

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Lekh L'kha

I looked in the mirror the other day and grew concerned over what looked back at me. There are no surprises. I know I am middle aged. I know I am balding, and while there is a whole lot less of me than there used to be, what stared back was no bathing beauty. I am getting old. I stood there wondering where the dark thick lion's mane with the red hi-lights had gone. What was left was not dark or full, and the only red visible is the sunburn on my now balding scalp from sitting out too long without a hat. Yes, I look in the mirror every day, well, almost every day, but on that day I learned that my almost Uncle Clark died, and I was feeling old. Clark was the baby brother of a man my mother had been engaged to, before she broke that off, met my father and then married him. I met Clark when he joined my congregation in Florence, South Carolina. I learned that we were almost related, when one Shabbat night, as he and his now widow, Carol, were leaving the Temple, they came to say "good night." My mother was visiting, and I introduced them. They say that there are six degrees of separation between any two people in the world. In the Jewish world, there are only two. "Jewish Geography is the game we "play" to figure this out. After a couple of preliminary questions as to where each other was from, they figured out that they knew the same people (both were from the Washington D.C. area). Then they looked at each other and realized that after nearly fifty years, they met in my Temple in Florence, South Carolina. Clark's brother had passed long ago, but instantly my mother, Clark, and Carol created a new and lasting friendship that swept me right along with it. Uncle Clark was a giant man and a kind man, and now gone, he makes me take stock of my own days.

Lekh l'kha, M'artzekha. Mimoladet'kha. Get up and leave. Leave from your land. Leave from your father's home. This week's Torah portion begins with God's call to Abraham to begin his journey. The rest of the Abraham story is a retelling and assessment of his life's story and resume. As I sat to read it, I thought of Clark and then, looking in the mirror, I had to assess my own journey to this place where I am standing before the mirror and not always sure about what looks back at me. As we begin Torah's version of the Abraham story (the Quran version varies somewhat), we see that he becomes a champion for justice, arguing even with God over saving the people of Sodom and Gommorah. We will see that he sometimes fails, as with his wife Sarah, before Abimelekh, with Ishmael before Sarah, and with Isaac on top of Mount Zion. Through it all, we still call Abraham, "Avraham Avinu -- Abraham Our Ancestor." Abraham is considered the chief patriarch of all three western Religious traditions. It seems that whatever his record in the story, we all agree that he is to be venerated for the great soul that caused him to pursue God, when the rest of the world pursued idolatry. Subsequent generations have lofted praise upon him and thrown criticism at him, yet, what we know from the storyline and from history is that Abraham was a good man.

I go back to looking at myself in the mirror. No, I have never actually taken my son up a mountain to kill him (though I did threaten to take him back to the baby superstore once). No, I never saved my own skin by telling a foreign king to take my wife, pretending that she was my sister. I have not only ***not*** denied my children, as Rabbi, I have gathered more. I have done lots of other things, though; have made bad choices along the way, even hurt people I love. Conversely, I have not saved the world, though I think my work makes a difference. I think I am raising children with strong moral values. I was a reasonably good husband to my late wife, and am trying to be a good partner in a new relationship.

Mostly, despite the fact that I really am my own worst critic (we all are our own worst critics), I can look at Abraham's legacy and see that if he can be remembered for righteousness, then when my time to go comes, so can I. In the same sense, I am sure that Clark was not always the fun, loving, and kind man that I knew him to be, yet, his memory will always bring me blessings. Face it, we are all Abraham. We do the most miraculous feats of righteousness and fall abysmally short of the standard of decency and appropriateness. Sometimes, we are able to do both on the same day. And in counting ourselves good, we are not ignoring the difficult pieces of our life story, rather we find the blessings in which we participate far more compelling for memory than any of our destructive behaviors. Why? Perhaps, we do this because we really are good people, even where we get lost in our own criticism. We get lost internalizing the criticisms people levy at us, even while we know that nobody really knows our heart as well as we know our own. Somewhere along the journey, we need to find a way to look at ourselves and know that even in our most challenging moments, there are people who are ready to stand and give us credit for the blessings that they enjoy. We need to accept some of that credit and in looking into the mirror, find a way to celebrate some part of the image that looks back. Shabbat Shalom.