response

Abraham, the founding father of our faith, is central to our Torah portion this week. Actually, as the story opens he is called Abram. Only later, in 17:5, will God change his name to Abraham. Read as much of the Torah portion as you can (Gen. 12.1–17.27). It is an engaging narrative! Our focus, however, will be the dramatic opening words of commissioning in Gen. 12:1.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (12:1).

“Lekh lekha...” The Hebrew term can be variously translated: Go, go forth, travel, leave. These words introduce the story of one man whose decision to step out and follow a divine call changes the course of history. Not only does this mark the beginnings of Judaism, but from here two other faiths claiming Abrahamic roots will emerge: Christianity and Islam.

Exactly what is it about this story that justifies its religious centrality? Who and what have led to this critical moment? If you have been reading Genesis to this point, you will recall the saga of Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah and the flood. Against the backdrop of these characters and their behaviour, what can you say about Abraham’s entrance centre-stage?

Perhaps you noticed that the moral fibre of each of the previous characters displays serious flaws. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, an esteemed Torah commentator of our time, observes that their flaw in common is evasion or abdication of responsibility. Do you agree? Think back on the preceding chapters of Genesis. Pool your knowledge with a *havrutah* partner (discussion/sparring partner). Revisit parts of Genesis if you need to recall a particular scene.

Sacks, drawing on the wider biblical canvass, describes the character of Abraham from the moment of call through the chapters that follow.

- Unlike Adam (who blames Eve who blames the serpent), Abraham accepts *personal* responsibility in adhering to God’s word. (See 12:4)
- Unlike Cain (‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ 4:9) Abraham accepts *moral* responsibility, rescuing his brother’s son, Lot (Gen.14).
- Unlike Noah (who is silent when God announces the destruction of humanity), Abraham prays for the inhabitants of Sodom and asks God to spare them (Gen. 18). He accepts *collective* responsibility.

In other words, Abraham, in resisting excuses and in his wholehearted response to the summons to ‘Go forth’ to a new land, charts a radical path in the history of humankind; one defined by a personal free choice to follow God without hesitation or reserve. •

Reflection:

Lekh lekha... Go forth... According to one Jewish (Hassidic) interpretation, *Lekh lekha* means “Go to yourself,” i.e., find that deep freedom planted within every human being, and set your moral compass from there.

What excuses sometimes deter me when God says, “Go forth...”? Do my personal choices come from that deep place of inner freedom where I am truly ‘myself’ before God?

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York: URJ Press, 2006); Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009).

Scripture: NRSV.

© Teresa Pirola, 2013. www.lightoftorah.net

This article may be reproduced for non-commercial use with acknowledgement of website.