

Parashat Lech Lecha, 5773, 2013:

Understanding the Greatness of Avraham Avinu

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The Holy One blessed be He fully revealed the uncontrolled nature of man when he declared: "...for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (*Sefer Bereishit* 8:21, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). Rashi (1040-1105), based upon the Midrash, explained this phrase in the following manner:

from his youth: This is written מְנַעֲרִי [i.e., without a "vav," implying that] from the time that he [the embryo] shakes himself [מְנַעֵר] to emerge from his mother's womb, the evil inclination is placed in him. — [*Bereishit Rabbah* 34:10]

Cain's murder of Abel, The Generation of the Flood, and the Generation of the Tower of Babel certainly underscore the veracity of Rashi's interpretation. On the positive side, however, it is precisely from this vantage point that we are able to appreciate the contrasting uniqueness, and consequent greatness, of *Avraham Avinu* (Our Father Abraham). His promise and potential began to be revealed from his earliest days, when he courageously stood alone against the polytheistic worship and culture of his time:

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor

was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one G-d who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other G-d among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 1:3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

The Rambam further notes: “Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator.” (Ibid.) Make no mistake about it: Avraham was a religious revolutionary! He radically rebelled against the religious establishment of his time. He recognized, as Isaiah would say so many years later, that: “... those who carry their graven wooden image and pray to a god who does not save, do not know.” (45:20) Avraham’s spiritual classroom was Nature and the Cosmos, and his teacher was G-d Himself. His flawless logic and extraordinary intellectual ability led him to rediscover the forgotten truth of Hashem’s existence. Therefore, he was able to apprehend that it was Hashem, and none other, who created the world and continues to guide it according to the dictates of His divine will. These beliefs were truly “counter-culture” in the context of Avraham’s idol-worshipping world. He rejected both the underlying philosophical axioms and the resulting practical sociological tenets of the culture in which he lived. Hashem and His value structure, rather than moral relativism and hedonistic behavior, would be the brilliant light that would illuminate the spiritual darkness of his time. In short, immutable and absolute truth would now replace the values of the day. Without exaggeration, Avraham changed the world for all time:

Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he 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 G-d 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 people who thought that 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 in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one God in the entire 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 [G-d's existence the entire time] - as the Torah states: "And He called there in the name of the L-rd, the eternal G-d." When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain [them] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the men of the house of Abraham. (Ibid.)

Avraham revolutionized the spiritual universe by presenting in thought, and representing in deed, the one true G-d to mankind. He was an outstanding individual who changed the history of the world and became the progenitor of the Jewish people. Beyond question, Avraham epitomized greatness, and his accomplishments are legion. In some ways, therefore, he is every Jew's spiritual guide and mentor.

Avraham's entrance onto the grand stage of world history was a great comfort to Hashem. He was the first person to rise to all of the challenges he encountered, and worshiped G-d in ultimate love and heartfelt devotion. He was, at one and the same time, *Avraham avdi* (Avraham My servant, *Sefer Bereishit* 26:24) and *Avraham ohavi* (Avraham My beloved friend, *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 41:8). At long last, our Creator had a friend who honored and obeyed Him, just as Hashem was Avraham's *yedid nefesh* (beloved of the soul). Based upon this unique and unprecedented spiritual relationship, we have the permanent *zechut* (merit) to be G-d's *Am Hanivchar* (Chosen People). May

we live up to this singular honor and, like *Avraham Avinu*, sanctify Hashem's Name in the world. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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