



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Lech Lecha

October 31, 2020, 13 Heshvan 5781

Torah: Genesis 12:1-17:97; Triennial 14:1-15:21

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:27-41:16

Abraham the Astrologer

Ilana Kurshan

From the moment he first encounters God, Abram is promised that he will become the progenitor of a great nation. Ultimately his name will be changed to reflect this destiny – Abram will become Abraham, meaning *av hamon goyim*, “a father of many nations” (Gen. 17:5). But for the duration of parshat Lech Lecha, Abraham remains childless, and even he—a man of such great faith that he uprooted his family in response to a divine call—begins to doubt God’s promise. Our parsha offers us a fascinating window into Abraham’s struggle with faith and doubt, offering us a way to navigate our own theological uncertainties.

As our parsha relates, following Abraham’s journey to Canaan, his descent to Egypt on account of famine, his subsequent return to Canaan, and his war against the four kings, Abraham finds himself in a crisis of faith: “O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless” (15:2). In response, God takes him outside and instructs him to “look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... so shall your offspring be” (15:5). The parsha book my children read beautifully illustrates this page with a dark sky filled with connect-the-dot constellations in the shape of little babies. And indeed, this sounds like a rather poetic promise—Abraham will have as many children as the stars in the sky—until we realize that Abraham was not just the first monotheist, but also an eminent astrologist.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of astrology in the Talmud appears on the penultimate page of tractate Shabbat (156a), in which the sages debate whether the Jewish people have a *mazal* or not. (*Mazal* refers to a celestial body – when we say *mazal tov*, we are basically wishing that the stars should align.) The issue under discussion is whether astrological predictions apply to Jews, or whether divine providence overrides astrology. The third-century Babylonian sage Rav, who argues the latter, cites evidence from Abraham’s dialogue with God about the starry sky. According to Rav’s reading, Abraham expressed concern to God that his horoscope indicated that he would not have a son. God then took Abraham “outside” – not just outside into the night air, but also outside of his astrological mindset. God informed Abraham that while the planets control the fate of the Jewish people, God controls the movements of the planets. Even though Jupiter was situated in the west, God would move it to the east, thereby altering Abraham’s destiny and ensuring him an heir.

This is not the only Talmudic source that associates Abraham with astrology; after all, he came from the land of the Chaldeans, who were known for their astrological prowess. In tractate Bava Batra (16b), for instance, the Talmud interprets the verse “and God blessed Abraham with everything” (Gen. 24:1) as signifying that Abraham was so knowledgeable about astrology that all the kings of the east and west would come to seek his wisdom. But it seems from Rav’s reading of the verses in our parsha that the true greatness of Abraham was not his skill at reading the stars, but rather his willingness to relinquish astrology in favor of faith in God.

The Torah relates that after God told Abraham to count the stars, Abraham “put his faith in God, and He reckoned it to His righteousness” (15:6). The Torah’s term for righteousness, *tzedakah*, is nearly synonymous with *tzedek*, the Hebrew name for Jupiter, which serves to explain why it is that particular planet that God had to shift. And indeed it took tremendous faith for Abraham to believe in God, especially when we consider that this exchange with God about counting the stars seems to have taken place not at night, but in broad daylight. This is apparent from the biblical verses that immediately follow God’s instruction to Abraham to count the stars. Abraham, commanded by God, takes a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove and bird and sacrifices them for the covenant of the pieces, and “as the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him” (15:12). If the sun set during the covenant of the pieces, then God must have told Abraham to go outside when it was still day.

God told Abraham to count the stars at a time when there were in fact no stars visible in the sky, such that he could only imagine their presence. This kind of imagining is an affirmation of faith that recalls the anonymous inscription discovered in the wall of a German internment camp following World War II: “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I feel it not. I believe in God even when He is silent.” Abraham had to count the stars even when he could not see them, and he had to believe in God’s promise even though the heavenly signs indicated otherwise. No wonder he serves as such a powerful religious model for us today, reminding us that even when God’s face is shrouded in darkness, we must nonetheless conjure forth points of light.

Why Not I???

