

LECH LECHA
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Most of us think of Abraham as a man of faith. If we follow his career the episodes that define him are his willingness to follow G-d's command to go to a new land, his faith in one G-d, his relationship with his wife Sarah and the story of the binding of Isaac. Yet Abraham was much more than a man of faith. In our Torah reading this morning he is also seen as a warrior and one who is skilled in battle.

The Torah tells us that Abram's nephew Lot is captured in a war of the four kings against the five kings. When Abram hears what has occurred to his nephew he decides to engage in battle in order to rescue him. We learn different aspects of Abraham's character in this particular episode. Whereas, at the beginning of our Torah portion, he is the one who displayed fear and evasiveness in Egypt, he now shows himself to be decisive and courageous in battle. The man of peace knows also how to exhibit skill and heroism in war. Abraham is much more than a man of faith, when the clash of arms is necessary and the call to battle is heard, he is ready to engage enemy forces.

At the end of the story, after his victory, he is approached by Melchizedek, the King of Shalem: "And King Melchizedek of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a Priest of God most high. He blessed him, saying: "Blessed be Abram of God most high, creator of heaven and earth and blessed be G-d most high, who has delivered your foes into your hand." The story continues by telling us that the King of Sodom wanted to share the spoils of war with Abram who refused to take anything so as not to appear as having acted for mercenary reasons. He did not want to benefit from the possessions of the vanquished; he was only concerned about reuniting his family.

Many commentators have questioned why this section appears at this particular point in Abraham's life. It is not essential to the story of our first patriarch. Yet, it teaches us about Abraham's character and his rationale for pursuing the manner in which he acted. I also believe it has an important lesson for us today.

At the beginning of our Torah portion Abram is told to follow G-d's command to go to a land that He will show him. There is no actual reason given for this command except that if Abram follows G-d's wishes there will be a reward: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

As Abraham's and Sarah's progeny we are the bearer of that tradition. We are to follow G-d's commands and in return, we pray, those who wish us well can show solidarity with us and enjoy G-d's blessing and whoever mistreats us will reap misfortune.

Abraham internalized this lesson. He recognized that he had responsibilities to his family and to his fledgling nation. The manner in which he acted said a great deal not only about him, but about his tribe and the people who would follow his lead. If he lived properly then he would be respected, admired and his name would be blessed. If he did the opposite, he would not live up to his side of the covenant.

In the Jerusalem Talmud there is a story about Shimon ben Shetah, who traded in cotton. His students said to him: "Master, allow us to buy you a donkey so that you will not have to labor so much." They went out and bought him a donkey from a certain Syriac and found upon it a precious stone. They came and told him: "Now you need not labor every again." Said he: "Why so?" They replied: "We have bought you a donkey from a certain Syriac, and found upon it a precious stone." He asked: "Does the owner know of it." They replied: "No." He told them: "Go and return it."

Following further discussion in the Talmud the Rabbis ask why did Shimon ben Shetah act in this manner. After all, he could have taken the precious stone as the Syriac did not know it was there and would not miss it. The Talmud continues with the statement that Shimon ben Shetah preferred hearing: "Blessed be the God of the Jews to all the riches of this world.

The manner in which we act says a great deal not only about us personally, but what and who we represent. We all know that when Nobel Prize winners are announced we immediately look for Jewish names. We are exceedingly proud of the manner in which our fellow Jews have been at the forefront of major advancements in medicine, science, humanities and statecraft. Last week the Men's Club joined with other affiliates of the Congregation to show the movie *Jews and Baseball – An American Love Story*. While it showed us a lot about baseball history, it was really concerned with the manner in which Jewish ballplayers not only exhibited their prowess on the baseball field but lived their lives. The two main stars were Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax. From what I have read and the movies I have seen, Hank Greenberg was truly a Jewish hero. He may have been a great baseball player, but when he didn't play on Yom Kippur in Detroit, the home of Henry Ford and Father Coughlin, he made a huge statement to all. His religion and his heritage were more important than winning a baseball game.

