

To Choose the Jews: Understanding the Election of Abraham

Parashat Lech Lecha, Genesis, Chapters 12-17 | October 14, 2021

In 1940, with doom descending on the Jews of Europe, several hundred yeshiva students obtained visas from Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara, who had heroically given them out despite his lack of authority to do so. These young Jewish men and their wives took the Trans-Siberian Railway across Russia, then sailed by ferry to Japan. They instinctively understood that they were escaping death, traveling into the unknown, sustained solely by their faith, just as their ancestor Abraham had once traveled into the unknown, sustained solely by his faith. Two of those individuals on board that train were my grandfather and grandmother. Decades later, this journey of theirs would be commemorated at a circumcision in a manner that would reflect not only their faith, but also the unique nature of the Jewish people and the chosenness of Abraham.

Abram first hears from Almighty God at the age of 75, when he receives the Divine command to leave his home and journey to the land of Canaan. No mention is made of how Abram understands who it is that is addressing him. In Jewish tradition, it is assumed that prior to this encounter, Abram already had come to know that there is one God; that he somehow intuited this on his own. The surest sign of this is that, as we discussed last week, surrounded by Sumerian pagans, Abram somehow defies the beliefs of all those around him, and in his journey, rejects their entire worldview. “*Vayelekh Avram*,” “And Abram went,” journeying to the land of Canaan, joined by his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot.

Clearly, his faith fuels his journey, but is he the only believer on Earth? Many biblical readers assume as much, and indeed assert that this is why God chose Abram. That is why, in response to the famous bit of verse: “How odd/of God/to choose/the Jews,” Jews have often quoted another very British bit of poetry in response: “Not odd/you sod/we Jews/chose God.” According to this understanding, Abram is chosen by the Almighty because in a world of pagans, he is the only monotheist.

But is he? At first, Abram does appear entirely surrounded by immoral and pagan societies. A famine drives Abram to Egypt, where because of Sarai’s beauty, she is seized, and then saved by the Almighty’s intervention. Then, a disagreement among their shepherds leads Lot to abandon Abram for the city of Sodom. And we are informed in Genesis 13:13 that:

The men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.

Thus, at this point, it seems that Abram truly is the only beacon of faith in his environments.

Suddenly, war breaks out and Lot is taken captive. Abram organizes an army and battles to liberate his nephew (or as the Bible puts it, his brother, a hint to the familial loyalty that defines Abram). Emerging from battle victorious, he meets a mysterious king:

And Melchizedek king of Shalem brought out bread and wine and he was a priest of the most high God.

And he blessed him, and said, blessed be Abram to the most high God, creator of Heaven and Earth. (Genesis 14:18-19)

The city of Shalem will later be known as Jerusalem, linking monotheism and that site forever, and it seems that Melchizedek and Abram share one profound idea: that there is a creator of Heaven and Earth.

It appears, then, that there *are* other monotheists. The poetic response to the anti-Semitic quip is indeed accurate. We Jews did indeed choose God, but so did others around the Earth who were never part of the people of Israel. The Bible also believes that moral heroes are not exclusive to Israel and that they are to be encountered everywhere. And how could I, who exists because of the sacrifice of a non-Jewish Japanese

consul, think otherwise? Thus, the fact that Abram is a monotheist is essential; that he is morally righteous is necessary; but we have not yet discovered what makes him *singular*. For this, we turn to the very next passage in Genesis, one which is well known, yet which rightly understood, is also astonishing:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying, Fear not Abram: I am thy shield; thy reward shall be very great. (Genesis 15:1)

Abram, who has constantly obeyed the Almighty up to this point, and who has said nothing to him, suddenly bursts out with a cry:

And Abram said Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless? (Genesis 15:2)

It is astonishing. The God he has followed across a continent promises him reward beyond imagination, and his reaction is apparently audacious. "So what?" he essentially says, "I want a child." But God, as verse 5 illustrates, is not angered by this reply:

And He brought him forth outside and said look now toward the heaven and count the stars if thou be able to count them and He said unto him so shall thy children be.

