# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Lech Lecha*, Genesis, Chapters 12-17

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## Abraham and Jewish Eternity

Last week, Pierre Poilievre, the opposition leader in the Canadian parliament, delivered a remarkable speech to Jewish Canadians attending a rally for Israel, a speech we have shared with you. Poilievre described visiting Auschwitz along with Jews on the "March of the Living." He was shown one building where the confiscated treasures of the inmates were kept, which he learned the Nazis had nicknamed "Canada." He broke down, he said, as he pondered how by the happenstance of history his family had immigrated safely to one Canada while Jews suffered and died near another. As he put it, "There was this sight of this Gentile in the corner of the room, bawling his eyes out, being comforted by Jews."

Poilievre may be a Gentile, but to commune with the pain of Jewish generations is very Jewish; and to receive comfort and to hope in the face of evil is very Jewish as well. Both of these experiences are featured in the early tale of Abram, whose story teaches us why we are a people like no other, one which will never die.

Our reading opens with the clarion call that changed the world:

> The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, . . . and I will bless those that bless you, and curse those that curse you, and through you will all families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:2–3)

We are not informed as to why Abram is chosen. Many instinctively assume that Abram is the only monotheist alive; that, as we shall see, is not the case. Abram's faith is essential, but we must wait to discover what makes him exceptional.

Abram, along with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot, arrives in Canaan, the Promised Land; given God's promise, we would expect for a great nation to arise immediately. Yet Scripture suddenly, surprisingly, shifts:

> And there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there . . . (Genesis 12:10)

Abram arrives at the locus of his destiny—and leaves. It would be comical if it were not so serious, akin to Groucho Marx's quip, "Hello—I must be going."

What are we to make of this sudden departure? Abram, commentators explain, embodies the talmudic phrase "*ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*," "the tales of the ancestors are a sign to descendants." He is pre-experiencing what will occur to his progeny; Jacob will also descend to Egypt due to famine. Abram's almost immediate departure from Canaan is thus a sign of the fragility of Jewish life. When Groucho sang "Hello, I must be going," he was unintentionally expressing an aspect of Jewish history. From its very beginning Abram's journey foretells exiles yet to come, and therefore it also inspires us to search the text for the essence of Jewish resilience.

Upon returning to Canaan, Abram and his nephew Lot part ways. When a war erupts and Lot is captured, Abram organizes an army and saves his nephew. His triumphant troops are welcomed by an unexpected individual: in the midst of pagans, there is a monotheistic monarch, reigning over Shalem, which will ultimately be called Jerusalem.

**[T]he fact that Abram desperately desires fatherhood is why he, and not Melchizedek, is chosen. Abram not only cognizes a Creator, he dreams of founding a faithful family.**

> And Melchizedek, king of Shalem, brought forth bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram to God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand." (Genesis 14:18–20)

Several conclusions can be drawn from this one moment. First: Jerusalem is bound up, from the beginning, with the story of monotheism. Second: the mysterious Melchizedek reminds us that there are those outside Abram's family who comprehend the miracle of Abram's story. Finally: if Melchizedek is also a monotheist, then the chosenness of Abram must be linked to more than his faith, bound up in another aspect of who he is.

That aspect is soon revealed:

> After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward will be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I am childless . . ." (Genesis 15:1–2)

God promises Abram reward beyond imagination, and Abram audaciously answers: "so what?" I want a child. But the Almighty is not angered; the fact that Abram desperately desires fatherhood is why he, and not

Melchizedek, is chosen. Abram not only cognizes a Creator, he dreams of founding a faithful family. He is therefore chosen to be the father of a chosen people.

But what sort of a people will this be? We must study's God's response:

> He took him outside and said, "Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them," and He added, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:5)

Abram's children will be as the stars; earlier in the reading, a different description is given:

> "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth." (Genesis 13:16).