I do remember Sandy Koufax and his unwillingness to pitch the first game of the World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. We all stood a little prouder because Koufax, who may not have been totally observant in the traditional sense of the term, understood that he represented all of us. The same was true with regard to Shawn Green who ended a consecutive game streak by not playing on Yom Kippur stating he needed to be a good representative of his faith.

It is not only true on the baseball field; it is true in all endeavors of life. We represent much more than ourselves, whether we like it or not. We are upset and distressed when Jews are found to disobey the law, are seen in a bad light and merit consternation and even disgust, and we feel embarrassed and even some shame. The actions may be the result of individuals, but they do seem to reflect, whether we like it or

not, on all of us. We cannot have it both ways, take only the successes and refuse accepting the failures.

Thus, the episode with Abraham and Melchizedek is an integral part of Abraham's life and his legacy. While he went to war to save his nephew, his reputation and the respect he earned from Melchizedek, and his reactions to the suggestions of the King of Sodom, reflect in a positive fashion upon Abraham and the G-d who Abraham represents. He truly was a blessing, his reputation brought respect upon himself, his tribe and his G-d. His actions spoke louder than any words he could have professed to show what kind of values he lived by.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we are told a number of times: "You shall do the right and the good in the eyes of the Lord." The Ramban, Nachmanides, suggests that this means that we must conduct ourselves in a manner beyond the requirements of the law. In other words, we must be prepared to give people the benefit of the doubt, to follow a higher level of conduct than is even necessary by legal standards, and "to seek to refine our behavior in every form of activity until we are worthy of being called 'good and upright.'"

Danny Siegel, the Master of Tzedakah, has written that the Talmud teaches us that there are 36 Righteous Ones in the world. They are known in Hebrew as Lamed Vavniks. Because of all the Evil and evils that exist in life, it is these 36 people who give G-d the patience to let our world endure. Their work, their being, sustains all humanity.

The Lamed Vavniks are Hidden Ones, unknown to other human beings. Mystery covers so much of the story of The 36. They are known but to G-d, and we mortals can only seek out other visible Righteous Ones who somehow resemble The 36.

One thing is certain Siegel writes, there are many, many more Second Level Righteous Ones than there are Hidden Ones. They are everywhere for us to see and to work with, if we but open our eyes to seek them out. We should be counted on that list. We may not reach that first level, but we can raise our sights and attempt to reach the second level and thereby add our contribution to the world by being a kind, compassionate and caring human being.

The manner in which we act and conduct our lives in our family, in our business, in our schoolwork, in our neighborhood and beyond reflects not only upon us, but what we stand for and who we represent. We represent the Jewish people and our G-d at all times. When we do that which is good and right, then the reflection upon us, our people and our G-d is for the positive. But the opposite is true as well. It may seem like an immense burden, but it can also be seen as a wonderful challenge and privilege. To represent G-d, as Isaiah suggested, to be witnesses to G-d, is a privilege granted to our people. To say that one is a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, who are recognized as the first monotheists by our tradition, is to admit that we have to live life by a higher standard of conduct. To be a light to the nations is an obligation and an ongoing responsibility, and if taken seriously will reflect itself in our conduct on a daily basis. By

not playing baseball on Yom Kippur, Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Shawn Green became instant Jewish heroes. We can do the same if we simply abide by our tradition and allow others to say about us: "Blessed be the God of Shimon ben Shetah" or "Blessed be Abram of God most high, creator of heaven and earth." The story of Abraham and his call to battle to save his nephew Lot is not merely a peripheral or tangential story. It teaches us much about Abraham's character and his exemplary model.

I pray that we may always keep this lesson in mind as we live our daily lives and meet its challenges. If we can live by this high standard then indeed the blessing given to Abram we pray may come true "that G-d will bless us as a great nation, that he will make our name great and that all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by us."