

Parashat Lech Lecha 5772, 2011:

*Encountering Avraham Avinu*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha*, in conjunction with *parshiot* Vayera and Chayeh Sarah, is preeminently the story of *Avraham Avinu* (our father Abraham). He is the progenitor of our faith-community and the primal link in the unbroken chain that eternally connects us to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He). As such, his fundamental importance to our people cannot be overestimated. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his disciples and students, portrayed Avraham’s remarkable and unique contribution to our people in the following fashion:

As the architect and founder of our nation, Abraham left such an indelible imprint upon our unfolding historic destiny that he has been integrated into our historical consciousness; he is so singular a motif of our historical emergence that the whole paradoxical, complex experience of our charisma would be impossible if we denied the reality of the Abraham-personality... If we were to deny the truth of the Abraham story, our historic march would be a fathomless mystery, an insensate, cruel, absurd occurrence that prosecutes no goal and moves on toward nothingness, running down to its own doom. The great figure of our patriarch is indispensable because it suggests a meaning and an end that are within the grasp of historical realization... If Abraham were a myth, a legend, a beautiful but fantastic vision, then we would be faced with a tragic hoax and the ridicule of the centuries and millennia. (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, pages 2-3)

Far too often, we fail to “see the forest for the trees.” Our sight becomes myopic and beclouded by details, and thereby prevents us from achieving a holistic and thoroughgoing vision. I believe that this frequently happens when we try to understand the import of great historical figures in general, and our patriarchs and matriarchs in particular. In my estimation, the above-quoted passage from the Rav addresses this

failing, and enables us, perhaps for the first time, to focus on the “big-picture” persona of Avraham. Let us review how Rav Soloveitchik conceptualized Avraham’s nation-creating role in history:

1. Avraham was the architect and founder of our nation.
2. Avraham’s actions left a permanent and deep-seated imprint upon our unfolding historic destiny and existential identity. It is often said that all of general philosophy is a footnote to Aristotle. *L’havdil af havdalot* (In stark contrast) it can very well be said – all of Jewish history is a footnote to the first patriarch.
3. Without Avraham – there simply could be no Jewish people – neither spiritually nor physically.
4. Avraham’s very being endows meaning to the past, present, and future of our people. In fact, without Avraham, our people’s presence on the stage of history would be meaningless and a cruel and absurd mystery.
5. Perhaps most importantly, “the great figure of our patriarch is indispensable because it suggests a meaning and an end that are within the grasp of historical realization.”

How, however, does Avraham’s life suggest a “meaning and an end” that can be authentically encountered as we journey upon the highways and byways of our lives? I believe the answer is found in one crucial word: “*chesed*” (“human kindness”). Avraham was the personification of *chesed*; he taught the world its ultimate value and limitless import. As the prophet Michah so beautifully stated in the final verse of his *sefer* (7:20): “You shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, that You swore to our forefathers from the earliest of days.” How do we emulate Avraham? How can we embody the *chesed* that was the hallmark of his life? I believe the answer is found in performing heart-felt acts of loving-kindness for others. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) encapsulated this notion in the following famous formulation:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel 14:1*, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

We now understand *Avraham Avinu's* greater influence and purpose, and the means to serve as his emissaries in our often-frightening and confusing world. Therefore, it is time to ask Hashem to help us to carry out Avraham's vision and purpose so that we may act with *chesed* toward our fellow Jews and to all mankind. In this way, we will truly be like Avraham and help bring about a time when *chesed* will finally triumph over evil for evermore. May that time come soon and in our days, *v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).