

Parashat Lekh Lekha: Choosing a New Self

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Bereishit 11:31

וַיִּקַּח תֶּרַח אֶת־אֲבִרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בֶּן־הָרָן בֶּן־בְּנוֹ
וְאֶת שְׂרֵי כָלָתוֹ אֵשֶׁת אֲבִרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאוּר
כַּשְׂדִּים לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶצָה כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיָּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

Terah took his son Avram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Avram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan, but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.

1. Avraham the Troublemaker

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל פְּנֵי תֶרַח אָבִיו (בראשית יא, כח),
רַבִּי חִיָּא בַר בְּרִיה דְּרַב אָדָא דִּיפּוֹ, תֶּרַח עוֹבֵד
צִלְמִים הָיָה, חַד זְמַן נִפִּיק לְאַתֵּר, הוֹשִׁיב לְאַבְרָהָם
מוֹכֵר תַּחְתָּיו. הָיָה אֲתִי בַר אֵינֶשׁ בָּעֵי דִּיזְבֹּן, וְהָיָה
אָמַר לֵה בַר כְּמָה שְׁנִין אַתָּה, וְהָיָה אָמַר לֵיה בַר
חֲמִשִּׁין אוֹ שְׁתֵּין, וְהָיָה אָמַר לֵיה וַיִּי לֵיה לְהוֹוֹא
גְּבִרָא דְהָוָה בַּר שְׁתֵּין וּבָעֵי לְמַסְגֵּד לְבַר יוֹמִי, וְהָיָה
מִתְבַּיֵּשׁ וְהוֹלֵךְ לוֹ. חַד זְמַן אָתָּה חַד אֲתָתָא טְעִינָא
בִּידָה חָדָא פִּינָךְ דְּסֹלֶת, אָמְרָה לֵיה הָא לָךְ קֶרֶב
קְדָמִיהוֹן, קָם נָסִיב בּוֹקֶלְסָא בִּידָה, וְתַבְרִינוֹן
לְכָלְהוֹן פְּסִילָא, וַיִּהֲב בּוֹקֶלְסָא בִּידָה דְרִבָּה דְהָוָה
בִּינִיהוֹן. כִּיּוֹן דָּאֲתָא אָבוּהָ אָמַר לֵיה מָאן עָבִיד לְהוֹן
קְדִין, אָמַר לֵיה מַה נִּכְפּוֹר מִינָךְ אֲתָתָא חָדָא אֲתָתָא
טְעִינָא לֵה חָדָא פִּינָךְ דְּסֹלֶת, וְאָמַרְתָּ לִי הָא לָךְ
קְרִיב קְדָמִיהוֹן, קְרִיבָתָּ לְקְדָמִיהוֹן הָוָה דִּין אָמַר
אָנָּה אֵיכּוֹל קְדָמָא, וְדִין אָמַר אָנָּה אֵיכּוֹל קְדָמָא,
קָם הִדִּין רִבָּה דְהָוָה בִּינִיהוֹן נִסָּב בּוֹקֶלְסָא וְתַבְרִינוֹן.
אָמַר לֵיה מַה אַתָּה מַפְלָה בִּי, וַיִּדְעִין אֵינוֹן. אָמַר
לֵיה וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אֲזַנֵּיךְ מַה שֶּׁפִּיךְ אוֹמֵר.

“Haran died in the presence of Terah his father in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans” (Bereishit 11:28). “Haran died during the lifetime of Terah his father” – Rabbi Hiyya grandson of Rav Ada of Yafa: Terah was an idol worshipper [and a seller of idols]. One time, he went away to some place, and he installed Avraham as salesman in his stead. A person would come seeking to buy. He [Avraham] would say to him: ‘How old are you?’ He would say to him: ‘Fifty or sixty years old.’ He would say to him: ‘Woe to this man who is sixty years old and seeks to prostrate himself before something that is one day old.’ He would be ashamed and leave. One time, a certain woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to him: ‘Here, offer it before them.’ He arose, took a club in his hand, shattered all the idols, and placed the club in the hand of the largest among them. When his father came, he said to him: ‘Who did this to them?’ He said to him: ‘I will not lie to you, a certain woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to me: Here, offer it before them. I offered it before them. This one [idol] said: I shall eat first, and another one said: I shall eat first. This big idol, who was standing among them, got up and took the club and shattered them.’ He [Terah] said to him: ‘What, are you mocking me? Are they sentient at all?’ He said to him: ‘Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?’

