

Lekh Lekha 5772 - Journeying Together
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

Craaaaaaack.....

Boom!

CRAAAAASH!

My wife, Sharon, and I were sitting in the family room by our patio doors last Saturday night around 11:30. Sharon's head was maybe 6 inches from the glass.

Suddenly, we heard a loud crack.

We had no idea what it was, but immediately after that we heard a large boom, followed by scraping and a crash.

Something large hit our house and then slid its way down the wall onto the deck. It sounded like a waterfall of bricks.

The tree in the middle of our backyard split under the weight of the snow on its leaves, and half of it hit the back of the house just above our son Ari's bedroom window. It came down to rest on our deck. Branches and leaves were everywhere, but, fortunately, the angle of impact left us with minimal damage. And although the tree landed just a few inches from Sharon's head, she was, thank God, unharmed.

This has been quite a week. While we in Massachusetts are used to winter storms, we're not used to October nor'easters such as we experienced last weekend. It seems as if we are in for more-and-more extreme weather.

We lost power, as we did three months earlier after Hurricane Irene, and I know that many of you lost power for a significant time as well.

Once again, the synagogue went powerless, dark, and cold. As opposed to when this occurred at the end of August, when we didn't need heat, now, the building became a frigid place; my office was 50 degrees.

We cancelled events, pre-school, religious school, and our Sisterhood dinner, but, thankfully, we still held our daily minyan carefully by candlelight.

Those of you who traveled around the area after the storm saw the devastation. Clearly, trees are not made to withstand heavy, wet snow on their leaves.

The order is supposed to go: the leaves turn colors, the leaves fall off, and then the snow comes. Changing that order is NOT a good idea!

The destruction was extensive. Trees came down, trees split, homes were damaged, roofs were damaged, power lines came down. It looked like a hurricane or a tornado had blown through the area.

Looking at the mess, the millions of people and businesses without power, it seemed daunting, overwhelming – how can all this get fixed?

While last week's Torah reading, *Parashat Noah*, may fit a little better with natural disasters like floods or nor'easters, this week we learn of the beginning of our covenant with God that is initiated with Avram.

So the first question we ask is: why Avram? Why was he chosen at the beginning of our *parashah* to go on this journey?

The Torah does not tell us – he is sent to the land God shows him and, sure enough, he immediately encounters a natural disaster: there's a drought.

Suddenly, all of God's promises of land and of becoming a people are rendered meaningless by the lack of water, which creates famine.

Escaping to Egypt to survive, Avram asks his wife to lie and say that she is his sister (since he is afraid Pharaoh will fall in love with her and then kill him to marry her).

Interspersed among these difficult episodes are uplifting moments: Avram is blessed at the beginning of the *parashah*, Avram is shown the land of Israel by God, Avram's successful military campaign, God's reassuring Avram that the Almighty will be his shield, Avram's being promised a son;

the *brit bein habetarim* - the covenant between the pieces as it is called, and finally the covenant of circumcision.

As we read of our earliest spiritual ancestor's life, I am struck by the uneven quality. Avram demonstrates real leadership in next week's *parashah* when God wants to destroy the cities of *S'dom* and *Amora*, but he does not handle his own domestic situations well – whether between his women or his sons.

That does not even take into account the entire episode of the binding of Isaac, which we read next week.

This is a good reminder that part of the greatness of the Torah is that it does not whitewash things – our leaders, our ancestors, our patriarchs and matriarchs are presented with all their warts. They are imperfect, as are all human beings.

Now, while Avram leads a life filled with ups and down, one of the key moments is at the beginning of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* where Avram is told by God to leave his home and go to Israel.

But why exactly is Avram chosen by God for this mission? Given the ups and downs of his life and of his own behavior and moral choices, it's unclear.

Perhaps it is this lack of an explanation in the Torah that motivates the rabbis to write the *midrashic* story of Avram the idol smasher. They present his father, Terah, as the owner of the idol shop who leaves his son in charge, only to return to find all the idols but one in ruin. Avram frames the largest idol as the perpetrator of all the damage to demonstrate how absurd it is to worship stone.

But there could be other explanations. Perhaps Avram is chosen because he becomes aware of God's presence in nature. The Book of Jubilees, a book written by a Jew in the first century BCE that was not included in the Tanakh – in the Hebrew Bible – states that Avram went out on the evening of the first night of the seventh month (which we know as Rosh Hashanah) to see what the future would be like; would it rain and provide sustenance? On *Rosh Hodesh*, the New Moon, the moon is almost entirely absent, which means that you can see the stars even more brightly.

