

**Lech Lecha Fall, 2011**  
**By David A. Epstein, Ph.D.**

Good Morning. Lech Lecha is a giant among the sections of Torah that we read. It is originary. Covering, as it does, our introduction to Abraham, and Abraham's enactment of the covenant, Lech Lecha is, for Jews, a sort of Big Bang moment, the point at which our people, our culture, and our relationship with the Lord become established. It is the nature and functioning of this relationship that I want to look at today. But it is not a clean and simple story. Broadly speaking, we are given the story of an old man, his deep religious belief, and the Lord's promises to him. The old man responds by agreeing to, and enacting, our covenant with the Lord that has continued in existence since that time. Mixed in with the story and the promises are several unsavory episodes. For example, there is war, there is a kidnapping and retrieval, there is righteousness so pronounced that it does not escape the possibility of being self-righteousness. There is flight from famine, there is the prostituting of Sarai to Pharaoh's house in Egypt. There is the mistreatment of Hagar by Sarai in the context of a lurid family drama when Abram sets about producing an heir. From our point of view, three thousand years after the fact, it's easy to be critical. And, in our endless Monday morning quarterbacking, it seems simple to notice where Abram might have done or said things differently. We are left with the bare facts of the narrative, our feeble shrug at the apparent facts, and the sense that there is little else to say.

Looking at the whole of the parsha, notice the overall framework: Abram is told to leave his homeland. Thus the context is rootlessness. Not spiritual rootlessness, for we are diligently informed of Abram's great faith, of his stolid belief in God. No, it is a geographic uprooting with which the section opens. Were this a Hollywood movie, that would cue us to understand that the story will only end when our protagonist comes home. And come home we shall, but it will be to the *spiritual* hearth. Abraham and his people—our people—will ultimately respond with the establishment of the covenant. It is the convening of origins. This agreement, initially formed between the Lord and Abraham, is that which has brought us all *here* this very day.

Abram is told repeatedly, by the Lord, directly, that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars, and that the territory into which Abram has journeyed, will belong to them. In the parsha

the Lord will tell this to Abraham at least six times. Why the repetition? Easy: as the doorstep moment of the advent of Judaism, we don't want to miss it. Consider, as well, the effect of such repetitions for Abram. After so many assurances, who wouldn't want to ask: *when* ? After being told so many times that something will happen, who wouldn't ask for some kind of proof? And Abram *does* ask: God will respond to Abram's entreaty, and we will examine more closely the details of God's response.

Why the repetition of assurance to Abram, that he will have numerous descendents? For one thing, as we know, this is a sore point for Abram: at this point in the narrative, he and Sarai are childless. Abram reminds God, "you know, this stuff about my offspring being many and peopling this land is all well and good, but, in case you hadn't noticed, Lord, I don't have any offspring whatsoever. Were you speaking metaphorically, Lord?" And the Lord responds to this in what seems to be an abstract way: "Make a sacrifice," says the Lord. It's probably not fair to put these kinds of stories into a contemporary context. Still, let's take what God says to Abram, and try to figure out where one might hear such a dialogue these days. God says, "Listen, you're special, very special. I'm gonna do something for you: I'm gonna make sure you have lots of descendants. In fact, look up. See all those stars? That's how many you're going to have." So Abram says not "Why should I believe you?" but "How do I know?" He doesn't doubt the Lord: he doubts his own ability to be certain, to know for sure. In response God says "Go get a cow, a goat, a ram, and two birds." Which he does. Then he cuts 'em in half, except for the birds, and puts the halves back together, and when the buzzards come to feed, Abram drives them away. Then he falls into a sleep so profound that he is scared. In this context, of darkness and fear, comes God's foretelling: all those descendents will be enslaved, but after four hundred years they will emerge, more wealthy and powerful than ever. And he affirms that all this will befall Abram's offspring. What would you think of such an offering today? How scared would you have to be to believe it? Or, more to the point, what would it take, in terms of personal faith, for you to believe it? Because that is what is on display in Lech Lecha: There is almost nothing to give Abram proof. As an intelligent man living by his wits in a semi-nomadic existence, he not only survives, he thrives. That in itself might easily be construed as divine providence. If one were a believer. An atheist might take the same life and wallow in pride. And it's likely there were such people.

