

Being Called

One of the highlights of my five years in Rabbinical School took place outside of school at a hospital.

One summer I worked for 400 hours learning how to be a chaplain, taking a unit of what is called: Clinical Pastoral Education at Beth Israel Hospital in NY.



The Dazian Pavillion of Beth Israel Medical Center at 10 Nathan D. Perlman Place between 16th and 17th Streets, Manhattan, New York City.

Beyond the powerful experiences I had with patients – who taught me a tremendous amount, I also learned with and from a small group of colleagues from various faiths. There were six of us studying to be clergy,

including two who were preparing for the Episcopal Priesthood and two who were going to be Protestant Ministers.

Several times a week we met as a group to reflect on our experiences so that we could learn from them. Sometimes, these meetings became intense “group therapy” style sessions where we shared our own personal and spiritual lives.

One day, the topic we were discussing was why we decided to become rabbis, priests, and ministers. The aspiring Christian clergy shared powerful narratives of how they felt that God had called them to serve. I remember being deeply moved by their stories.

And then they turned to me, “David, when were you called?”

My eyes opened.

“Called?”

I didn’t know.

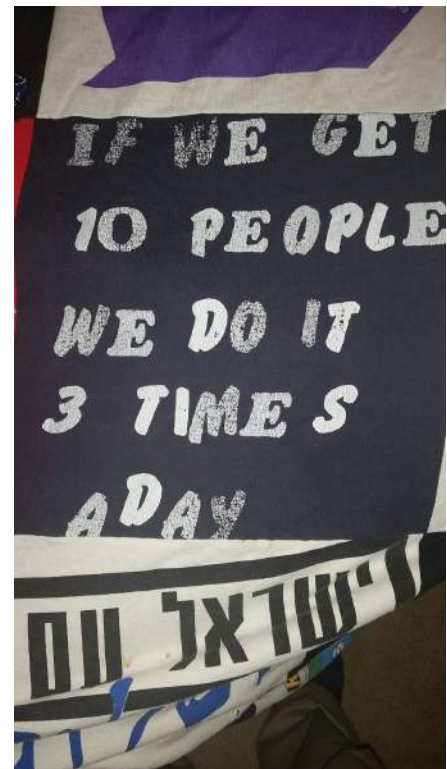
I never felt called in the way they were describing.

I never saw my story in the same way.

I felt that I had been on a journey of self-discovery, but when it came time to decide on a career path, it did not feel like a spiritual encounter with God.

It actually was a conversation with another student during the year that I lived in Israel after college. I was running an egalitarian *minyan* – one where men and women could participate equally at Pardes, a modern Orthodox, but fairly inclusive, *yeshivah* that allowed an egalitarian *minyan* to exist, though the faculty did not support it.

I ran the *minyan* and made sure we had ten. And let me just add that this was before the Emunah 10-for-10 Program was **even** invented! The *minyan* became more and more successful and we added *Minḥah* and *Ma'ariv* so that by its peak we had services three times a day. We were the most frequently meeting egalitarian *minyan* in Israel that year. I even had t-shirts made which read, “If we get 10 people, we do it 3 times a day.”



As a 22-year-old, I was pretty excited about those shirts!



Anyway, Pardes held a Shabbaton – a

Shabbat experience where I coordinated the services, Torah reading, and

delivered a couple of *divrei Torah* – mini-sermons – for the egalitarian *minyan*. One of the students came up to me after I spoke and said, “That was really good. *Yasher koah*. Oh, and remind me – why again are you not becoming a rabbi?”

It was then that I realized that I should do professionally what I loved to do. And after that, I applied to Rabbinical School – something that had always been in my mind as the son of a rabbi and a professor of Judaic studies, but I guess I needed that final push.



But what about a vocation, a true calling?

