

What does it look like to lead a life dedicated to holiness, to blessing?

In this week's parashah, Avram receives the famous call: Lech lecha, go forth from your native land, your birthplace, your father's house, to a land that I will show you.

Avram and Sarai and their extended household go.

And they don't stop going.

They arrive in Canaan in verse 5, passing through Shechem in verse 6 (in what is today northern Israel), and the Negev in verse 9 (in what is today southern Israel), down to Egypt in verse 10, and back out in verse 20. At the beginning of chapter 13, he is back in the Negev. After parting from his nephew Lot, in Chapter 13, verse 12, Avram remains in Canaan, and Hashem appears to him again, and charges him again to get up and walk throughout the land.

Later, at the beginning of Chapter 17, Hashem will demand this a third time, appearing and saying, "Walk in my ways."

Avram follows the call, consistently, moving as commanded, seeking as commanded, not settling, staying and outsider and above the fray. Arguably, you could also say, he was doing what people of his culture did: living nomadically, moving with the seasons, avoiding the corruptions and enticements of the cities.

But there is one episode that interrupts these calls and wanderings, one chapter in which the voice of God is silent.

Chapter 14 comes seemingly out of nowhere, to describe the historical geopolitics of the region: a head king named Cherdolaomer has conquered the area and all of the local kings pay tribute, until they don't anymore. In verse 2, we meet five kings - King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, who rebel against Cherdorlaomer.

Now, Rashi points out that each of these five kings have synonyms for evil or enmity embedded in their names. It's as if you were reading a contemporary story in English that described, "Captain Nevil, Captain Meanie, Captain Enemy. . ." etc. Torah is clearly not sympathetic to the rebellious vassals.

Then something interesting happens. As he puts down the rebellion, Cherdorlaomer and his three loyal vassal kings conquer the whole rebellious territory and take everyone captive, including Avram's own nephew Lot, who settled in Sodom. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah escape by hiding. When Avram hears this news, he amasses a force of 318 fighters and follows in the night, defeating the High King Cherdorlaomer north of Damascus, and bringing back all of the captured individuals and property.

And you think that Torah is sometimes boring!

What are we to make of this? Beside what Noa noted in Torah study that Lot seems to cause a great deal more hardship than he's worth to Avram. . .

Sforno writes that "we can image what a tremendous feat Avram accomplished when he defeated the four kings under the leadership of Kedorleomer. He must have possessed outstanding military skills in order to have accomplished this."

We don't usually think of Avram, the first Jew, as a military man. But here he is, entering the fray, seemingly without hesitation.

The story doesn't end there. Two characters come to meet him. One is Malchizedek, high priest in Shalem, which the rabbis of the Talmud identify as an early name of Yerushalayim, Jerusalem. The other is the king of Sodom. And as we noted that the king of Sodom's name is essentially, 'Captain Evil,' Malchitzedek's name would translate to "my King is Justice."

Malkitzedek serves bread and wine, and blesses Avram, invoking a name of God that we still use in our Amidah – “El Elyon, koneh shamayim v’aretz.” – God most high, creator of Heaven and earth.

The King of Sodom, in contrast, approaches Avram and says, ‘Keep all of the stuff, but can I have my people back?’

Avram immediately rejects the implication that he himself is the new high king, that might makes right. Invoking the blessing he has just received, he says, “I swear to ה', God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’ For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the parties who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share.

As Rabbi Elie Kaunfer taught this week, “Simply by his presence—justice embodied—Malki-Zedek reminded Avram that taking money from the King of Sodom, even money fairly won in war, is not right. In fact, the King of Sodom, whose name, as we noted, is Bera (evil), is the embodiment of the opposite of Malki-Zedek (justice). Avram, against his own economic interest, sides with justice.⁵ He takes the hard road, and refuses any spoils of war, simply because his ally is immoral.”

Malki-Tzedek, a pagan, is the character who brings God back into the narrative, who implicitly reminds Avram that even though he could see this whole episode as separate from his “Lech Lecha” mission, he is dedicated even now to El Elyon, and must figure out how to integrate his worldly obligations and activities with the larger Lech Lecha mission to which he has promised himself.

In this moment, Avram learns that there are not two different tracks of his life—the one involved in the world of war and politics, and the one dedicated to holiness, but that the task of his life is actually to dedicate himself to holiness as he navigates the world of war and politics. When he refuses to take tribute from the King of Sodom, he shows that he understands – sometimes I have to fight. Sometimes I have to be down in the thick of things. Sometimes I may even, inadvertently ally with “Captain Evil.” But that doesn’t mean I can’t be dedicated to holiness, even then.

I think about this passage as I think about the idea of keeping Judaism separate from politics – as if a commitment to a worldview and entire way of life could not have political implications. If Avram had chosen to keep his beliefs out of his politics, perhaps he would have accepted the tribute of the king of Sodom – but then what would have been the substance of this belief?

Avram instead shows to be a person of spiritual conviction is to enter the worldly fray to fulfill your obligations, as he was obligated to the well-being of Lot. So whatever you feel your obligations are and to whom, please make sure you express them as you exercise your right to vote by this Tuesday. Because as descendants of Avram, we have an obligation to be in the fray. Even if that means sometimes siding with the lesser of two literal evils in order to save a life, as Avram quite literally did.

Avram also shows how that obligation doesn’t throw away our other obligations to behave according to our highest moral virtues – in Avram’s case, that meant refusing the tribute of the King of Sodom. In our case, that might mean campaigning hard for what we believe is right, but refusing to join in the mudslinging and cancel culture that so define the politics of this moment.

However we strike that balance, we must be willing to enter the worldly fray – and to bring a commitment to holiness even there.