

Dignity and Redemption: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha, October 27, 2012

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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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In his classic work, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes of two aspirations of human beings: dignity and redemption.

Dignity results whenever we triumph over nature, e.g., when we make scientific and technological advances, when we control our environment, when we achieve social or economic success. In these instances, we see ourselves as masters, not as victims. This is dignity.

Redemption, though, is something quite different. It stems not from our feeling of being in control but from our feeling of being entirely dependent upon God. We are vulnerable. We are afraid. We recognize deeply and without reservation that our lives are in God’s hands, not our own. No matter how successful we may appear to be, only God has full control.

Rabbi Soloveitchik notes: “Dignity is discovered at the summit of success; redemption in the depth of crisis and failure.”

Put into other terms, dignity can be described in our resumes. We can list our achievements, honors, titles, our material assets. But redemption is something deep within us that we cannot quite explain to others. It is not quantifiable.

The dynamic inner life of a religious person attempts to balance the human need for dignity with the equally human need for redemption. It does not ignore the claims of the material world but also does not forget one’s soul, one’s ultimate purpose in life. This tension leads to the courage to stand alone courageously, to be different and not to follow blindly the passing fads and trends of society.

This week’s Torah reading focuses on our forefather Abraham, the ultimate “loner.” God commanded Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace, his father’s home—and to set off in a new direction, to a new land, to a new society. Abraham was to spread his revolutionary notion of One God and a system of ethical

monotheism.

The Torah makes clear that Abraham was a man of dignity. He had wealth and a coterie of followers. He could muster troops to wage and win military battles. He had an impressive resume of achievements and material successes.

But the Torah also makes clear that Abraham was a man who sought redemption. He humbly followed God's commands, even at great personal sacrifice. He prayed to God and served God, recognizing that God's will—not his own—must prevail.

Abraham was a personality marked by profound courage. He was not afraid to stand alone, to teach a new and grand idea, to foster a religious vision that made tremendous demands on the faithful. Abraham was known as Ivri (the Hebrew), and our Rabbis noted that the root of the word Ivri relates to being on the other side i.e. the whole of society was on one side, and Abraham stood alone on the other side. Society could measure Abraham's material success and dignity; but his challenge was to make them understand the need for redemption, for inner spiritual transformation.

In this respect, Abraham set the agenda for the Jewish people. We have had, and continue to have, a special mission to the world. We are surely to work for the scientific, technological and material benefit of humanity—to foster human dignity. But we have the far more difficult task of working for the spiritual advancement of humanity—to foster redemption. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's words: "Heroism is the central category in practical Judaism." We need the heroism of Abraham to stand on one side, even if much of the world stands on the other side. We need to learn for ourselves so that we can teach others: material dignity is not enough for human salvation; we require spiritual depth, humility, a sense of living in the presence of God.

There is a Midrash that teaches that when the Messiah is about to arrive, the Almighty will spread two bridges across the ocean. One will be made of steel and the other will be made of paper. Most will choose the steel bridge but it will collapse. The righteous will choose the paper bridge and will arrive at redemption.

Steel symbolizes putting reliance on physical strength, wealth, power—the material signs of success and dignity. Paper symbolizes putting reliance on ideas, on our holy books. Strangely enough, it is the paper bridge that is actually stronger and that leads to redemption.

Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out that the "lonely man of faith" is not lacking friends and social context. Rather, the loneliness is ontological, an essential ingredient in

the human psyche. In spite of being surrounded by people, a person of faith has a yearning for the transcendent God. No one else outside of him/her can fully understand what is transpiring within his/ her mind and heart and soul. This loneliness is not a negative quality, but is at the root of spiritual growth.

We live in a society where material success is prized enormously and where people think their human worth is measured in dollars. Dignity is a popular word. While not discounting the importance of material wellbeing and human dignity, we also need to remind ourselves and others that dignity is not enough: we crave redemption, a sense of ultimate meaning in life, a yearning to be in the presence of God.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)