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 16:1-4

(1)And Sarai, Avram's wife had not borne him children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. (2)And Sarai said to Avram, "Now, the LORD has kept me from bearing children. Please go to my maid; perhaps I will be built up through her." And Avram listened to the voice of Sarai. (3)And Sarai Avram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, after Avram had dwelled ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Avram as a wife. (4) And he came to Hagar and she conceived; and she saw that she had conceived and her mistresses became slight in her eyes.

- How do you think that Sarai envisioned her relationship with the child that would be born from Hagar?
- What is Avram's role here? What would you suggest that he does?
- What do you think Hagar conceiving has to do with her losing respect for Sarai her mistress?

Commentary: Radak Bereshit 16:4

***And he came... and her mistresses became slight [in her eyes]** - she thought that now that it was clear that Avram's seed would be from her, she would become the mistress [of the house] and so she would no longer heed instructions given to her by Sarai.*

- According to Radak, what was the basis of Hagar's disregard for Sarah?
- How do we react when we feel displaced by a person whom we enabled to move up?

Commentary: Rashi Bereshit 16:4

***And he came to Hagar and she conceived** - from the first union.*

***and her mistresses became slight in her eyes** - She said, "this Sarai, her conduct in private can certainly not be like that in public: she shows herself to be a righteous woman, but she cannot really be righteous since all these years she has not been privileged to have children, whilst I conceived from the first union" (Genesis Rabbah 45:4).*

- According to Rashi (who brings the Midrash), how did Hagar interpret the conception? How did this lead to disregard for Sarah?
- While Rashi presents these as Hagar's thoughts, who else might have wondered? What affect might that have?
- How is this different than Radak's reading? Which is more painful? Which do you feel fits the story better?

*Jumpstart thought: Both commentaries are not dealing with simple envy, they go a step farther, into tormenting emotional places.

History Repeats Itself

Bex Rosenblatt

What relevance does Avraham Avinu have for me today? God never called me to leave my land or sacrifice my son. He's a complex character - while I admire his pushback against God for Sodom and Gomorrah, I wonder where his chutzpah went when God told him to bind Isaac. This week's haftarah, Isaiah 40:27 - 41:16, offers a way to understand Abraham's legacy as relevant across any number of historical contexts, including our own.

Isaiah speaks to the nation in exile after the destruction of Jerusalem and the first Temple. He speaks words of comfort and hope as he challenges the nation to remember who they are and what their destiny can be. The promise of renewal and return from exile is bound up in the person of Cyrus the Great, rising ruler of Persia, who would conquer Babylon and issue an edict allowing the Jews to return home and rebuild the Temple. In our passage today, the story of Cyrus is told as the story of Abraham, marrying our understanding of our origins with our hope for change.

The passage reads magnificently, rife with rhetorical questions: "Who raised [him] up from the East, [who] calls victory for him at every step? He placed nations before him and gave him dominion over kings. He placed his sword [making his enemies] like dust, his bow [made his enemies] like windblown chaff" (Isaiah 41:2). The answer to the stated question is, of course, God. God caused all these things to happen. The unstated question is who the other he is, the one who is raised up and given dominion over kings. Here the answer is less obvious. Abraham fits the bill, but so does Cyrus, as the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra notes.

In the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Abraham is called from "the East," and told "lech lecha," go forth, to the land of Canaan. In Genesis 14, Abraham wages war against and defeats the four kings, gaining "dominion over kings," conquering those before him like "dust." Likewise, Cyrus comes from the "East" and he'll conquer "kings," as he becomes emperor of Persia. So why are the two made equivalent to each other?

Both Abraham and Cyrus are agents of earth-shattering change. Both irrevocably alter the course of the history of the Jewish people, allowing them to get up and go to an old-new home and leave behind all that had become familiar. In exile in Babylon, we cast Cyrus in the model of Abraham in order to give us the courage to enact radical change. We turn to our past, to our history, to find the permission to create something new. As we navigate our ever-changing reality, Abraham and Cyrus-in-the-model-of-Abraham invite us to return to our origins in order to find the courage to forge a new future.