

Leaving his family in Charan, Abram, Lot, their wives, and their followers continue their interrupted journey. Something must have inspired Abraham's father Terach to uproot his family and set off for Canaan. Perhaps he had also felt the presence of HaShem, but too grounded in the pagan mindset to follow through, he gives up and settles in Charan. Clearly, Abraham's senses are more finely tuned to divine revelation, and he resolutely takes up the cause his father had abandoned. There is a curious episode in the middle of this eventful parashah that seems irrelevant to the story. Why the long narrative about hostilities between two factions of petty kings, when Abram, as he was still called then, only gets involved after his nephew Lot is captured? Midrash Bereshit Rabba explains: Amraphel, the king of Shinar, is none other than Nimrod, Ham's grandson through Cush, the "mighty hunter" who "incites the world to revolt." Nimrod is a fire-worshiper; during Abraham's youth in Ur-Kasdim, he tries to convince him to return to the paganism he is obviously beginning to reject. The midrash describes Abram's wily attempts to counteract his father's persistent idol worship. "Rabbi Hiyya said: Terach was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away and left Abram to sell them in his place. A man came wishing to buy one. 'How old are you?' Abram asked. 'Fifty years,' he replied. 'Woe to such a man! You are fifty years old and would worship a day-old object!' At this he became ashamed and departed. On another occasion a woman came with a plate of flour to offer to the idols. ... So, he took a stick, broke the idols, and put the stick in the hand of the largest. When his father demanded to know what had happened, ... he rejoined '... the largest arose, took the stick and broke them.' ... Terach cried out 'Why do you mock me? Have they any knowledge?' Abram answered, 'Should your ears not listen to what your mouth is saying?' Thereupon Terach seized him and delivered him to Nimrod." Fed up with Abram's clever countermoves pitting the elements fire, water, cloud, and wind against each other and proving them all unworthy of worship, Nimrod throws him into the fire. Abram's brother Haran, undecided whom to follow, waits for the outcome. When Abram emerges unscathed he sides with him, whereupon Nimrod throws him into the fire and he dies. (Parashah Noach: "And Haran died in the presence of his father, in the land of his birth, Ur-Kasdim." 11:28) Citing the midrash, Rashi defines the name Amraphel as *amar* (he said) *pol* (fall) into the fiery furnace. The midrash etymologically interprets the names of the opposing kings: Bera (evil son), Birsha (wicked son), Shinab (he amassed wealth), Shember (he flew and procured riches), Bela (its inhabitants were swallowed up). All of these negative attributes illustrate an unfavorable imbalance between the good inclination (*yetzer ha-tov*) and the evil inclination (*yetzer ha-ra*). Indeed, Bera is king of Sodom, and Birsha is king of Gomorrah, cities so steeped in evil that HaShem eventually must destroy them. Earlier, Lot and Abram have amiably parted ways because their individual possessions have become so great that the herdsmen of their cattle were quarreling not only amongst themselves, but also with the inhabitants of the land. Lot chooses the lush plain of the Jordan, and settles in Sodom. When the five kings are defeated and Lot is taken captive, Abram is forced to take sides in a conflict he would otherwise have avoided. As we have seen, both coalitions of petty kings represent the evil inclination. Amraphel-Nimrod and his allies embody the pagan world with all its enticements set against the nascent idea of monotheism, and the five kings of the opposing alliance represent the epitome of evil. Abram does well to keep his distance. But once a kinsman is involved, he is duty-bound to intervene, even if it means aiding Sodom and its evil allies. Abram rushes into battle, rescues Lot and reclaims all the people and possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah. The king of Sodom only wants the people returned and offers the material spoils to Abram. But invoking HaShem, Abram refuses any reward for himself, ensuring only that those who fought with him receive their just due. These stories are the opening salvo in the struggle between paganism and monotheism. One small word (14:13) stands out in illustration. "And the fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew – *ha-ivri* (of Lot's capture). Literally, *ha-ivri* means "the one who crossed over." Abram is the first person to be called *ivri* and this is the first appearance of the word in our scriptures. Abram, the non-conformist, stands on the opposite side of prevailing custom, slowly, patiently leading by example. His kindness and concern for his fellow human beings counters the hedonistic world of Sodom and Gomorrah. What gives him the strength to persevere when his father had given up? Again, we find the answer in our text: HaShem's command, *lech lecha* – go **to/for** yourself. In other words, plumb the depths of your own being, recognize who you are and what you stand for, and hone your courage to proceed in the face of all odds. You will be refined in other spiritual fires, but if you keep your senses tuned to the *kol d'mama daka*, the tiny rustling of the Divine spark that resides in all humans, you will prevail and the world will be a better place because of you. These stories are wonderful allegories, eloquent teaching tools to help strengthen us in our own struggles to keep the balance of our inclinations weighted in favor of the good.

Shabbat shalom!