* * *

This Shabbat’s *parashah*, *Lekha-Lekha*, contains the narrative of how

Abraham, who was actually Avram at the time, is called by God to be our earliest spiritual ancestor. It contains the famous words: “*Lekh Lekha mei’artzekhah u’mi’moladetekha u’mi*

beit avikha el ha-aretz asher areka – Go forth unto yourself from your land,

the land of your birth, your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”



Abram Journeying into the Land of Canaan (engraving by Gustave Doré from the 1865 La Sainte Bible)

It's a great moment, not only in our history, but also in the spiritual history of this planet. Avram is chosen by God. He is called by God to go on a spiritual and physical journey.

But why? Why is Avram chosen? Why does God say "*Lekh Lekha*"? Why him? Why not someone else?

Well, some of you may know a story about why. Why is Avram called? What did he famously do?

Who remembers what he did with the idols?

One day when his father is out, Avram takes a hammer and smashes all the idols in his father's idol shop. He then places the hammer in the arms of the largest idol. His father is furious with him since his business has been ruined. Avram says it was not his fault and shows his father the idol with the hammer, claiming that the idol did the damage. Livid, his father says – well, of course the idol did not do it. Idols cannot do anything!

Got 'ya! Avram has proven that idol worship makes no sense. Avram has discovered a new spiritual truth.

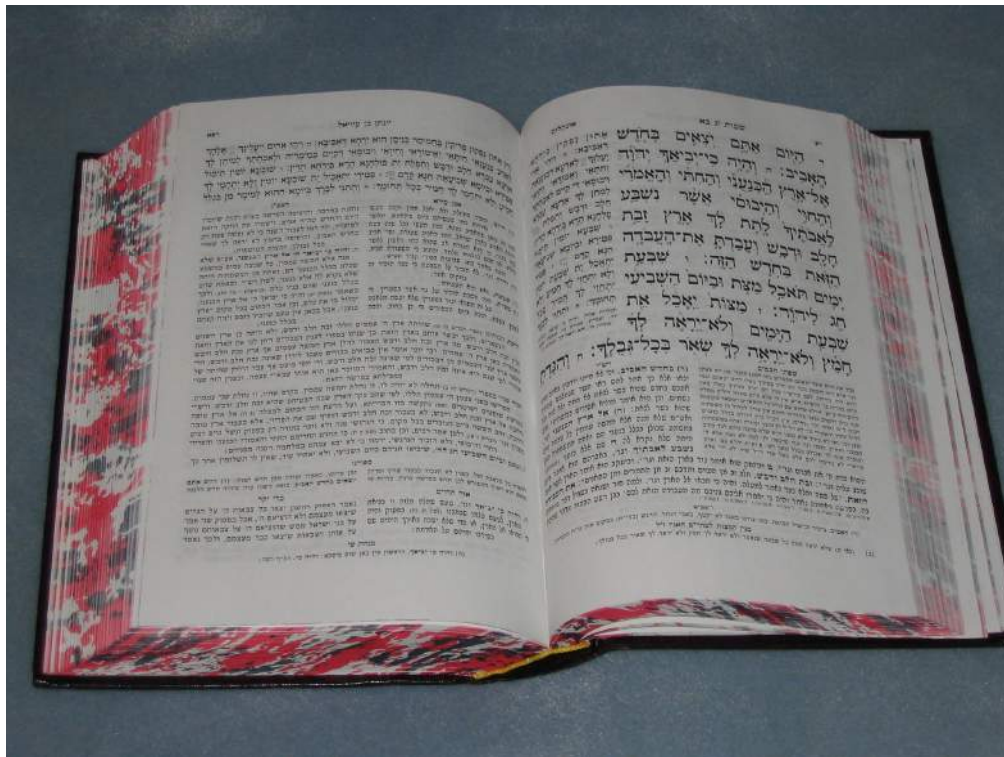
I have always enjoyed that story, I liked the uppity Avram speaking truth to power, though it was not nice, nor smart, to destroy his father's enterprise.

Once when I cited that story as the reason

Avram was called, I remember my ninth grade

Judaic Studies teacher asking me to find that

story in the text. He handed me the humash [the Torah] and said, "Show it to me." I could not. It is not there.



