

# It's Just a Story: Finding Abraham and Ourselves

Parshat Lech Lecha 5770

By Rabbi Mark Greenspan

“It’s only a story.” That’s what my religious school student said. “It’s only a story – I mean we don’t really know if any of this really happened. So why should I care about it?” If I had a nickel every time a student asked me this question. Of course, they’re right – but that’s only half the story. Sometimes stories are truth than facts. And sometimes the characters in the Torah speak to us in a way that history can’t. I can’t point out where history ends and myth begins. But I do know that the Torah speaks to us differently than any other book....

This morning, as we begin the story of our Abraham and Sarah, I’d like to suggest that there are at least two surprising things that we can learn from Abraham and Sarah about the Bible. The first is that the Bible is not history. And the second is that it does not contain theology.

The Bible doesn’t record history, at least in the sense that we think of a modern historical text. It does not attempt to tell us what happened long ago on a particular day in a certain place. It doesn’t even provide us with an entire biography of our forefather and mother. Rather, the Torah attempts to help us understand who we are by telling us a story. By calling Genesis, not history but ‘a story’ we do not minimize the importance of this text. Story telling is how we understand ourselves. When we read about Abraham, the Torah becomes a mirror which allows us to see ourselves in new and different ways.

Several hundred years ago the author of the Zohar, the great work of Jewish mysticism, understood that if you are looking at the Torah as a history book, you’re missing the point. The author of the Zohar writes:

“Woe to the human being who says that the Torah merely presents worldly matters. If so we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words and it would be better than the Torah. Even the rulers of the world possess words more sublime!”

The Torah, then, is not about the past but about the present; it’s all about us, and about our relationship with God. It is not even about which God is as much as it is an instrument through which we can encounter God in our lives. Professor Louis Finkelstein the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary used to say that when he prays, he speaks to God, but when he studies torah God speaks to him!

But if the Bible isn’t history, neither is it theology. No where does it clearly articulate what Abraham believed. The truth is, Abraham’s beliefs were probably not that different from his neighbors! Rabbi Harold Schulweis has written that the Bible is the first word but not the final word when it comes to religion. Abraham is only the beginning and not the end of the story. When we enter the Bible we begin a journey of discovery, just as Abraham did when he left home on his way to an unknown destination. That’s why Abraham’s journey begins with the words, *Lech Lecha*, literally “Go to You.” With each generation our understanding of God changes as does our way of reading these stories.

Where it will take us is unknown, though it always seems to bring us back to God. The riches of Torah can be found not in the conclusions but in the journey, in getting there.

Because the Torah contains stories and not history and because it doesn't confine us to a single understanding of God, exploring the Torah is an exciting journey. There is joy to be found in reading and re-reading these familiar words and discovering that there is always something new in them to enrich our lives and deepen our understanding of the world. The Torah may be the same from year to year but we're not. We see it with new eyes and through new experiences. More than a story about the distant past, the Torah is about the world in which we are living right now, at this moment!

And so we turn to the story of Abraham. I find Abraham to be one of the most intriguing characters in the Bible. Everything begins with *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our father, as we call him, and yet we know so little about him. Three faiths have claimed Abraham as their own and yet we even don't really know what he believed. There are no more than a handful of statements attributed to him in the Torah and even fewer which define the nature of his faith in God. We don't even know exactly when he lived. Yet for more than three thousand years we've been talking about Abraham and Sarah.

Three times each day we begin the *Amida* by speaking of God as 'the God of Abraham and Sarah,' and by calling God *Magen Avraham u'foked Sarah*, "Shield of Abraham and the one who visited Sarah' Yet Abraham is a mystery and an enigma. We know even less about Sarah. Abraham both fascinates us and terrifies us. He leaves us with more questions than answers. He challenges us to think more deeply about ourselves.

We admire Abraham. He was willing to give up everything to pursue his deep faith in God. Abraham lived his life with a strong sense of justice. He put his own life on the line when his nephew, Lot, was taken hostage and he defended Sodom and Gomorrah when God threatened to destroy the cities, even accusing God of potential injustice. Abraham is depicted as a man of deep hospitality and kindness who opened his home to passing wayfarers. As Jews, we seek to emulate our forefather. Maimonides says that we should doubt the lineage of any Jew who is cruel to those who are needy. Such a person, he writes, cannot be a descendent of Abraham! Maimonides suggests that because we are the descendents of Abraham, we are genetically disposed to being kind.

But we're also confounded by our forefather and we're not always so proud of him. He wasn't exactly a 'Leave it to Beaver' husband or father. Abraham lied about his relationship with his wife to protect himself. He expelled one son from his home and nearly killed the other. Abraham took Hagar as a concubine and just as quickly threw her out, sending her out with Ishmael to die in the wilderness. These stories are not for children! They trouble us and force us to think more deeply about our lives and our world! They force us to see our own dark side,

What was the nature of Abraham's faith? The Torah challenges us to decide! In one of his few theological statements, Abraham refers to God as *Adonai, El Elyon koneh shamayim va'aretz*, "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." And yet this name is not so different from the name that a pagan priest uses in the same passage to describe a Canaanite god! Abraham reminds God that He is bound by the same strictures of justice as humanity when he says, "Shall the Judge of the Earth not deal justly," and yet he is disturbingly silent when God tells him to bind his son on the altar.

Abraham is shrouded in mystery. We, living in the twenty first century, see our forefather from a great distance through layers of history and civilization. Each generation has recast Abraham in its own image. For one generation he was an iconoclast who smashed his father's idols. For another

generation, he was the visionary prophet who hears the voice of God and sees God's plan for history. For the sages, he was a rabbi and interpreter of God's law and in the Middle Ages, he was described as a philosopher who contemplated the nature of faith or as a mystic who communed with Divine. In contemporary times, Abraham has become a social activist who seeks to repair the world through social justice. But when we describe Abraham in this way are we really describing him as he was or are we recasting him in our own idealized and very contemporary image? So, who is Abraham, really? I'm tempted to ask, "Will the real Abraham, please stand up?" What was the true nature of his faith?

I should put in a word on behalf of Sarah this morning. She has only recently found her own voice in our tradition. Today we read not only about the lonely man of faith, but the couple who serve God together. We begin the Amida with *Elohay Avraham V'Sarah*, the God of Abraham and Sarah, something our parents didn't do. And that should influence the way we read the Torah. Of course our parents knew about Sarah but they didn't emphasize her significance in our faith the way we do. We've come to see Abraham not as a sole individual but as a partner, as a husband who set out on a journey with his family. With our changing understanding of the role of gender in Jewish life, we now speak not of one but two – because we see ourselves differently and our world differently.

True, "it's only a story." But stories have the power to change our lives. I invite you to join Abraham and Sarah on their journey this morning. There is no telling where they will take us! Along the way their story and struggle will enter our hearts and we may discover who we really are. It might influence how we live, and what we do today. We might discover that Abraham is not as mysterious and strange as he first appears or that we are more like Sarah than we realize! Like our own parents, the more we get to know them, the more we discover how much of them is present in each of us.

To discover Abraham and Sarah, then, all you have to do is open the book with a willing heart and open eyes – and all the rest will follow. It is surprising where they can take us!

Shabbat Shalom