The fact that Abram desperately desires to be a father is the very source of God's love for him, and the very reason why it is he, and not Melchizedek, who will be the vehicle for God's providential plan. Several chapters later the Almighty will say so explicitly:

For I have known him, because he will command his children and household after him to keep the way of the Lord. (Genesis 18:19)

Abram is not the only individual in the ancient world to know of a Creator, and of the ethical implications of this great truth. But he *is* the first to have a dream of founding a family that will transmit this monotheistic principle from generation to generation. Abram is the first to truly envision not only bringing children into this

world, but teaching them, and raising them to follow his path; he sought children who would perpetuate not only his body but also his beliefs.

Abram was loved by God because of his qualifications not only as a believer but also as a faithful father. Thus parental love is at the heart of Abram's elevation, and therefore the bond between parents and children is placed at the center of the Jewish faith. Indeed, Jews see themselves not only as part of a faith but also of a family. As the theologian Michael Wyschogrod put it,

A full definition of Judaism does, of course, involve a whole complex of ideas, beliefs, values, and obligations posed by Judaism...But however crucial these are, they are, in a sense, superstructure rather than foundation. The foundation of Judaism is the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is why, as Wyschogrod further points out, the State of Israel successfully came into being when Jews came to the Holy Land from every culture and country from across the Earth. In the process, they discovered that they possessed a bond that was much more important than their differences, showing the world that they were truly brother and sister.

But in God's guarantee of a future family for Abram, there is also a hint of a warning. God finalizes his promise with a covenant, using an ancient Middle Eastern method in which animals are cut in half and the parties pass between the parts. Here the parties are to be Abram and the Almighty. Then we are enigmatically informed as follows:

And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses and Abram drove them away. And it came to pass that when the sun was going down a deep sleep fell upon Abram and lo, a dread even a great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:11-12)

Why do these birds of prey preface the darkness that descends? Perhaps to indicate the many predators

that Israel as the chosen nation will encounter in its history. When my grandfather and his fellow students arrived in Kobe, Japan, two of their rabbinic leaders were summoned to Tokyo to meet the military, as the Nazis had apparently informed their allies that Jews were problematic. At this meeting, according to one version, a general asked the rabbis, “Tell us, why exactly do the Nazis hate you so much?” One of the rabbis was flummoxed and flustered. How do you answer a question like that?

But the other looked calmly at the Japanese general and said, “The Nazis hate us because we are Asian.”

The general responded, “But *we* are Asian.”

“Yes,” the rabbi replied, “You are also on their list.”

Now, this is a very clever answer, and it is true of course that the Nazis hated all those who did not look like them, but at the same time, anti-Semitism is not just hatred of difference: anti-Semitism is hatred of the Jews, hatred of chosenness, hatred of our family’s eternal affiliation with the Almighty, and with the morality of biblical monotheism that we gave to the world.

In Chapter 17, Abram’s name is changed and enlarged to Abraham, *Avraham* in Hebrew, meaning “*av hamon goyim*,” “a father of a multitude of nations.” His wife Sarai, which means “my princess,” will have her own name evolve into the universalist form of “Sarah,” “humanity’s princess,” meaning God will be known to all the nations through Abraham’s family, and the Creator of the Universe will be known Himself by the family name: “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Those who hate the God of Israel and his moral message for humanity will direct their hatred first and foremost to the family of Abraham. Abraham’s vision foretells that darkness will descend upon his children again and again, as it did for my grandparents and the Jews of Europe. Michael Wyschogrod has noted that if Hitler sought the eradication not only of Judaism but the Jews, it was because he knew that to destroy the presence of God and his morality in this world, it was not only Jewish values that needed to be eradicated, but also Jews themselves. And if, through all this, Israel endures, it is at least in part because we are driven by the Abrahamic instinct

for familial perpetuation. This is the ultimate meaning of the ritual introduced in Genesis 17:10:

This is my covenant which ye shall keep between Me and you and thy seed after thee. Every male among you shall be circumcised.

So central to our identity is this ritual that we apply to it the Hebrew word *brit*, meaning covenant, without any additional explanation. By marking our sons, we remind them of Abraham’s obligation to continue his dream of fatherhood, and we remind parents that every child born to us is akin to the biblical child we will soon meet: a gift, like Isaac. Darkness has descended many times in the past upon Abraham’s family, but it was our dedication to familial transmission that overcame it all.

Not every Jew has understood this. One Jew who abandoned his heritage, Benedict Spinoza, claimed that it was anti-Semitism, inspired—in his view—by the Jewish differential mark of circumcision, that allowed for our eternal existence. But the truth, I think, is the opposite. In the midst of hate, what allowed the Jews to endure was familial love. This, for them, was the source of light in the midst of darkness.

