

As I wrote to the community yesterday, in this week's parashah, our ancestor Abraham – at this point, still called Avram – is called to take a leap into the unknown. Having already wandered from his birthplace in *Ur Kasdim* – Ur of the Chaldeans - as far as Haran, in the company of his father, Terach, and other family members; Avram receives a personal message at the beginning of this parashah, immediately after the death of his father.

Genesis 12:1-2:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמְמֹלַדְתֶּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָךְ:
וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

Hashem said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.

In Torah study, yesterday, some of our members expressed discomfort at the seeming arbitrariness of the call. Who is this guy Avram, anyway? Why is Hashem so gratuitously singling out this unknown wanderer for blessing?

That is exactly the question that my favorite midrash seeks to answer.

In Bereshit Rabbah 39:1, Rabbi Yitzchak opens with a comparison to Psalm 45:11:

"Listen, daughter, look, and incline your ear, and forget your people and your father's house." Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *bira doleket*. . ."

The translation of this phrase is really crucial to this midrash. *Doleket* is from the same root as *l'hadlik*, like "*l'hadlik ner shal Shabbat*" – to light, to ignite. So *bira doleket* is sometimes translated as a "castle aglow, a castle lit up" and sometimes translated as "a castle on fire; a burning castle." We'll hold the simultaneous possible translations throughout this reading.

So, continuing Rav Yitzhak's extended metaphor: the wanderer saw this *bira doleket*, this lit up or burning castle. "He said, 'Are you telling me that this castle lacks a person to look after it!?' The owner of the building peered out at him and said to him, 'I am the master of the castle.' What happened with Abraham our father was similar. He said, 'Are you telling me that this universe lacks a master?,' the Holy Blessed One peered out at him and said to him, 'I am the Master of the Universe.'" . . . Thus, G-d said to Abram, [go forth...].

Rav Yitzhak uses a metaphor of a traveler encountering a castle to describe Avram: Just as the traveler wandered, so too did Avram. Just as the traveler noticed the *bira doleket*, so too did Avram notice something. Just as what the traveler noticed causes a question to burst forth: "Are you telling me that this castle lacks a person to look after it?," so Avram's noticing caused him to formulate the question, "Are you telling me this world lacks a master?" And somehow that question invites the response, "Here I am."

But what is it, exactly, that the traveler, that Avram sees? Is it a *bira doleket*, a castle aglow? Is the midrash talking about a building so intricately constructed, so beautifully lit, so obviously lovingly managed, that there must be someone stewarding it with great care? In that case, the question, "Are you telling me there is no master here?" is incredulous – there must be a master taking care of this. By this reading, the extension of the metaphor is that Avram was so struck by the glory of the universe that it awoke in him the monotheistic insight – one deity ruling the order of sun and moon, seas, earth and sky, lovingly, deliberately constructed. And it was the articulation of that monotheistic insight "Don't tell me there's no master in charge here!" that merits Avram to receive the call, the master saying, "indeed, I'm here!" in the form of "lech lecha. . ."

But what if we read *bira doleket* as a castle on fire? Then the midrash would be of a traveler who is worried or even horrified by what he encounters – a lovely building that seems to be abandoned to destruction, calling out in anguish and perhaps moral indignation, "Are you telling me there's no one in charge? Isn't

there anyone taking care of this?” Avram, by metaphoric extension in this reading, travels the world and sees human cruelty, the seeming randomness of fate, and asks indignantly, “Isn’t anyone in charge here?” And in this reading, too, that cry in some way demands – and receives – a divine revelation. “Yes! I’m here! Right here *in this burning castle!*”

Since there is no one right way to translate and understand this midrash, the right way in fact must be *both at once*.

Gratitude is often a pathway to divine revelation; the more we practice awe and gratitude, the more connected, the more grounded we can be. This is why I have a daily gratitude practice. This is why our prayers begin with *shevach*, praise. And the first reading of the midrash supports this.

But as so many of us know, outrage is also a pathway to the divine – the awakening of the cognitive dissonance when we face something is not as it ought to be, when we allow ourselves to feel the force of that dissonance – *someone should put out this fire!* The dawning awareness of the gap between what is and what should and *could* be is the beginning of moral vision that can lead to moral leadership. So how appropriate that the second possible reading of the midrash points to this way.

Avram doesn’t merit the call because he realizes a capital T - Truth. He merits the call because he is awake and aware and he asks a big question. A question so big that no one translation can contain it, a question encompassing wonder and outrage, humility and moral indignation: *what’s going on here? Is there anyone in charge?*

And as anyone who has asked such a question in a meeting knows the answer is often, “sounds like you’re volunteering to work on this!”

And thus Avram is invited into partnership with Hashem.

So I want to encourage us to inhabit the many facets of Avram's noticing and question. If you are listening as someone who typically leans into gratitude as your pathway to the divine, or who worries that you shouldn't bring anything but awe and gratitude as an offering to God, consider offering up your more challenging emotions as well. Understand that confusion, indignation and outrage, too, can be holy prayers, can be pathways that lead to divine revelation.

And if you orient to outrage and moral indignation all too easily, remember too that the world is vast, complex and beautiful, and your heart is, too, vast, complex and beautiful. Remember to notice the palace aglow, lit up in splendor, and to marvel at how wonderful it is, even as you rage.

To be very clear. As the election finishes this Tuesday, what follows is unknown. We do not know what will challenge this democracy, what will be called from us.

And that's okay. Because the capacity to hold and face complicated questions is perhaps more important than the ability to settle on an answer. We will discern what we are called to do as it unfolds. We will be in relationship, calling out, "are you there?" and answering, "here I am!"

As descendants of Avraham, we are capable of facing the unknown weeks or even month ahead of us. We are capable of holding fear and hope, outrage and moral vision.

Lech lecha. Go forth.