**No tides of time, no pain of persecution, could overcome a nation that is a family, whose memories span millennia...which even in periods of darkness remembered salvation and never stopped believing in joyous laughter yet to come.**

Abram's children are akin to stars *and* to dust. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin explains that the Torah provides two sublime similes for our identity. First, stars: the emphasis is on the individual, a description of the Jew as a beacon of faith. But then there is dust. With dust, each grain is insignificant; only together, in multitudes, is dust made unmovable. Later in Genesis, this simile changes slightly: Jacob is told that his children will be "like the sand on the shore of the sea." Rabbi Berlin notes that to see an enormous wave is to assume it will destroy all it comes upon; but the sand is so solid that the wave dissipates. The waves of history loom against Israel and crash asunder, while Israel remains; or, as the musical *Hamilton* put it, "Oceans rise; empires fall."

Dust, or sand, is strong as a collective; stars are strikingly singular. Another aspect of Jewish nationhood is suddenly revealed, recalling what the Catholic historian Paul Johnson told Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about the greatest achievement of the Jews:

> He replied in roughly these words: "There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasized the individual—like the secular West today. And there have been others that placed weight on the collective—Communist Russia or China, for example." Judaism, he continued, was the most successful example he knew of that managed the delicate balance between both—giving equal weight to individual and collective responsibility.

Stars and sand, individuality and collectivity. Judaism is a unique form of community that sustained itself

against the tides of time. But what is the source of this bond? We must read on. Abram is informed that terrible suffering would befall his descendants:

> As the sun set, a sleep fell on Abram, and a dark dread came upon him. And He said to Abram, "Know that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will judge the nation that they serve, and then they will go free in great wealth." (Genesis 15:12–13)

Thus did Abram understand that his previous journey to Egypt foretold another exile. And Abram experienced more than mere prophecy; the darkness and fear that overcame him, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik argued, reflected the fact that he truly communed with his future children:

> Abraham actually came in contact with the future sorrows and miseries of his children. He was overwhelmed by a vivid, sensuous awareness, which reached the intensity of real pain and suffering; a horror of great darkness fell upon him. The woes and agony of many years were condensed into a single moment. In an instant, he went through the oppression, fear, and uncertainty. For whatever would be inflicted upon his offspring was brought to him in its full impact and vigor.

This is what Rabbi Soloveitchik has called Jews' "unitive time-consciousness": our minds merge with other Jewish generations. I once described to the historian Andrew Roberts how Jews mourn the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon 2,500 years ago. He was struck by this. I asked Andrew about the historical references made by Churchill, the ultimate historian-statesman; he replied that generally they did not go further back than Agincourt in 1415, a relatively recent moment in Jewish history. No nation remembers as we do; our people feels the pain of past destructions and rejoices in the salvations that occurred millennia ago; as Abraham *pre*-experienced the past in the present, we *re*-experience the past in the present. If we never lose hope, it is because our memories also encompass and relive moments of salvation. Like Abram, we feel the darkness but also know the redemption. In another striking speech by a non-Jew, delivered just last week—one that I heard in person in London, and that you must see if you have not yet—the writer Douglas Murray described another conversation between Rabbi Sacks and a non-Jew about the nature of Judaism. Murray said:

> I once asked Jonathan Sacks what he thought it meant to be a Jew. And he replied, quite characteristically, by quoting someone else; specifically, he quoted his friend, the late great philosopher Isaiah Berlin. He said, "Douglas, Isaiah once answered this question when he was asked, by saying 'to be a Jew is to have a sense of history.'" And I looked at Jonathan; I knew there was something more. He tilted his head. And I said, "What do you think?" He said, "I think Isaiah was almost right." And I said, "So what's your answer?" He said, "To be a Jew is to have a sense of memory."

Murray further reflected:

> Now memory can be a burden, for some people an almost impossible burden. But it's also a blessing. Because if you as a people, you as individuals, know what went before, you know that the Jewish people have been here many times before, in too many situations, and too many times to count. . . . What we know . . . is that the Jewish people have seen off every one of its enemies for millennia.

As Abram experienced the future, we experience the past, and draw from it our faith for the future. This is what sustains us.

With Sarai barren, Abram has a child with a concubine, Hagar, who bears Ishmael. Abram assumes that through this child God's promise would be fulfilled. God gives him the symbol of circumcision—highlighting how fatherhood of a future child will be central to Abram's identity—and then tells him that the child of the covenant must come from Sarai, a woman as covenantally called as he, who took the journey with him. Thus does Abram learn that covenantal family requires both covenantal father and covenantal mother.

