בני זמננו

Modern Commentaries

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Did Abraham break from his father or complete his path?

Rabbi Sacks: Fathers and Sons

Abraham's call in Lekh Lekha can be read two ways: as a radical break from his idolatrous father Terah, as the midrash and Maimonides suggest, or as the completion of a journey Terah himself had already begun toward Canaan and away from idolatry. This ambiguity reflects a deeper pattern in Jewish thought about parenthood—even God Avinu (our Father) "diminishes" His own role, making space for His children to walk ahead and complete what He began, as seen in halachah's insistence that parents forgo excessive honour so children can grow, and in the Talmudic image of God rejoicing, "My sons have defeated Me." What feels in youth like a complete break from one's parents is often, in retrospect, the fulfillment of ideals they themselves first set in motion. AI SUMMARY

Fathers and Sons

The call to Abraham, with which Lekh Lekha begins, seems to come from nowhere:

Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, and go to a land which I will show you (12:1).

Nothing has prepared us for this radical departure. We have not had a description of Abraham as we had in the case of Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God" (6:9). Nor have we been given a series of glimpses into his childhood, as we will in the case of Moses. It is as if Abraham's call is a sudden break with all that went before. There seems to be no prelude, no context, no background.

Added to this is a sudden, unexpected verse in the last speech delivered by Moses's successor Joshua:

And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the river [Euphrates], Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods (Joshua 24:2).

The implication seems to be that Abraham's father was an idolater. Hence the famous midrashic tradition that as a child, Abraham broke his father's idols. When Terah asked him who had done the damage, he replied, "The largest of the idols took a stick and broke the rest."

"Why are you deceiving me?" Terah asked, "Do idols have understanding?"

"Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying," replied the child.

On this reading, Abraham was a breaker of images, one who rebelled against his father's faith – an iconoclast who burst out of his context, his culture and all that came before.

According to Maimonides' powerful philosophical rendition, originally human beings believed in one God. Later, they began to offer sacrifices to the sun, the planets and stars, and other forces of nature, as creations or servants of the one God. Later still, they began to worship them as entities – gods – in their own right. It took Abraham, using logic alone, to realize the incoherence of polytheism:

After he was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, how is it possible that this celestial sphere should be continuously guiding the world, without something to guide it and cause it to revolve? For it cannot move of its own accord. He had no teacher or mentor, because he was immersed in Ur of the Chaldees among foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. He continued to speculate and reflect until he achieved the way of truth, understanding what was right through his own efforts. It was then that he knew that there is one God who guides the heavenly bodies, who created everything, and besides whom there is no other god.

According to this reading, Abraham's rejection of the past was intellectual rather than physical. He broke no idols, merely the thoughts that gave rise to them. But whether the iconoclasm was literal or metaphoric, what is common to Maimonides and the midrash is discontinuity. Abraham represents a radical break with all that preceded him.

Remarkably however, the previous chapter gives us a quite different perspective:

These are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot…Terah took Abram, his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran (11:31).

The implication of this verse seems to be that far from breaking with his father, Abraham was continuing a journey Terah had already begun.

The two passages seem contradictory. Many commentators explain this away by assuming that they are not in chronological sequence: The call to Abraham (in Genesis 12) came first. Abraham heard the divine summons, and communicated it to his father. The family set out together, but Terah stopped halfway, in Haran. The passage recording Terah's death is actually chronologically out of place, and is noted before Abraham's call, in order to guard him from the accusation that he failed to honour his father by leaving Terah in his old age.

Yet there is another obvious possibility. Abraham's spiritual insight did not come from nowhere. Terah had already made the first tentative move toward monotheism. Children complete what their parents begin.

Significantly, both the Bible and rabbinic tradition understood divine parenthood in this way: God signals the way, then challenges His children to walk on ahead, to complete the path on their own. The Midrash contrasts the description of Noah ("Noah walked with God," 6:9) and that of Abraham ("The God before whom I have walked," 24:40).

The ultimate challenge, in God's words to Abraham, is to "Walk ahead of Me and be perfect" (17:1).

In one of the most famous of all Talmudic passages, the sages disagreed with Rabbi Eliezer's opinion and outvoted him, despite the fact that his view was supported by a heavenly voice. Afterwards, Rabbi Natan encountered the prophet Elijah:

Rabbi Natan asked Elijah: "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do in that hour?" Elijah replied: "He laughed [with joy], saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me!'"

To be a parent in Judaism is to make space within which a child can grow. Astonishingly, this applies even when the parent is God Avinu, "our Father," Himself. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker."

This idea finds expression in halakha, Jewish law. Despite the emphasis in the Torah on honouring and revering parents, Maimonides rules:

Although children are commanded to go to great lengths [in honouring parents], a father is forbidden to impose too heavy a yoke on them, or to be too exacting with them in matters relating to his

honour, lest he cause them to stumble. He should forgive them and close his eyes, for a father has the right to forgo the honour due to him.

There must be a balance between what a child owes its parents – the honour due to them – and the space within which the child can grow. God, like the parent, forgoes, "diminishes" His own creation.

The story of Abraham can be read in two ways, depending on how we reconcile the end of chapter 11 with the beginning of chapter 12. One reading emphasizes discontinuity. Abraham broke with all that went before. The other emphasizes continuity. Terah, his father, had already begun to wrestle with idolatry. He had set out on the long walk to the land which would eventually become holy, but stopped halfway. Abraham completed the journey his father began.

Perhaps childhood itself has the same ambiguity. There are times, especially in adolescence, when we tell ourselves that we are breaking with our parents, charting a path that is completely new. Only in retrospect, many years later, do we realize how much we owe our parents – how, even at those moments when we felt most strongly that we were setting out on a journey uniquely our own, we were, in fact, living out the ideals and aspirations that we learned from them. And it began with God Himself, who left, and continues to leave, space for us, His children, to walk on ahead.

