

Haftarot Unrolled: Lech Lecha

The Dawn

In the Haftarah of Lech Lecha, Yeshayahu describes a historical figure who represents G-d's involvement in the history of mankind.

מי העיר ממזרח, צדק יקראהו לרגלו,
יתן לפניו גוים ומלכים נרדו יתן קֶעֶפֶר חֲרָבוֹ כְּקֶשֶׁת נֶדָף קִשְׁתּוֹ :

Who arose from the East? Justice follows in his footsteps.

Nations were given over to him, and kings subdued. His sword turns all to dust, to driven straw, his bow. (Yeshayahu 41:2)

The Haftarah asks, "Who arose from the East?" According to the Midrash (Breishit Rabba 43:3), the answer is Avraham. As we read in Parshat Lech Lecha, G-d roused Avraham to leave his home in the East, and to leave his pagan heritage. Wherever he would go, he would advocate justice and truth, influencing people to leave false idols and serve the Creator.

This verse is used by many Midrashim to refer to Avraham, and by juxtaposing it with other verses, they derive different aspects of his impact on the world.

ויאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא עד מתי יהא העולם מתנהג באפילה תבא האורה, ויאמר אלהים יהי אור
זה אברהם הה"ד (ישעיה מא) מי העיר ממזרח צדק וגוי אל תקרא העיר אלא האיר
G-d said: "How long will the world be shrouded in darkness, how long till the light comes? "And G-d said, let there be light": this is Avraham, for it says "Who arose from the East with justice", don't read it as "arose" (העיר), but rather as "illuminated" (האיר). (Breishit Rabba 2:3)

This Midrash claims that the world before Avraham was darkness and the light of Creation became visible only once Avraham appeared. What did Avraham do that warrants making him the symbol of G-d's light?

The "darkness" that the Midrash refers to is idolatry. But what makes it so terrible? Why does the Torah focus all its resources on wiping it out? What difference does it really make what people believe?

According to the Torah, it is not possible for polytheistic pagans to build a society of justice and kindness.

First of all, polytheism is a lie. There is no such thing as a "god of rain" or a "god of war" or a "goddess of fertility", or a "goddess of lost objects". G-d alone created the world. He alone controls it.

Nevertheless, people can believe all kinds of things that aren't true, and that is not necessarily destructive. What happens, though, when there is a "god of life" and a "god of death", is that you begin to see the world as a function of the struggle between them. The simplest explanation for the tension between life and death, between good and evil, is that they are

governed by conflicting forces and the "god of good" and the "god of evil" are locked in battle. If there is a "god of evil", than one needs to placate that evil in order to survive. What some these societies chose to do to placate their evil gods is the stuff of nightmares.

Placating the "god of good" is also not morally neutral. If you relate to your god by through the gifts you give it, quid pro quo, then the greater the gift, the greater the power you have over your god. This creates a society where giving is only valued for the power it earns, and kindness and mercy have no value at all. Not only did paganism fail to promote morality, but it undermined the basic morality that is innate to human beings.

Avraham is often called the father of monotheism; not only the Jewish People, but all the billions who follow Christianity and Islam trace the origin of their religion to him. However, the Torah clearly says that Avraham was not the first monotheist. Adam knew the Creator, Noach did not worship anyone other than Hashem. If we trace the arithmetic of the "begats" in Breishit, we'll find that when Avraham was born, Noach was still alive. Moreover, in Parsha Lech Lecha itself, Avraham is granted an audience by Malkitzedek, King of Shalem, who is introduced as "the priest of the G-d Above." There were plenty of people in Avraham's generation who were aware that polytheism is a lie. So what made Avraham different? How was it that he brought light, while the others did not?

Not only did Avraham reject paganism, risking his life to protest it publicly, but, as we read in Parshat Lech Lecha, Avraham spent his life going from place to place "calling in the name of Hashem." Unlike Noach, who kept his monotheistic religion to himself, Avraham told everyone willing to listen that there is a single Creator Who cannot be manipulated or placated, Who cares equally about all His creatures, Who is the source of justice and kindness and that such actions matter to Him. Avraham showed the world that worshipping G-d is a path toward greater morality and a more just society. This is the light that Avraham brought into a world of darkness.

There is another Midrash on the same verse from the Haftarah:

אמר רב : איתן האזרחי זה הוא אברהם, כתיב הכא : איתן האזרחי, וכתיב התם מי העיר ממזרח

Rav said: Eitan HaEzrachi is Avraham. Here it says "Eitan HaEzrachi", there it says "Who arose from the East (Mizrach)" (Bava Batra 15a)

Avraham's essential trait is that of "eitan", fortitude, the ability to stand firm for your beliefs. In this Midrash, they derive an additional property to describe Avraham: "Zerach" (אזרחי, מזרח), dawn. Avraham was the dawn of a new era of human history, the dawn of the light of truth, justice and kindness that ultimately spread throughout the world.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

Dedicated to my son, Yair Eitan, who is named after his great-great-grandfather Avraham, and to my nephew, Nadiv Yair, named after a different Avraham, whose Bar Mitzvah Parsha is Lech Lecha.