But the architects of the Old Testament are about something. They have chosen not the unbeliever, but the believer, not the haphazard, but the achiever. I realize that I am privileging two authors here: a divine grantor of the Word, and, alongside, some nameless scribes on the edge of prehistory. And I'm going to duck out this quandary by suggesting a third author, namely, ourselves. Stories last because they have relevance. We respond to narratives because of their pertinence *to us*. In this way, every time we revisit a story, we see it through eyes that see mostly our own issues. This is Joseph Campbell's account of why myths persevere: we keep on re-telling tales because they respond to our human need for both memory and guidance in the progress of our lives. There are rites of passage that we all go through, and asking *this* question of our faith is a major one: "Yes, God, I *understand*: but how do I *know*?" This is the relevance and the resonance of Lech Lecha for us: The sages and philosophers through the ages have filled many volumes on the difference between comprehension and certainty. And from our point of view it seems a simple thing to understand Abram: he is a believer. He has faith. It even seems a simple thing for us to say that in his faith he was *certain*. And further, we may ourselves have certainty about our faith. Or we may know someone who seems more certain than ourselves. This, then, is an issue in Judaic culture that continues to matter: Need I be certain, or need I only understand?

Look where God takes Abram after Abram asks for certainty: to a place where the speculative becomes the known. The future is foretold. The Lord tells him what will come to pass. If it were a person telling the future, we would call it prophecy. Since it's the Lord, it's more like revelation. God directs Abram to perform a ritual sacrifice of several animals. And when vultures gather above the scene, Abram is filled with dread. As it happens, this is not without good reason, as God tells Abram about the impending enslavement of the Jews in Egypt. God's foretelling involves one of *the* strong points of our identity. From our point in time, we can see that this is allusory, or pointing at this very central story. God tells to Abram what is to us a defining point for our faith: "Once we were slaves in Egypt..." And everything that goes along with this: to survive, to persevere, to be redeemed from suffering, to go out from bondage, to return to the land of Israel. If there is a capsule version of Judaism, of its primal elements, it is to be found in this episode.

On the heels of this terrible revelation comes another affirmation about Abram's eventual progeny: So, the answer to "How will I know?" is that God already knows what will come to pass, and this knowledge of the future is equivalent to surety. If you know any futures, you know all. Does this help Abram feel sure? Maybe. We have already had multiple reminders of Abram's faith. And when Abram asks God for certainty, two questions occur? First, why should this devout man need more than he already has? And second, is it possible that Abram's faith was just his outward modus operandi? God seems to respond to Abram's ongoing devotion: they keep on having conversations. How does Abram respond to God's responsiveness? By also continuing this unusual and close relationship. It seems clear that, above all else, they are each dependent on, and invested in, one another. Take it one step further: God and Avram even define themselves by one another.

In the end, Abram does what every Jewish male does: he says "it's about me." So God meets Abram at this very personal level. Abram points out that he has no children with Sarai, and how can any of this come to pass? So first, Abram has a child, Ishamel, by Hagar, with Sarai's machinations to allow it. This doesn't work out so well, and, ultimately, Abram has to intercede with God, on Ishmael's behalf. Boy, talk about having some protexia! And then, in a sense even more personally, God tells Abram that the agreement between Abram and the Lord will be evinced by circumcision. Abram doesn't blink, and gets to work on every male in his group. He gathers them all: "Okay, fellas listen up. I've spoken with God, and I've been told that we're gonna be taken care of. In return, we have to do something. So everyone line up over here. One at a time, no pushing..."

After this ritual circumcision comes God's most startling revelation: *Abraham*, you and *Sarah* are going to have a baby. The Parsha ends here, with the promise of the birth of Isaac, and we have in this birth, the symbolic birth of the Jewish faith. As with the cliché that every journey begins with a single step, God's promise to the people Israel begins with a single baby. If one had to sum up the overarching theme of this complex and elaborate parsha in one word, that word might be *nurturing*. Abraham nurtures his community's survival and well being. After all the traveling done in this parsha--leaving home, famine, war, abduction, retribution, substitution,

circumcision, what we keep coming back to is interlocution: the conversations between God and Abraham. God nurtures Abraham's faith. The nurturing relationship between Abraham and God is like the nurturing relationship between parents and children. The parents know everything, the children are certain of almost nothing. If we're doing things right, the children are certain of one thing: they are loved. Our most natural interaction of nurturing functions as a model: let our faith be as accessible, as comprehensible, and ideally as fulfilling, as our role and functioning as parents. *Shabbat Shalom.*