Being True: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

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By
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Rabbi Harold Kushner told a story of a man who stopped attending his usual synagogue and was now frequenting another minyan. One day he happened to meet the rabbi of his previous synagogue, and the rabbi asked him where he was praying these days. The man answered: “I am praying at a small minyan led by Rabbi Cohen.”

The rabbi was stunned. “Why would you want to pray there with that rabbi. I am a much better orator, I am more famous, I have a much larger following.”
The man replied: “Yes, but in my new synagogue the rabbi has taught me to read minds.”

The rabbi was surprised. “Alright, then, read my mind.”

The man said: “You are thinking of the verse in Psalms, ‘I have set the Lord before me at all times.’”

“You are wrong,” said the rabbi, “I was not thinking about that verse at all.”

The man replied: “Yes, I knew that, and that’s why I’ve moved to the other synagogue. The rabbi there is always thinking of this verse.”

Indeed, an authentically religious person is always thinking of this verse, either directly or in the back of his mind. Such an individual lives in the presence of God, conducts himself with modesty and propriety. The Rabbi Cohen of the story was genuine; he was a spiritual person seeking to live a godly life.

The other rabbi in the story was “successful.” He had a large congregation and external signs of prestige. But he lacked the essential ingredient of being authentically religious: he did not have the Lord before him at all times. He was busy trying to make himself popular, get his name into the newspapers, rub elbows with celebrities. Even when he prayed, his mind was not on God, but on how he could advance himself in the world.

In this week’s parasha, we read about the early career of Abraham. The Torah does not describe Abraham as a great orator or statesman. Rather, Abraham is

one who walks before God, in the presence of God. God refers to Abraham as “ohavi,” My friend (Isaiah 41;8). Friendship implies a loving mutual relationship, loyalty, trustworthiness. Jewish tradition identifies Abraham with the quality of compassion (hesed), meaning that he really cared not only for God but for people. He took the time to speak with—not at—others. More importantly, he took the time to listen to others. He was not a self-aggrandizing politician or a back-slapping smooth salesman.

Others in Abraham’s time may have been mightier, more popular, and wealthier. But God chose Abraham because Abraham was true. Abraham was the one who would become “father of a multitude of nations.” Abraham was the one who would ultimately prevail in bringing the world closer to God and closer to godliness.

Our goal should be to set the Lord before us at all times and to associate with others who strive to do likewise. Life is too important to waste by clinging to falseness and vanity.

Angel for Shabbat