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avodat Kohavim 1:3

וְכֵן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה הִכִּיר אֲבְרָהָם אֶת בּוֹרְאוֹ. כִּיּוֹן
שֶׁהִכִּיר וַיֵּדַע הַתַּחֲוִיל לְהִשָּׁיב תְּשׁוּבוֹת עַל בְּנֵי אוֹר

Avraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>כְּשֶׁדִּים וְלַעֲרֹךְ דִּין עִמָּהֶם וְלֹמַר שְׁאִין זֶה דֶּרֶךְ הָאֻמָּת שְׂאֵתָם הוֹלְכִים בָּהּ וְשֹׁבֵר הַצְּלָמִים וְהַתְּחִיל לְהוֹדִיעַ לָעָם שְׁאִין רָאוּי לַעֲבֹד אֱלֹהִים לְעוֹלָם וְלֹ רָאוּי לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וּלְהִקְרִיב וּלְנַסֵּךְ כְּדִי שִׁפְיָרוּהוּ כָּל הַבְּרוּאִים הַבָּאִים. וְרָאוּי לַאֲבֹד וּלְשֹׁבֵר כָּל הַצּוּרוֹת כְּדִי שֶׁלֹא יִטְעוּ בָּהֶן כָּל הָעָם כְּמוֹ אֵלֹהִים שֶׁהֵם מִדְּמִים שְׁאִין שֶׁם אֱלֹהִים אֵלֹהִים אֶלֹהִים. כִּיֹּן שֶׁגָּבַר עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרָאִיוֹתָיו בִּקְשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַרְגוֹ וְנַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ נֹס וַיֵּצֵא לַחֲרָן. וְהַתְּחִיל לַעֲמֹד וּלְקַרֵּא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל לְכָל הָעוֹלָם וּלְהוֹדִיעַם שֶׁיֵּשׁ שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד לְכָל הָעוֹלָם וְלֹ רָאוּי לַעֲבֹד. וְהִיָּה מְהֵלֶךְ וְקוֹרֵא וּמְקַבֵּץ הָעָם מֵעִיר לְעִיר וּמִמַּמְלָכָה לְמַמְלָכָה עַד שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְאַרְץ כְּנָעַן וְהוּא קוֹרֵא שְׁנֹאֲמַר (בְּרֵאשִׁית כ"א ל"ג) "וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם בְּנֵשׁם ה' אֵל עוֹלָם".</p>	<p>began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path. He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world. To Him [alone] is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations so that the people of future [generations] would recognize Him. [Conversely,] it is fitting to destroy and break all the images, lest all the people err concerning them, like those who thought there are no other gods besides these [images]. When he overcame them through the strength of his arguments, the king desired to kill him. He was [saved through] a miracle and left for Charan. [There,] he began to call loudly to all people and inform them that there is one God in the world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan - proclaiming [God's existence the entire time] - as [Bereishit 21:33] states: "And He called there in the name of the Lord, the eternal God."</p>
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2. The Cost of Rebellion

Bavli Bava Batra 91a	
<p>וְאָמַר רַב חֲנַן בַּר רַבָּא אָמַר רַב: עֶשְׂרֵי שָׁנִים נִחְבְּשׁ אֲבִירָהּ אֲבִינוּ – שְׁלֹשׁ בְּכוֹתָא, וְשִׁבְעַת בְּקָרְדּוּ. וְרַב דִּימִי מִנְהַרְדֵּעָא מַתְנִי אִיפְכָא. אָמַר רַב חֲסֵדָא: עִיבְרָא זַעֲרָא דְכוֹתָא – זֶהוּ אוֹר כְּשָׁדִים.</p>	<p>And Rav Hanan bar Rava says that Rav says: Our forefather Avraham was imprisoned for ten years because he rejected the idol worship that was accepted in his land. He was imprisoned for three years in the city of Khuta, and seven years in Karddu. And Rav Dimi of Neharde'a teaches the opposite, that he was imprisoned seven years in Khuta and three in Karddu. Rav Hisha said: The small passage of Khuta, this is Ur of the Chaldeans (see Bereishit 11:31).</p>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963

<p>My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood...</p>

3. Choosing a New Self

Stephen J. Dubner, "Choosing My Religion," <i>The New York Times Magazine</i> , 31 March 1996	
<p>True, the relative merits of Catholicism and Judaism could be argued endlessly, as my mother and I have tried, but hadn't my parents and I ultimately trodden the same path? Like Abraham, we left our native land and our father's house for a land we did not know. As much as ours were spiritual acts, they were cultural, familial, and psychological acts as well. Choosing a religion means far more than choosing a new perspective on God -- it informs how we talk, eat, and vote, how we think about justice and history, money, and sex. We choose a new religion to choose a new self, to set ourselves apart from where we have come.</p>	