

The first two parashiot in our Torah are concerned with archetypal areas of tension: male-female and siblings in Parashah Genesis, and in Parashah Noach freedom versus conformism and their excesses. These stories describe the general human condition, and their countless variations on the themes of human volatility, propensity to violence, and reluctance to learn from mistakes exist in every civilization on earth. The myths and legends of our ancestors are strikingly similar, and they resonate in the literature, art, and music of every succeeding generation – nothing new under the sun – except for a major variant beginning with the story of Abraham and his family.

HaShem again singles out one particular human being, but unlike the story of Noach, which culminates with HaShem making a covenant with all of creation, this story leads to a covenant between HaShem and one particular group of people: our people. This does not mean that HaShem is abandoning the rest of creation; it simply adds another dimension. Because rules alone don't always achieve the desired results, we need examples and viable role models to encourage us to follow them. Every parent has learned, often painfully, that statements like "because I said so" and "Do as I say, not as I do," are dismally ineffective. Conversely, most of us have also experienced how self-defeating it is to aspire to perfection. We can't all be Nobel laureates or selfless paragons of virtue. We can only be the best version of ourselves. And this is precisely what makes the stories beginning in Lech Lecha and continuing throughout our scriptures so revolutionary. Our patriarchs and matriarchs are anything but perfect, but their stories contain teachings that are relevant for all of humanity. Abram and Sarai, as they are known before HaShem gives them new names that reflect their new purpose, lead the way. In the land disputes between the herdsmen of his nephew Lot and his own herdsmen, Abram demonstrates compromise for the sake of peace. In dealing with the king of Sodom he refuses to enrich himself at the expense of the people. His trust in HaShem leads him to set out on an unknown journey, and then to circumcise himself and all of the males in his household. And later in the following parashah, he models exemplary hospitality. But he also exhibits lack of trust by fleeing to Egypt when there is famine in Canaan, and then compounds it by lying about his relationship with Sarai, exposing her to potential adultery in Pharaoh's harem. The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) teaches that this lack of trust is the reason we later had to experience exile and slavery in Egypt. He also condemns Sarah for her similar lack of trust in forcing Hagar to bear a child for her, and then dealing harshly with her both when she is pregnant and after Ishmael and Isaac have been born. Yes, it is easy to find fault with them both, but it is just as easy to find plausible reasons for their behavior. Every healthy organism has a strong will to live and will do all it can to defend itself. Facing famine in Canaan, Abram does what any reasonable person would do: he becomes what we today call an economic refugee and flees with his wife to Egypt, where there is food. And knowing the prevailing culture, he engages in subterfuge in order to save his own life – a pattern of deceit that runs in the family, as we will read in subsequent chapters of the Book of Genesis. Sarah fears for her life in a different way: HaShem has prevented her from bearing children herself, so she resorts to a practice that is fully acceptable in her culture and acquires a child through her servant, thus ensuring that she will live on even though she is barren. When the inevitable rivalry between the two women arises, the behavior of both is understandable. Impatience aside, could their faith in HaShem's promise to make them into a great nation simply have inspired both to do everything humanly possible to ensure success? Our choices are based on our understanding, which, after all, has its human limitations.

With Parashah Lech Lecha the focus shifts from all of humanity to one family that will eventually become *Am Yisrael* – the Jewish People – a people with values that were revolutionary in their polytheistic, autocratic world but that have come to be woven into the fabric of nearly every democratic form of government and jurisprudence. Although our *Aleinu* prayer concludes with the fervent hope that all mankind will one day accept HaShem's rule, which means all humankind will live by these values, unlike other religions, Judaism does not proselytize; we lead by example. The heroes and heroines of our stories are normal human beings, multidimensional and often deeply flawed; they grapple with authority, they learn slowly, and they make mistakes, just like we do. We do not deify them; instead, we strive to emulate their strengths and learn from their weaknesses. Beginning with Abraham's initial journey, we constantly navigate between the universal and the particular, making our homes all over the world, interacting with and adapting to its cultures to the extent our mitzvot allow. In upholding our eternal covenant, we do our best to be worthy emissaries of the lofty principles of our ancestors that have defined and guided our people throughout the millennia.

Shabbat shalom!