The way in which the "birth" of the Jewish people is told reminds Jews that as a people they are to see each other not as fellow citizens but family members. Henry Kissinger, in his memoirs, describes bringing Golda Meir a list of Israeli soldiers that he had confirmed had survived on the Syrian front in the Yom Kippur War. He tells us how intensely she studied it; for Golda, he writes, the list:

> was a record of the life or death of members of her family, names of young men that would bring joy to their loved ones, and despair by omission to others.

The Jewish people is not Rome, whose origins lay in a city's founding; Abram's nation begins with a father and mother, and the chosen people will always think of itself as a family.

Both patriarch and matriarch receive new names, "Abraham" and "Sarah," reflecting through a Hebrew pun that their lives will impact many peoples. Abraham, surprised that his elderly wife will bear a child, laughs in delight, inspiring the name of the child to be:

> And Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, saying to himself, "Can a child be born to a man of a hundred, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" . . . And God said, "nevertheless Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac" [in Hebrew, *Yitzhak*, i.e. "He laughs"]. (Genesis 17:17–19)

"He laughs;" this is a name that may seem simple, or silly, but is anything but. It embodies the Yiddish saying, "*man trakht, un Gott lakht*"—man thinks, and God laughs, or "man proposes; God disposes." Laughter, the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued, emerges from delighted surprise, such as from the punchline of a joke. The name Isaac highlights the fact that the twists and turns of Jewish history will be utterly unexpected, a point

captured by Menachem Begin when he, a man whose parents were murdered, came to the White House—as prime minister of Israel—spoke of the Holocaust, and then declaimed the great psalm of return.

> When the Lord returned the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. (Psalms 126:1–2)

No tides of time, no pain of persecution, could overcome a nation that is a family, whose memories span millennia, which celebrates individuals but is joined together by this unitive time consciousness, which even in periods of darkness remembered salvation and never stopped believing in joyous laughter yet to come.

Pierre Poilievre spoke last week to Jewish Canadians in a very dark period. "My friends," he said, "it is very easy in these times to become hopeless and tired; all you want to do is live in peace and know your family in Israel can do the same. It has been a long history, hasn't it." After recalling how Jews had comforted him, a Gentile at Auschwitz, he, in the speech, sought to comfort the Canadian Jews in the audience. He recalled how at the concentration camp, after he wept, even as he stood at the precise spot where Joseph Mengele once stood, he experienced what he called one incredible "morsel of hope." He heard a cantor recite in Hebrew the 23rd Psalm, and, he added,

> As we literally walked in the valley between the old wooden shacks on each side, there were big, beautiful Israeli flags in the hands of young people, the greatest symbol of all, to say that "we are here, we survived, we are strong, we have a state, we have a people, an indigenous people, the longest standing indigenous people, the only people, the only story where the same people worship the same faith, on the same land, in the same language, in the same country as 3,000 years ago." From the time of the Pharaoh, many monsters have tried to attack and destroy the Jewish people; all of them have been condemned to the trashcan of history, and the Jewish people are still here, the Jewish people will still be here, the eternal Jewish people, and they will say the beautiful words in Hebrew, *am Yisrael chai*.

So said this self-identified Gentile, reflecting on his experience of Auschwitz. From Egypt of old, the story of Abraham endures; and in the face of hate, there are also non-Jews who see that see the miracle that we are, exultantly exclaiming, like Melchizedek long ago, "blessed be Abraham to the Most High God." This faith will be vindicated once more, when our current enemy will be defeated, when the stories of the forefathers will once again serve as a sign to the descendants, when Melchizedek's concluding words to Abraham will be repeated, "blessed be God who has placed your enemies in your hands," and when the mouths of the Jewish people, in moments of joy, will be filled with laughter once again.

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*May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.*

## Additional Resources

Pierre Poilievre on the Hamas's October 7 Attack and Visiting Auschwitz, October 18, 2023. Click here to watch.

Douglas Murray on Israel, Britain, and Jewish Memory, October 11, 2023. Click here to watch.

Meir Soloveichik on Judaism and Laughter, "May You Be Inscribed for a Good Laugh," *Commentary*, September 2017. Click here to read.