I had the chance to reflect on this when I merited to experience the circumcision of my first child, my eldest son, which took place on December 25. My friends found this amusing—perhaps because I was, at the time, studying Jewish and Christian thought—and they went out of their way to wish me a “merry *brismas*.” But the truth is that for me, it was a very serious moment. The cry of the child seemed to reflect the Jewish cries throughout history, and the joy of the experience seemed to capture the very source of our endurance: that we Jews treasured the gift of children above all else. At a circumcision, the father pronounces the blessing inspired by our biblical passage: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord...who commanded us to bring our child into the covenant of Abraham.” and at that moment the community responds, “As he has entered the covenant so may he enter a life of Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds.” To the outsider these words may seem odd. The child is eight days old, and we are already envisioning his wedding! Yet rightly understood, the statement is said for the parents, reminding *us* that it is our obligation to seek to ensure

that the lives we lead, and the lives our children lead, are Jewish ones—continuations of Abraham and Sarah’s legacy, fulfillments of God’s promise that the covenant of our family will endure even when the darkness descends.

It was that very darkness that ensconced my grandparents as they travelled by train across Asia, escaping the specter of annihilation as almost every other member of their family was murdered.

My grandfather’s journey, like that of Abraham, ultimately also ended in the Holy Land, but it was much longer in distance and duration than that of his ancient ancestor. He spent the war, with my grandmother, in Japan and Shanghai, and then made his way to New York, where he taught Torah for many years before ultimately moving to Israel to continue his spiritual vocation.

Decades after his passing, I received a call from a young man whose wife had just had a baby boy; he was calling me to ask me to officiate at the circumcision. His wife’s family, whom I also knew, is named “Sassoon,” and this new baby’s great-grandfather was named Rahmo Sassoon. Rahmo Sassoon was born in Aleppo, part of the Syrian Jewish community, at the beginning of the 20th century and travelled for business to Kobe, Japan, building a Sephardic synagogue there. In 1940, when Kobe experienced an influx of European Jews, Sassoon was one of the leaders of his own Jewish community who saw to the refugees. Culturally, he was a businessman from Aleppo who seemed to have nothing in common with yeshiva students from Lithuania and Poland, but what bound them was Jewish brotherhood. At this circumcision at which I officiated, I explained to the unaffiliated who were in attendance how circumcision reflected the fact that we are more than mere individuals, and that as Jews we are bound in an eternal familial covenant uniting generations past, present, and posterity. I then described how this baby’s great-grandfather welcomed Jews from the other side of the world to Japan. Then, I revealed what the baby’s family did not themselves know when they requested that I preside: that my own maternal grandfather, Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Warshavhik, had been one of those Jews who had travelled to this far-flung corner of the Earth, who was welcomed to Kobe by Jews like

Rahmo Sassoon. I then asked the audience: when those two Jews—this baby’s great-grandfather and my grandfather—Jews from utterly different areas of the world, found themselves in Kobe, Japan, with the entire globe at war, could they have predicted that one day seventy years later, the grandson of one of them would be presiding at the circumcision of the great-grandson of the other, together, in New York City? They may not have predicted it, I said, but they would have believed it, because they both understood how the sacrifices of the past obligate us in the present to preserve our familial future. They understood that as Jews, they and their descendants were bound to one another.

At that moment, I was overcome with gratitude for the courage and fortitude of our Abrahamic ancestors, who helped ensure that generations later, this baby’s family and my family could come together as Jews, marking the continuity of the covenant together; gratitude that thousands of years after one man from Mesopotamia journeyed to the Holy Land and founded a family, his journey continues; that after so many attempted annihilations of his descendants, his family still endures, and thereby, the spirit of Abraham still lives.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik makes the case that God chooses Abraham not because he is the only monotheist on Earth, but because he is the only monotheist with the dream of founding a family rooted in the theological and ethical precepts of monotheism. What should this teach us about the Jewish mission today? What are the implications of Jews being charged not only with advancing a worldview, but also with advancing a way of life?
2. Why might the Almighty desire to attach Himself to a *family* rather than simply an individual? How can the family unit advance God's purposes in the world in ways that isolated individuals cannot?