

Genesis 12-17

Lech Lecha

For reasons beyond human understanding (because it does not conform to the rules of probability), I have been asked to deliver the Dvar Torah on this passage, Genesis 12-17 Lech Lecha, in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. I have on all these occasions modified and rewritten what I want to say about this text and I intend to do the same this evening.

First, however, let me remind you of some of the things I have said about this text in the past. The Bible that we have in hand began as a collection of myths, legends, stories, folktales, songs, and what they understood to be history loosely strung together by Hebrews living in Babylon and subsequently in Israel in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Seventy-two Biblical scholars translated this collection into Greek, known as the Septuagint, in Alexandria in the third century BCE. By the third or fourth centuries of the common era, perhaps under the influence of what was happening to the Christian text at the time, the Hebrew text – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy -- came to be thought of as the word of God that He dictated to Moses who wrote it all down. Understood as the word of God, the text tells us what God wants us to know. Exactly what that is, became the primary religious and intellectual interest of Jewish rabbis, sages, and scholars over the next two thousand years. What they found to believe in the text over the centuries became the modern rabbinic Judaism that we practice today.

Those who read the text as the word of God believe that everything in the text is true. But that's not the only way to read the text. Those who read the text as history often seek confirmation in archeology, contemporary records, linguistics, ethnic and cultural comparisons, and so on. Those who read the text as literature recognize that not everything is what it seems, that symbolism

and metaphor convey meaning, that writers are individuals with a point of view and a bias—religious, political, personal. It was long believed that whatever was written was written for our benefit and instruction. That reverence for the written text may well have been true when scrolls were few and hardly anyone knew how to read. Now, however, we know that writers write to amuse, to shock, to make money, to record, to memorialize, to flatter, to encourage, to satirize, to debunk, and not exclusively to teach us something.

I have argued in the past that Abraham never existed. He does not appear in the earliest Biblical prophets, Amos, Micah, Hosea, Zephaniah. He could not possibly have lived in the Biblical world described for him nor could he have done the things ascribed to him in the Bible. He could not have travelled from Ur of the Chaldees, because the Chaldean people did not migrate into the region of Ur until over a thousand years after Abraham is thought to have lived. He could not have met the Philistine kings, again because the Philistines did not arrive on the Levantine coast until around 1250 BCE, long after the time attributed to Abraham. The destruction of Sodom is a myth and the city of Sodom never really existed. Most modern scholars now believe that Abraham is part of a myth of national origin.

The same is true for Moses. Nearly all historians and biblical scholars believe that the 400-year sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt, the Biblical Exodus from Egypt, and Joshua's conquest of the Canaanite cities never occurred. Had they occurred, you would expect someone to break a bowl, drop a spoon, lose an earring during 40 years wandering in the desert. You would also expect that someone in the great world outside the Biblical text would have noticed and mentioned the plagues, the deaths of the firstborn, and the disappearance of so many serving people from the Egyptian economy. But no. Not a whisper. These are all myths of national origin, attempts to explain where we come from, why we do the things we do, and

who we are as a people. All cultures have them and believe them wholeheartedly. Yes, there may have been some Hebrews who went to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan, but the Hebrews as a people were actually rural Canaanites who left the region of the rich coastal cities to settle peacefully in the hitherto sparsely populated, mountainous hinterland, out of the rush and thrust of invading armies.

In addition to being a myth, Abraham is also part of a literary trope. As soon as Abraham arrived in Canaan, there was a famine in the land and Abraham went down to Egypt, as one does. As he approached the border, he said to his wife Sarah: 'Look, Sweetie,' or words to that effect. 'When the Egyptians see what a beautiful woman you are, they will say you're my wife and they'll kill me to have you. Please, tell them that you're my sister so that we both may live.' And indeed, when the Egyptian courtiers did see how beautiful Sarah was, they praised her to Pharaoh and took her to Pharaoh's house. And because Sarah was living in Pharaoh's harem, the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues, in this case unspecified. So Pharaoh summoned Abraham and said 'What have you done to me, telling me she's your sister? Take Sarah your wife and get out!'

So Abraham came up from Egypt, heavily laden with sheep and camels and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and silver and gold. This seems to be, except for the sticky moral issue of one's wife in Pharaoh's harem, a very good way to make a fortune. It's such a good way, that Abraham tries it again. On his way out of Egypt and into the Negev, he asks Sarah once again to pretend to be his sister. The local king, Abimelech, took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream that very night and told him he was a dead man for taking another man's wife. Abimelech claims he never touched her, never went near her, and, to shorten the story in Genesis 20, he gives Abraham more sheep and more cattle and slaves and a thousand pieces of silver to Sarah and allows

Abraham to settle anywhere in the kingdom he wants. I should point out that Abraham is not actually lying. Sarah is in fact his sister, or half-sister, by a different mother.

This is such a good story that, would you believe, it comes up again in the Bible. There's a famine in Abimelech's kingdom, but God tells Isaac this time not to go down to Egypt. Isaac asks his beautiful wife, Rebecca, to let it be known she is his sister so that the men of the place won't kill him and sexually exploit her.

All this repetition would be comic if it were history, but it is not. It is literature. It is an early example of a particular literary trope, a 'type scene' that is common in Biblical narrative, common in fiction since the 12th century, and common in modern film. A 'type scene' is one in which the writer invokes a fixed sequence of narrative motifs that his audience recognizes as a familiar convention. For example: bringing the boyfriend home to meet the parents. Think of 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner' (Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn, Sidney Poitier) and 'Meet the Fockers' (Robert De Nero, Barbra Streisand, Ben Stiller). You could throw in 'Crazy Rich Asians' too, a variant of the type.

My point is that it does not make any difference at all whether Abraham is a historical character who did what the Bible says he did or he is part of a myth of national origin and a character in a literary type scene. Early Hebrew culture, even I in my youth, believed that he was historical. Judaism is not unique in this. The same is true of the Christian text. It should come as no surprise for you to learn that Jesus never walked on water, multiplied the loaves and fishes, or rose from the dead. These things don't need to have happened in the real world for them to be believed and for us to be taught by them. Early, less scientifically oriented people than we believed that these things happened and over the centuries they evolved a very expansive and inclusive Christianity or

the multi-focal Judaism we see around us in the world today. What is important is what the wise men and, more recently, the wise women make of our Biblical narrative after examining it, arguing about it, and thinking about it for the past 20 centuries. It does not matter whether the text is true in some historical sense for us to learn from it. We learn from fictions all the time, from novels, film, pop music lyrics. From these literary texts we read on Friday nights, serious readers – most notably among those closer to home – Anne, Barbara, and Justin -- have pointed out the ethical and moral values, behavior, and rituals that can be drawn from these imagined narratives and that define modern religions.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam read the same texts differently, through their own specially designed, interpretive lenses. Orthodox Jews understand the Bible through the lens of 1500 years of rabbinic interpretation. Conservative and Reform Jews understand the Bible each in their own, often eccentric, individual ways. The important thing to understand is that all these religious lenses are correct for those who adhere to that religion. The spiritual meaning of the text derives from whatever spiritual or religious sense that particular religion or reader makes of it. If these stories are told to teach and morals are to be drawn from literary texts, the Abrahamic stories teach us to obey God, to know what the rules are and to follow them. There are 613 in the Tanach.