“A Multiplicity of Blessings”

D’var Torah for Shabbat Lech L’cha, October 30, 2020

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My bar mitzvah portion was *Lech* *Lecha*, which we read all over the Jewish world this week. My modest little speech began, in my inescapable Texas accent: “My par’shah, Lech Lecha, tells of Abram, who left his father’s house and followed God to a new place and a new way of worshiping God.” Or something like that.

As a kid, I grasped the message of Abraham’s uniqueness and independence. I’m not sure I understood the rest of the message, though. Not until I was an adult and became deeply involved in interdenominational Jewish work, as well as interfaith work.

For as much as we like to characterize Abraham as the maverick, the one who goes it alone and bushwacks a new religious path all his own, a closer reading of the portion tells us something else. Namely, Abraham’s career is notably one of interacting with – and getting along with – diverse groups of nations, tribes, ethnicities, and religious practitioners.

It is his ability to speak others’ religious and cultural languages, and to shuttle among them on behalf of his own family and the family of nations in his midst, that gives him the well-earned title “father of a multitude of nations.” *Av hamon goyim*.

Avraham – or just Avram as he is known until the end of our parashah – becomes the tone setter for what the Jewish people would become, or at least what we would *strive* to become. Namely, we would be true to our unique identity, AND we would interact – interconnect – with all the peoples of the world in order to radiate a great ethical vision for humanity.

And along the way, we would be welcomed sometimes and shunned sometimes. Embraced sometimes, and mass-murdered sometimes. But we would not erase this seminal idea from our Torah or our collective memory.

Here is the key verse (Genesis 12: 3):

וַאֲבָֽרֲכָה֙ מְבָ֣רְכֶ֔יךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ֖ אָאֹ֑ר וְנִבְרְכ֣וּ בְךָ֔ כֹּ֖ל מִשְׁפְּחֹ֥ת הָאֲדָמָֽה׃

I will bless those who bless you, and any individual that curses you, I will [subsequently] curse; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.”

In the parashah, every local leader from Chedarlaomer to Melkitzedek wants to have Avraham over for dinner. Everyone wants to consult with him; to pray with him; to ally themselves with him; to draft off of his spiritual strength. The more he exhibits personal integrity and dedication to his own religious mission, the more they want to befriend him.

Ralbag, who is the 14th century French Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, or Gersonides in the medieval philosophical literature, notes that God’s promise to “bless those that bless you” is in the plural, while “cursing those that curse you” is in the singular. The idea, he says, is that it’s actually a divine wish that his supporters be many and his detractors be few.

How else, asks Ralbag, can we hope to create what he calls a *kibbutz medini*, a “shared collective society.” How else but when we rally around leaders of integrity with an abundance of blessings in our shared speech, even while minimizing our utterances of curses and disparagements toward our fellow *kibbutzniks*, our fellow members of society.

The K’li Yakar, who is the 16th century Rabbi Ephraim Solomon ben Haim of Luntshitz, or Lemberg, sees the syntax of our verse as containing the key concept. God says that “I will bless those that bless you,” meaning “I will anticipate their good intentions by blessing them even before they utter blessings to you.” And by contrast, “any individual that curses you, I will curse,” meaning “I will give the potential curser the benefit of the doubt and wait until he actually utters his curse. Only then will I repay him for carrying out his ill intention.”

As if to say, we (following God’s model) should be setting the tone for our society by giving others, including our political and cultural opponents, the benefit of the doubt, and that we should be striving to find the best possible way to say what we need to say about those same opponents.

*We should be changing the atmosphere by the way we speak and the way we show deference to one another!*

I doubt that Avraham, if he were he alive and well in modern-day America, would be non-partisan in his politics. Why should he be? The Jewish way is not to stay neutral in the struggles of society. It wasn’t so in *Lech L’cha*, and it needn’t be today. Of course he would formulate opinions and express them. Of course he would vote. Of course he would care passionately about the outcome.

He would, however, insist on exhibiting decency in his public speech, in his discussions of contentious issues, in his personal and public conduct, and in the ways he would sanctify the personhood of everyone he encountered, across all lines of race and religion, and across all of the many other lines we have foolishly drawn between ourselves in our own *kibbutz medini*.

I think this is the way he would want his religious heirs to live. He would say, “Be enough of a blessing in your own Jewish civilization to allow your aura to emanate outward to those beyond your borders; and be a blessing to your own selves.

To quote the divine charge to our wandering ancestor: *v’heyei b’rachah*. Be a blessing. Be a mentsch. *Kein y’hi ratzon*. So may it come to be.