

Lekh Lekha 5778

About ten years ago a book called “The Year of Living Biblically” was published. Its author lived for a year observing as many biblical commands as possible, dressing and behaving as an ancient Israelite. Each day he has to weigh whether to go to the movies, or stone an adulterer, or eat anything that was not readily available in biblical times. I read a bit of it online this week, and found it to be humorous but an ultimately empty idea, because since the time of the events in the Torah itself, Jews have not lived biblically; we have lived according to the principles laid out in Torah, as understood through the prism of rabbinic interpretation. We have an enormous body of secondary literature in the Talmud, midrash collections, legal codes and so on. Instead of living biblically, Jews have always been in the present moment, applying the words of Torah in a world very different from that in the Torah itself. Interpretation is the means by which we unpack the many possible meanings of Torah.

The written Torah tell us who we are and how we as a people came into being. It is, on one level, a national narrative; beginning with the story of Abraham, it is concerned about a particular people. But on another level, Torah is a sacred text. Our tradition teaches that the Torah sometimes contains what appear to be superfluous words, words that themselves help us to understand the story those words are telling. This is where the idea of a dual Torah, written and oral, comes into play. The Torah, meaning the five books of Moses, is our written tradition, and the collected words of rabbinic lore are our oral tradition, the means by which we understand the written Torah. It is the interplay between the written and oral that defines what we believe as Jews.

This week, the first verse of Lekh Lekha, reads "Vayomer adonai el Avram 'Lekh lekha me'artz'kha, umimoladt'kha, u'mibeit avikha, el ha'aretz asher areka," which the standard JPS translation renders as "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." In order for that verse to mean anything to us, we cannot simply leave it at what the written Torah says. In order for it to have an impact on us, and not be merely a tall tale from antiquity, we must read it very closely. The meforshim, the classical rabbinic commentators, have much to teach us about the nature of this journey, and why it took place, using the words of the Torah itself as tools to better understand what was being asked of Avram, why he agreed to the call, and what that call meant. After all, the text could have simply quoted God as having said 'Go!' Why did God bother to say 'from your native land and from your father's house'? What is the full meaning of God's instruction to Avram? The first source to consult is always Rashi, the foremost commentator on both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Rashi explains the words "Lekh lekha," "Go forth" as indicating that Avram should leave his home for his benefit and for his own welfare. 'I will make you a great nation there' Rashi understands God to be saying to Avram. 'Here you do not merit having children.' This jibes with what Sarah will say at the end of this parsha: "God has kept me from conceiving." Rashi gives another reason for Avram's leaving his home: The Torah is saying that God will only make Avram understand his place in the world when he makes this journey. God has a destiny in mind for Avram, one that can only be fulfilled by hearing God's words. Action is required.

The Hebrew words of the first verse in Lekh Lekha convey something slightly different than the JPS translation, which uses two phrases to describe where Avram is leaving ("from your native land and from your father's house,") while the Torah uses three words. The Hebrew says

that he should leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house. Why does the text use three different words, and why these three? What do the words themselves tell us about the journey? Another commentator, the Ramban, says that they convey the difficulty of making such a journey. First, it is difficult for a person to leave the land on which they live, where all of their loved ones and friends are. It is all the more difficult when that land is the place of one's birth. And it is even more difficult to leave when one's parents' home is there. The only reason someone would agree to do such a thing, Ramban says, is out of their love of God. So the threefold directive to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house indicate the difficulties with which Avram must begin his journey, and the motivation he must have in order to overcome those difficulties. The Radak, yet another commentator, says something similar, but with a different emphasis. He focuses on the words "to a land that I will show you." According to Radak, had God said 'to a land as good as' or 'to a better land,' it would not have been as difficult. The text is purposely phrased in an ambiguous way, he claims, in order to show that there was no ulterior motive for the journey, that Avram had no reason to believe that the land to which he was going would even be as good as the one he was leaving. Like the Ramban, the Radak suggests that these words indicate that Avram acted out of love for God.

The answers that the commentators provide allow us to define what their question really is. Each of them provides a reason for why Avram behaved as he did. What those answers indicate is that the most important question we can ask about Avram is whether or not he trusts the words he was hearing, and how he responds to those words. The commentators are attempting to provide us with something like an interior dialogue. They want to know what we want to know: What is Avram thinking? What does he know about what is about to happen?

Lekh Lekha begins with God speaking to Avram and telling him to uproot himself in order to go to a place unknown to him, a place that God is promising to him and his descendants as an eternal inheritance. As readers, we know what the scale of what is about to begin, but Avram does not. We know that this is the beginning of the family drama and the national history that will lead to the establishment of a Jewish presence in Canaan. We know that the Israelites will be enslaved and redeemed and conquer Canaan. We know that Saul, David and Solomon will reign as kings, and that the Temple will be built and destroyed, built and destroyed. We know that Jewish history will unfold for two thousand years after that, and that Jewish civilization will change and grow in innumerable ways, that the rabbis will engage in debate and develop the Talmud and all of Jewish legal literature. We know about the Shoah, and about the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Finally, we know that all of these events, all of these achievements unfold because of, and only because of, Avram's accepting God's call and willingly fulfilling it. Everything we have been, are and we will become is here in potentia in Lekh Lekha. It is the moment when Jewish history begins, when our history as individual Jews begins, all with the simple words 'Lekh Lekha' and the more complex words of the oral tradition that explains them.

I would never want to live a year according to the precepts of the written Torah alone. It would be an empty exercise, an attempt to recreate a particular kind of life rather than to live a meaningful one now. What literalists, and authors looking for an interesting topic, don't understand is that the written Torah is where it all began, but our interaction with that text is what brings it alive right now. Instead of a year living biblically, I recommend a year living Jewishly.

Shabbat shalom.