Being True to Oneself: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha, November 1, 2014

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(Much of this essay is excerpted from my book, Losing the Rat Race, Winning at Life.)

During the course of a lifetime, a person may wear many masks. In order to curry favor with others, one adopts their attitudes, opinions, styles and behavior patterns. Above all, one wants to belong, to play an acceptable role. At the same time, one also has a separate individual identity within, the hard kernel of one's own being. When one loses sight of his separateness from the masks he wears, he becomes the masks; i.e., a superficial, artificial human being. A person may go through life without examining carefully who he really is. One simply becomes an assortment of ever-changing masks, living life on the surface.

Rabbinic tradition offers an interpretation of Genesis 12:1, where God commands Abram to leave his land, his birthplace, his father's house, to go to a new land to which God will direct him. The Hebrew text reads: Lekh lekha, which is normally translated to mean "get thee out" or "get yourself going." Yet, the text can also be read more literally as "go to yourself," i.e. to your own self. In order to start off on his new road of life, Abram was told that he first had to go into himself, find out who he was at his core. Our "self" cannot realistically be separated from the influences of others, such as parents, relatives, friends or teachers. It is the task of the "self" to understand, evaluate, accept or reject the external influences on one's life. It is not easy to separate ourselves from our masks.

Our self-definition is vastly influenced by the opinions of others. Much human misery comes as a result of people betraying themselves by adopting artificial personae. They present themselves as intellectuals, business tycoons or gregarious show-offs. Yet, deep down they know themselves to be only moderately intelligent and creative; or they detest the world of business competition; or they know themselves to prefer quiet conversation in small groups rather than noisy talk in big crowds. People are happiest when they respect themselves, when they feel they have taken responsibility for their lives

and have done well.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better and for worse as his portion.” A person who wishes to live life on its deepest level must be able to stand on his or her own, without allowing the attitudes and values of others to supplant personal attitudes and values. In one way or another, everyone wears masks, yet the wise person knows not to confuse the self with the masks.

When a person acts in an artificial manner in order to pose as an authentic human being, he is clearly a play actor rather than a real human being. When an artist becomes self-conscious of being an artist, he loses the quality of being a genuine artist. The same is true of a religious personality. An artist, a poet, a religious person is always striving to express some deep feelings or ideas for which his expressions are inadequate. One tries again and again, and always—at least to himself—fails. Once one thinks he has succeeded—if only for an instant—in that instant he is no longer an artist, a poet, a religious personality. Vanity has obscured his humility. But it is humility and the sense of inadequacy that serve as the foundation of spiritual greatness.

No two human beings are exactly alike. It is precisely our individualistic worldviews that enable each of us to make a distinctive contribution to society. Our sense of meaning in life is directly correlated with our freedom to participate creatively in the human adventure.

This week’s Torah portion opens with God’s command to Abram to go “unto the land that I will show you.” Our commentators wonder why God did not specify the destination to which He was sending Abram. The general consensus is that God was “testing” Abram’s faith: would he leave his land and birthplace and father’s home to go to some vague destination? I interpret this command to Abram in a broader sense, as applying to every human being. We are each commanded to pick ourselves up and head for an unspecified destination: it is unspecified, because each of us has a different place to reach. Each of us needs to find that inner wholeness that comes with trying to reach the goals which the Almighty had in mind for us. If we are true to our inner light, if we strive to maximize our talents and energies…then we will find ourselves moving in the direction of that mysterious land that “I will show you.”

Angel for Shabbat