

Lech Lecha 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/28/17

In this week's Torah portion we meet the very first Jew, Avraham, or Avram as he is first known. His choice by Gd to be that very first Jew (after all, Adam and Noah and their generations were not Jewish) is a bit of a puzzle. Last week, Noah was introduced to us as someone chosen by Gd for his righteousness. But when we meet Avraham, we essentially meet him on a journey. Suddenly, at the age of 75, Gd says to him "Lech Lecha," "Now you must go forth." And the question is, "Where did Avraham come from?" It is tantalizingly elusive. We really only get to know him in the last 50 years of his life when he follows the commands of Gd to be a blessing to others. But curiosity pushes our learning and so the Tradition fills in the blanks with stories of his youth. One of them is more famous than all the rest. It's the story of Abraham and the idols.

The simple version (that many of us grew up with) is that Abraham's dad owned an idol shop. One day he goes out to lunch, and while he is gone Abraham smashes all the idols with a baseball bat and then puts it in the arms of the biggest idol. When dad gets back and asks who destroyed all the merchandise, Abraham says the biggest one did it. Dad says that's ridiculous, and Abraham replies, "So is your faith in idols."

That's the "Reader's Digest" version, but the original is far more nuanced and more interesting. In fact it is so interesting that is essentially retold verbatim in the Quran; it is a story widely known to Muslims and therefore it has shaped the faith of Jews, Christians and Muslims, too.

This is the original, not from the Torah, but from Midrash Rabbah: "R' Hiyya said: Terah was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away somewhere and left his son, Abraham to sell them in his place. A man came and wished to buy one. "How old are you?" Abraham asked him. "Fifty years" was the reply. "Woe to such a man as you," he exclaimed, "You are fifty years old and would worship a day-old object!" At this he became ashamed and departed. On another occasion a woman came with a plateful of flour and requested him, "Take this and offer it to them." (At this point Abraham realizes that this is a real problem. The first guy really didn't believe it, so he left. But she's not fooling around. She needs something in which she can put her faith. She really thinks that bringing an offering to something his dad is selling will get her what she wants.) So he took a stick, broke them, and put the stick in the hand of the largest. When his father returned he demanded, "What have you done to them?" "I cannot conceal it from you," he rejoined. "A woman came with a plateful of fine meal and requested me to offer it to them. One claimed 'I must eat first,' while another claimed 'I must eat first.' Thereupon the largest idol arose, took the stick and broke them." "What are you trying to pull on me?" Terah cried out, "Do they have minds?" Abraham retorted "Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying...?"

But the story does not stop there in the original text. It continues, "So Abraham took his son to the King, Nimrod. Nimrod called Abraham and commanded him to worship Fire. Abraham said to him, "So let's worship water since water has the power to extinguish fire." "Right," said Nimrod, "We should worship water." "In that case, we should worship the clouds, since they carry water." "Yes, we should worship the clouds." "Then we should worship the wind, since it drives the clouds across the sky." "Yes, we should worship the wind (ru'ach) -- air, spirit." (And here it is a play on words, because ru'ach means wind, but it also means the human spirit, the soul, the conscience, the inner workings of the human mind and heart.) "But," said Abraham,

"Humans have the power to rule over the spirit- (meaning their own.) Should we worship human beings?" (Because that's what we are really talking about here!) You make these gods so that everything can go your way and according to your plan.) "You're playing with words!" cried Nimrod. "I worship only fire, and I am going to throw you into a huge furnace. Let the God you worship come along and save you from it!"

Abraham is indeed saved from the fire, but his point has been made. Abraham's relentless logic brought Nimrod to the brink of having to admit that man can indeed control his own spirit and instincts. If he fails to control himself and surrenders to the fire of his lower instincts then his "religion" is basically about self-worship. And THAT is the major point of this. It's not one whether you have one god or many gods. It's that the one Gd wants US to be able to control ourselves, to have our lives shaped by a spiritual life, a higher calling. It's not about asking Gd for the stuff we want. It's about having the faith to know that if we follow the religious plan we will become the kind of PEOPLE we know we can be, and, in fact even better than we can imagine. Through faith we can discover greater wellsprings of strength than we even knew we had. Trying to placate other god's, running after the things that really don't matter in the big picture; that's the idolatry that pulls us away from the true challenge of living a spiritual life. As Jews we ask, "What can I do for Gd?" not "What has Gd done for me?" For, when we ask the former, we will surely find the answer to the latter.