I've looked at the sky on a night like that in the Sinai desert, and it's truly remarkable; you feel as though you could reach out and touch the stars.

In Avram's world, he was taught that if you looked at the stars and their positions, you could determine how much rain would fall and, thus, if and how the community could survive.

But as Avram is looking at these stars, he realizes that they do not control the rainfall. In fact, there is something behind and beyond the stars that initiated the universe and that continues to sustain the world. He becomes aware of God's presence, of God's oneness. This is how Avram becomes the father of ethical monotheism.

But the reality of his having been chosen, beyond these *midrashim*, these commentaries on the Torah that the rabbis write and that the author of the Book of Jubilees writes – that reality is a bit different.

Avram is actually going on a journey even before the beginning of the *parashah* where he is told: “*Lekh lekha mei'artzekha u'mimoladetekha u'mibeit avikha el ha-aretz asher ar'eka* – Go forth from your land, from your native land, from your father's house to the land I will show you,” (Genesis 12:1)

The journey is actually started by his father, Terah, at the end of last week's *parashah*.

“Terah took his son Avram; his grandson Lot, the son of Haran; and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Avram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the Land of Canaan, but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.” (Genesis 11:31)

So, apparently, the journey was not begun by Avram, but was begun by his father, Terah.”

It appears from the text that Avram is simply following in his father's footsteps. Sometimes we forget that before he is given the famous command, “*Lekh lekha* – Go forth unto yourself” at the start of this week's *parashah*, something preceded God's command.

He is at the city of Haran because of his father; his father already left Ur of the Chaldeans, wanting to go to the land of Canaan.

No matter what the Midrash says, this is not a totally new journey, a new calling, but one that already began with his father that he continues.

Similarly, we too do not begin from scratch. We build on the insights of our ancestors, on earlier generations, on earlier texts and ideas that came before us. As Jews, we stand on the shoulders of giants, meaning that we have the lessons and ideas of 4,000 years of our people about how to live in this world, about how to be a moral, ethical person, about how to infuse meaning into our lives, about how to make tough choices and, yes, how to mark a moment like becoming a Jewish adult at a bar mitzvah.

We should be proud to build on what came before us.

Yet we cannot rest on our laurels. We must continue to move forward, to innovate, and to recreate and renew our traditions one step at a time. We must move incrementally.

Lekh lekha is replete with journeys.

The verbs of this Torah reading all convey that: *lekh, yelekh, va'yeitzu lalekheth, va'yavo'u, va'ya'avor, va'yisa* – going, setting out, arriving, passing through and journeying.

The text discusses Avram's journeys. After Avram leaves Egypt during the famine and returns to the Negev, the desert in Southern Israel, he proceeds in stages from the Negev to the city of Bethel, to the place where his tent had formerly been. The key phrase is *vayelekh l'ma'sa'av* – Avram proceeded in stages.

This is something fundamental to how we approach moments in our lives – large moments and small moments. When we look at a large challenge, like preparing for a bar mitzvah, or whenever we feel overwhelmed by a daunting task – let's say, restoring power to millions of homes and businesses that lost it – the best way to approach these moments is in stages, one step at a time, as Avram did.

One of my favorite teachings is the famous Chinese proverb: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” We can focus on only one step at a time. That is the best way to live

As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches in his beautiful book, *Peace is Every Step*, we must pause, take a breath and engage in mindfulness to become fully present in each moment. Then we can move onto the next step.

The Midrash sums up all of this in a comment about the phrase, “*Lekh lekha* – Go forth unto yourself.” It says you should leave and leave again, meaning that we leave in stages. The journey towards greatness cannot be achieved in one fell swoop. There is a process of leaving, arriving, and moving forward again to tackle a project, to do something well. To be successful takes many small, consolidated gains. (Mid. Rabbah 39:8)

So it is for all of us. Whether we are looking at ourselves as children, as grandparents, as siblings, as students, as children, as partners, as peers, as professionals or as friends; whether it is the process of cleaning up an October nor’easter or going on a journey to Israel, it is taking one small step at a time that helps us manage the inevitable vicissitudes of life.

May Avram’s example of that behavior inspire us on our own journeys.

Shabbat Shalom.