A page from a modern *Mikraot Gedolot humash*

It is a *midrash*, a rabbinic story explaining why Avram is called.

Our rabbis wanted a reason for Avram's having been called; it did not make sense to them that God just starts speaking to him.

And I feel the same way. I need a reason about why God calls our earliest spiritual ancestor.

Could it really be random? Does God chose people to convey spiritual messages without any reason? It's just luck.

That does not seem right, nor effective. To convey a spiritual truth, especially one that others will find compelling, you would want the recipient of God's message to have some special qualities.

And what would those be?

Communicator.

Compassionate.

Courageous – not afraid to go against the grain and speak the truth.

Although, if we think about our greatest prophet, Moshe, he did not necessarily have all those qualities. We know from the scene at the burning bush that he was afraid. He did not think he would be believed. And he is not a great communicator – he suffers from a speech impediment.

What else are we looking for in prophets?

They should be humble. Receiving an important message, a divine truth – that could go to your head. We need people who will not get carried away with everything.

Maybe it's good if they are reluctant to lead – someone who is too eager may not be sufficiently humble.

Look at another prophet, Jeremiah, and how he relates his calling.

He says:

“The word of
Adonai came to me
[and said]:

““Before I
created you in the
womb, I selected you;
Before you were born,
I consecrated you; I
appointed you a
prophet concerning the nations.’



The prophet Jeremiah at the foot of the Colonna dell'Immacolata, at the end of the Piazza di Spagna, Rome (1857). [Photo by Ian Scott.](#)

“I replied, ‘Ah, *Adonai Elohim!* I don't know how to speak, for I am still a boy.’”

Interesting, it seems he is chosen by God not for any special reason, some quality he had even in the womb. He is simply chosen. Seemingly, at random.

But, his first response is reluctance. God reassures him and Jeremiah goes forth as a prophet, but his first inclination was to say no.

‘All the signs of the stars, and the signs of the moon and of the sun are all in the hand of the *Adonai*. Why do I search them out?’” (The Book of Jubilees 12:16-17)

What does this mean? Well, Avram went out on the first day of the seventh month – that is what we call *Rosh Hashanah* and he looked into the sky. What do you see on *Rosh Hashanah*? Stars – if it is clear! What do you not see? The moon. It is the new moon. It is a dark sky.

He was taught – as many were in the ancient world – that if you read the sky carefully, the stars could tell you the future. They could predict the weather. And for people who were farmers, that was a big deal. If it would rain, the crops would grow. And if it did not rain, you might not eat.

But, of course, it was not true. The Book of Jubilees says that Avram understood that this was not the case and in the beauty of the night sky, he realized that there is something else to this universe beyond the stars. He felt God’s presence, becoming aware that the stars are not the ultimate power in the world, but there is a universal power that lies beyond the physical world.

He became aware of God, of the One.

I like this *midrash* even more than the smashing idols one. This points to an internal process that Avram experienced. He becomes aware of God.

This teaches us that we, too, need to cultivate a spiritual awareness within ourselves. It is not necessarily that God chooses us, but that we choose ourselves.

I like to think of God sending out a constant stream of divine light, but it is up to us to hone our abilities – our awareness, our internal processes, our humility, our openness to others and compassion – if we develop these qualities, then we may be able to sense some of that divine flow, the *shefa*, as it is known in the Kabbalistic tradition.

We can choose to be called. We can learn how to be called.

Just like Avram in *Lekh Lekha* – sometimes we are not sure of exactly where we are going. But, more often than not, when we are open to the journey, we can become a blessing, as God says to Avram: “*V’heyeh brakhah.*”

We can become a blessing when we choose to be called.

* * *

That's what happened to me. I have found blessing as a rabbi. In addition to the blessings of my family, I am blessed to be a part of this wonderful Emunah family.



And I hope each and every one of us will think about how we are all called to be *menschen* – good, ethical human beings. And if we are Jewish, how we can be good Jews. And maybe even, how we can call ourselves to even greater heights in God's service.