

Lech Lecha Neiel Baronberg October 16, 2021

The parsha Lech Lecha is known to us all. It introduces us to one of the most significant turning points in world history, to a new religious awareness and an alternative moralistic and family underpinning of expected human behavior. The person Abraham appears on the scene and will eventually be the father of three great religions. He is our progenitor the founder and original leader of our nation and we will follow his behavior and his exploits. He will be the model in perpetuity for his descendants and for all of us and all who will follow. So, it is reasonable to ask: "Why and how was this man chosen as the one who would move civilization forward and what accounts for his preeminence. Abraham traveled with his family from Ur Kasdim in present day Iraq to Haran in present day Turkey. His family was semi-nomadic moving their herds to small cities and engaging in minor commerce. Haran was a fairly prosperous and cosmopolitan city with a developed economy and some prominence in science, law and culture. The monotheism of more ancient cultures had given way to polytheism and this permeated the local culture of the time. Abraham's father Terah, we are told in Midrash, but not in the Torah, manufactured idols and these were sold in the marketplace by his obedient son. We know nothing further of Abraham's childhood, his adolescence, his marriage to Sarah or even most of his adulthood. The Torah is silent. He is called by G-d at age 75. Why? Our previous heroic figure, Noach was called because he was righteous in his time and walked with G-d. Nothing stands out for us regarding Abraham. Did G-d speak to him? ; did he hear voices?- was he troubled as an adolescent? Did his own intuition lead him to question the whole world of polytheism which prevailed throughout Mesopotamia at the time? It seems that at least on the surface, all we have is that Abraham was called because he was a rebellious son who questioned the worship of idols and in a fit of anger broke his father's figurines. . There is no evidence of any deep meditative contemplation or sitting under a bodhi tree or any rapture leading to his epiphany. Nevertheless, we are left with him as a revolutionary, an iconoclast and a man of new beginnings who overturned everything his father stood for. Torah scholar, Leon Kass says that Abraham was an ambitious man with a desire for greatness and he believes that the voice he heard would lead him to this distinction. This is how Kass sees it yet there is nothing in the text regarding Abraham's motives for answering the call. Still the question is not trivial concerning what moves each of us to follow our aspirations;. How we experience a calling or feel a sense of destiny is really the question we all may sometimes ask of ourselves or see in others. Still, one might have expected some deeper philosophical dedication. We would all like to hear that. But no. Abraham here seems to be one who will step rather abruptly without deliberation, into a new arena and embrace the unknown. He seems to be one who is willing to live with this uncertainty and this attitude will forever be part of the Jewish personality and is a legacy from our patriarch. . How does a person such as Abraham gain such an epiphany? The easy answer is that G-d spoke to him. But others might prefer the inner voice path directing him to a new understanding of what is right and true. The non-conformity of youth and the absurdity of seeing idols that did nothing tangible, took hold. And for him this new awareness, would not be denied. Abraham heard that he was being asked to be different. And that he could be a leader for making this difference. We as Jews will ask similar questions forever. It is our legacy and our expectation to always be inquisitive to ask questions to be skeptical and critical as we note what is and ask why it is so? Abraham will be the initiator of this life of inquisitiveness. He knows that something about this idol worshipping is wrong. Misplaced "worship" appears in every aspect of life. From material acquisition, to personality cult and to power structures of control. All of this will need reevaluation. All aspects of idol worshipping in any form that we encounter every day are suspect and must be questioned. Go forth he is told, go to yourself, or go for yourself are all variations of this movement, of this potential energy ready to burst

