And Abram Went: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

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“Now the Lord said unto Abram: Leave from your country, from your family, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And Abram went as the Lord had spoken to him…” (Bereishith 12 1-4).

At age 75, Abram was commanded by God to leave for a new land. Since Abram would not naturally be inclined to set off on a life-changing journey, God sought to induce his compliance with various promises. Here is a tentative way of understanding God’s words and Abram’s responses.

God: Abram, I want you to leave your country, your family, and your father’s house in order to go to a land that I will show you.

Abram: I am 75 years old, well settled, financially secure. Why would I want to set off on this mysterious journey?

God: I will make you into a great nation.

Abram: I am happy to be a private person. I don’t need to be a great nation.

God: I will bless you with wealth.

Abram: I don’t need more wealth.

God: I will make your name great.

Abram: I am not interested in fame.

God: If you listen to Me, all the nations of the world will be blessed through you.

Abram: When You promised me a nation, wealth and fame, I was not inclined to accept Your challenge. However, if my going to the new land will enable me to be

a blessing for all humanity, I am willing to undertake this responsibility.

Only after God promised Abram that he would be a blessing for all the nations of the world—only then does the Torah state: And Abram went. Until then, Abram was not ready to move. He was a highly idealistic man. His mission in life was not to attain wealth or fame; it was to impact positively on society as a whole. Once God acknowledged this goal, Abram was prepared to go forward, to assume leadership, and to change the world for the better.

Abram understood that leadership is not to be viewed as a means of obtaining a fancy title and good pay. Leadership is a total commitment; it demands the highest degree of integrity and good judgment. It views the purpose of life as something that transcends the self.

Abram set an example for all future leaders…and for all responsible human beings. His message continues to be relevant today.

Polls continually show that the public is disgusted with politicians who abuse their positions to advance their own fame and fortune. The public does not feel that its elected officials put the needs of the public first; rather, many feel that politicians are in it for their own ego gratification and wealth production.

Leaders of corporations, institutions and organizations are expected to take their responsibilities seriously. Yet, so often we learn of heads of companies who take massive pay, even while their companies do poorly, even while workers are being laid off. We read of institutions—religious and secular—where the top officers are paid tremendous amounts and given many honors; and yet, these top officers will “jump ship” when a better offer turns up. For such individuals, loyalty and commitment to constituents are far less important than their own self-promotion. Such “leaders” are not driven by a sense of mission for the greater good; they are driven by the desire to advance their own interests as best as they can. They surround themselves with a clique of powerful supporters, and conduct themselves as though the rest of the public doesn’t really matter.

The Talmud (Eruvin 13b) states: Anyone who seeks greatness [i.e. personal glory], greatness flees from him; and anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks him. If a person sets the primary goal of attaining personal fame and honor, people will come to see his/her shallowness of character. The more an individual demeans him/herself to attain glory, the more genuine glory eludes them.

If a person seeks to live according to high ideals that transcend personal glorification, such a person will earn the respect of others. Genuine people

respect genuinely good human beings.

Abram set an example for all who wish to live honorable lives. “And Abram went as the Lord had spoken to him.” That made all the difference for Abram. And that can make all the difference for us.

Angel for Shabbat