"*Lech lecha*: Rehabilitating Terach"

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The episode that immediately precedes the life and activity of Abra(ha)m is that of the Tower of Babel (Gen. ch.11:1-9). There we are told that early mankind inhabited a valley in Mesopotamia, which was the place of Abram's family's domicile, and from which he left to find his destiny in the Promised Land.

The juxtaposition of those two episodes is suggestive of cause and effect: that we are meant to view Abram's abandonment of his birthplace against the backcloth of what had happened there a few generations earlier, namely the building of the Tower of Babel.

Babel stood for a philosophy that was inimical to that of a spiritual visionary like Abram. It stood for self-glorification and gratification: "Let us build a city and a tower, whose summit is in the heavens - *v'na'aseh lanu sheim pen nafutz al p'nei kol ha-aretz* - and let us make *a name* for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4).

There is also an unmistakeable textual association here between the Tower builders' slogan, *v'na'aseh lanu sheim*, "Let us make *a name* for ourselves," and God's promise to Abram while he was still in Babel, that, once he had left that environment – *va'agadlah* sh'mekha - "I will glorify *your name*" (12:2).

God was clearly saying to Abram, "Divorce yourself from the society of vain men, attempting to leave a hollow legacy of bricks and mortar. You, on the other hand, are destined to leave behind a legacy of the spirit. Your name will live on in minds, hearts, souls, and deeds. I, God, will 'glorify' your name - as opposed to those who attempt to glorify

themselves, by constructing a monument to their own name, a monument as insignificant as was their contribution to humanity. And, if any remembrance of them at all survives, it will be merely through the silent, broken slabs of a failed, audacious enterprise.

The proximity of those two episodes is undoubtedly intended to focus on the uniqueness of Abram, who stood alone – *contra mundum* - in defiance and rejection of a society that was obsessed with human glorification. Contrast that with his authentic modesty and humility, as evinced when, in petitioning God for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, he says, *va'anokhiy afar va'eifer*, "I am but dust and ashes" (18:27), as well as in his self-abasement before Ephron, the Hittite prince (23:7; 12).

However, this link between the end of the sidrah Noach and the beginning of our sidrah presents us with a problem. The penultimate verse of Noach states:

> And Terach took his son Abram, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Abram his son, and they departed with them from Ur of the Chaldees *to go to the land of Canaan*; and they arrived at Haran, and they settled there (11:31).

This clearly indicates Terach's desire to move from Ur and to settle in Canaan long before God instructed Abram to do so! Indeed, long before God even disclosed the identity of the chosen land, and while it was merely 'the land that I shall show you' (12:1). Terach, somehow, had a sixth sense about Canaan! And we believe that this is significant for any assessment of his character, which is otherwise impossible to make.

In last week's Torah Thought, we audaciously queried whether R. Yochanan might have done a disservice to Noach when he asserted that had he lived in Abram's generation he would not have been acclaimed as a man of any spiritual distinction. Dare we suggest that

here once again the Midrash might undeservedly have given Terach a bad press? This might well emerge from our discussion below.

From our earliest Hebrew lessons we are all familiar with the engaging Midrashic stories of Abram's childhood. The favourite, and most beloved, is certainly the one about his father Terach having been an idol-maker who, one day, left the young Abram in charge of his shop while he was away on a journey. Abram, already totally disabused of the notion that inanimate stone idols might be invested with divine qualities, smashed all his father's idols, and placed a hammer in the hand of the largest one, hoping thereby to support his allegation that it was the latter that had perpetrated the crime.

But the most important part of the legend is the continuation:

> When Terach returned and demanded to know what had happened, Abraham reported that it was when the smaller idols became hungry, and started squabbling for food, that the large idol became enraged and smashed them all into pieces. When Terach retorted that what Abram was saying was rubbish, given that idols don't get hungry, and cannot talk, squabble, or even move, Abram smiled and came in with his well-prepared punch-line, "Father, let your ears hear what your mouth has just said. If they are so impotent, how, then, can you possibly think of worshipping them as gods?"