forth – or just Go. Go quickly and do not wait as Pirke Avot advises when performing mitzvot. . Abraham is the person who sees this urgency and feels his agenda can only be accomplished when drastic changes are made. When each of us can Go forth. This urgency will become a new paradigm; that a person will need to get going to move on, to leave something behind, when responding to a voice that all of us will hear at some time in our lives. Abraham, and then we who follow are directed to do more than just Go forth. We are challenged by G-d to “be a blessing “ to all of humanity; Abraham is asked to leave what he has gotten used to; a theme repeated throughout Torah and throughout Jewish history. He must leave his land and his father’s house and start anew. The archetypical Jew is this wanderer with the courage to explore and venture into the unknown. Abraham will be the first, but this motif continues with many players throughout the Book of Genesis and then in Exodus in the Wilderness when we, as a nation left Egypt and followed the pillar of fire and a new image of a universal G-d. Throughout the millennia Jews have heeded such a call or be forced to get going, to leave their homes but then taken leadership roles in new environs whenever and wherever they were given the chance. 3 Abraham hears the call, “Are you ready to go – do you hear a voice calling upon you to act upon your inclination that something in this house and in this land is amiss. Are you , ready to reject the present societal standard of all Mesopotamian cultures and risk a new way of understanding the world and its sources of power and control? Abraham hears within and envisions new leadership and morality based on compassion and justice rather than upon placating arbitrary idols. The human model G-d has in mind is one with the courage to be different; to take a risk, to journey in a new direction and to challenge the status quo by rejecting the idols of the age . To leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable, restricted and without freedom. Leave behind you the social forces, the familial pressures and the circumstances of your birth . With sufficient imagination and determination discipline and courage the model asks the Jew to look beyond. The concept of Moshiach is born and there must be movement in that direction at all times either via familiar pathways or the road less taken. Abraham envisioned this alternative road and he is the leadership model for all Jews who will come after and who know the truth in this model. How does this model look today? Abraham the Jew is not merely the rebel or the enlightened soul of the moment. Rather there will be responsibilities and accountability and these will be the expectations for the Jew forever. G-d speaks right at the outset of the parsha– “you shall be a blessing” implying that Abraham and his descendants in order to inherit the land promised will be required to demonstrate and carry out the agenda set by this voice from within. Throughout our history we have all carried this voice within us in some measure. We will always ask, do we measure up and do we hear the Torah in the background. It is a counter culture voice criticized and denigrated even today by much of humanity – our voice is honored and admired yet often despised and attacked . It is a voice which asks the Jew to go it alone and find truth within; to seek and perpetuate a G-d inspired universe that we know is true. A monotheistic world with a unified program based on justice – just the opposite of the world inspired by pleasing idols in all their multiple forms. The Jew will, as was Abraham, be required to show the world there will always be the path which can go against the prevailing materialistic and egoistic power structure. A world where the other less fortunate is a priority – where the stranger is recognized and where fair dealings are the norm. But Abraham the destroyer of idols, goes even further. He speaks out to argue with authority He will not be timid before any establishment where he might sense injustice. He intercedes with G-d in Sodom and sympathizes saying to G-d “your harshness would be a sacrilege if you bring death upon the righteous along with the wicked”. More poignantly he directs his concern to G-d saying “ Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice here”. These are the words of a man who is confident and not subservient, and worships justice and not the

idols of self-aggrandizement and self-promotion. 4 It is said that Abraham “protested the flames that threaten the palace and the evil that threatens G-d’s world.” This gift of seeing in advance what needs to be remedied, taking action and responding possibly to a higher calling is an image of the Jew reflected from Abraham. Jewish identity is that inner voice learned in childhood and reinforced by lifelong study and rehearsed by daily ritual and prayer . We are asked through the mind of Abraham to go forth, to go to ourselves, to emulate Abraham, to sense his yearning and wonderment, and his desire for leadership and to be a member of a people apart, who are a light unto the nations and apart from the mainstream. And this, we have always been. Leaving home, family and place of birth - going forth - Abraham is the first who heard this inner voice asking him and us to see his situation and to see the world where the power structure of idol worshiping gives way to self-initiative , self-confidence and self-affirmation . We will control our destiny and we will be responsible and accountable. He is the first to speak and act in this manner. This is the legacy and this is the challenge we inherit.