

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Lech L'cha

Lekh - l'kha, mae-artz'kha oomi-moladetkha oomibaet avikha el ha-aretz asher areka. Get yourself up and leave your country, the land of your birth, from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you." In light of the recent elections, I could not help but equate the journey in which Abraham embarked and its likeness to the journey our country has traveled. Abraham was to leave the land of his comfort zone. He was to go to new places and have new experiences that would help him grow and mature into a man of faith. The text will warn him that along the way, there would be people who would bless him and curse him. In the end, though, his journey would prove successful not just for himself, but for his family and his off spring more numerous than the stars of the heavens and sands on the shores of the sea.

Such is the story of our great nation. Several times we have made this same journey, from imperialized colonials to revolutionary freedom fighters, from farmers to industrialists, and from segregationists now to the fulfillment of the dream that truly all of us are created equal. Along the way there were moments when we stumbled and moments when we soared. On the way, we have experienced both the blessings and the curses that result from walking through territories as yet to be charted. Certainly the latest steps in this journey have provided both the blessings and the curses. The latest election has seen the unthinkable become not only thinkable but real. While we have witnessed history in the making as Barack Obama ascends to the White House, we have also seen the rekindling of open and hostile racial animus. Over the course of this election, we have pushed to the heights of excitement and progress, while also dropping to the depths of bigotry and hate. Over the course of the last year plus, we have been two different countries, headed in separate directions, both at the same time. And as I have watched the blessings and curses, I found a new dimension through which to understand our biblical Abraham.

We take for granted that as he traveled, he held on to a stack of God's business cards, and that everyone who meets this patriarch immediately knew he was that generation's "Chosen by God." This does not address what Abraham thought of himself. As with all of us, there are two sides to this man; the one that people see and the one that he sees. Our tradition spends a lot of energy to demonstrate that Abraham was a great man. Soren Kierkegaard and a few others have looked insightfully into the psyche of the man, but in each case, the evaluation is of the man who has already heard and responded to God's call. Over the course of this election, both candidates made it clear that they had a vision of a better America, and both opposing parties called the ethics and honesty of those visions into question. We had to think about what really does drive people to pay attention to the call to service. Is it opportunism? Is it fear of not responding? Is it that we have some sense that we really can make a difference? And, assuming our own personal integrity, why is it that others are so easily swayed against us? What is it about people wanting to lead, that makes us so skeptical. It has always bothered me that Abraham would have to be warned that in doing God's work, he would have to be prepared to be cursed.

Watching the progression of this election, some of these answers became all too clear. Was it faith or ego that made Abraham understand that the voice he heard was God's? We have too many people in

this world claiming to have uniquely heard the word of God, and yet each preaches a different message – most of which are narrow and exclusionary. When Abraham came to town, why should people have believed him? Why should people have stopped what they were doing and adopted “a new way?” Maybe we have been reading the Abraham message with far more baggage than its original intention. God’s command to Abraham was not grounded in preaching, but in providing an ethical example for the world. The highlight stories of his life show us a man who succeeded and failed, but who lived a message of change. What is unique about Abraham is that he understood the call from God to be a wakeup call, a call to action; a call he answered with the word “Hinaeni.” This is an action word meaning not only “I am here,” but “I am ready.” The call was not about leaving his geographical home, but leaving the stereotypes he has inherited from previous generations. The call’s purpose was to bring Abraham to a place where he engaged truth without being bound to the rhetoric of yesterday. God called Abraham to break the tyrannous chains that had kept his ancestors pagan, opening a new path to engaging the divine – the simile for engaging the truth. The reason God prepared him to be cursed is simply that we don’t like change. Even where it is in our best interests, we fear it, shun it, reject it, and vilify anyone who brings it. And yet, while we denounce those who bring change during our own lifetimes, we glorify, even beatify them in retrospect. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, George Washington, Martin King, and Abraham were all change agents who stood for messages much bigger than their own lives. In their own day they were cursed by many. In our day they are blessings. This is where we find ourselves with President-Elect Barack Obama. The change he represents scares us, yet he has left the place of complacency and made a statement of change to the world. Some of us love it while others fear destruction. Only time will tell what his legacy will be, but I know that if we are prepared to revere the change agents of history we need to prophetically understand the potential effect that this week will have on creating a new world where even those who had been left out are now equal. Abraham’s journey brought us blessings, may the days ahead bring them, as well. Shabbat Shalom.