Although this story is typically Midrashic, it draws attention to the fact that the Torah does not provide, as expected, any account of the origin and discovery of monotheism, the central pillar on which the entire Israelite covenant rests! Such an account would have fitted perfectly either at the end of the sidrah Noach or at the beginning of our sidrah. It would also have provided an insight into what it was that prompted Terach to uproot himself, "from *his* land, *his* birthplace, and *his* father's home!" even before God issued that command to his son.

One answer we would suggest is that Terach fled from his homeland precisely out of consideration for his son, Abram. The latter's conversion to monotheism and the rejection

of idolatry would inevitably have made him a figure of hate within his city of Ur; and the report of his rejection of the gods would have certainly spread far and wide, to the extent that the Midrashic account of King Nimrod seeking to have him thrown into a fiery furnace, with only divine intervention saving him from certain death – is not too far-fetched. Any father whose son was challenging the regnant religious beliefs would have removed him without delay to a country of safety. Furthermore, if we accept the plausible Midrashic tradition that Terach was persuaded by his son to embrace monotheism, that would have been an added reason for him to have fled with his family from Ur.

The Torah gives no explanation of his choice, though we may postulate that he was aware that attitudes in Canaan toward adherents of other cults were far more tolerant and relaxed. This is to be explained on the basis that Canaan, lying midway between Egypt and Mesopotamia, attracted the cultural and religious influences of both countries, which it synthesized with its own. Hence Canaan's large pantheon of gods - led by such deities as El, Baal, Asherah, Astarte, Chemosh, Dagan, Anat, Moloch, Mot, Resheph, Qos, etc. - as revealed by the Ebla archive from Tel Mardikh and the cuneiform texts from Ras Shamra-Ugaritic. Terach thus had good reason to believe that his family would find a welcome in that land and that his son would find fertile ground there wherein to sow the seeds of his monotheistic belief.

We are not told why Terach decided, notwithstanding, to stay permanently in Haran. We may conjecture that, primarily, it was on account of his old age and infirmity, given that he died aged 205 years (See Gen. 11:32). A contributory factor may have been political instability and inter-tribal warfare in Canaan, as exemplified by the later war of the four kings against the five, in which Abraham subsequently became embroiled (See Gen. ch. 14). And, finally, because his main concern had been to secure the safety of Abram and

his family, and Haran provided them with the haven they sought. This would also explain why, immediately after recording Terach's death, the call of *lech lecha* was given to Abram. Its message was that, notwithstanding the conditions in Canaan, the time had arrived for him to respond to his God-given mission and to travel around the country promoting monotheism and the ethical and moral values to which he was committed.

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We suggested above that the Midrash might undeservedly have given Terach a bad press. This may be attributed to the great popularity of that Midrash depicting him as a maker, seller, and worshipper of idols, which certainly coloured any further assessment of him, to the extent that he is depicted in that literature as a wicked and misguided character who readily seized his religiously rebellious son and brought him to Nimrod to be thrown him into a fiery furnace. The one exception to that assessment seems to have been Rabbi Abba bar Kahana who asserted that God assured Abram that his father had been allocated a place in the World to Come.

So, liberating ourselves from the Midrashic bias against him, we believe that a case may well be made out for upholding the integrity of Terach. After all, he took the initiative in removing his family from Ur, with intention of reaching Canaan. Whatever his reason of choice, he is still deserving of credit for having been the first biblical figure to implant into his family the notion of Canaan as the ideal place for them to put down roots.

Furthermore, given the chaos that ensued in Babel following the destruction of the Tower, accompanied by the widespread population upheavals (see Gen. 11:9), Terach should also be given credit, at the least, for having brought his family to safety and for having saved Abram for humanity.

But it goes much further: He clearly also provided a nurturing homelife. The fact that, given Abram's personal piety and exacting standards, he was content to remain living with his father until Terach's death, says much for both father and son, and is suggestive of a close relationship of mutual respect and an environment attuned to Abram's ideas, values, and way-of-life.

Shabbat shalom,
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