



Parshat Lech Lecha
November 5, 2011—8 Cheshvan 5772
Bricks and Cathedrals
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The story is told of three brick layers who are doing hard manual labor on a hot summer day. Somebody comes up to them and asks them, what are you doing?

The first brick layer says, what does it look like I'm doing? I'm a brick layer. I'm laying bricks.

The second says I'm working hard to support my family. This work puts bread on the table and will allow my kids to go to college and have a better life.

The third says the bricks I am laying are going to be part of a magnificent cathedral. A community of faith is going to gather here, and I am proud that some of my bricks will be part of that cathedral.

The same act. Three different ways of framing it.

I thought of the brick layer story as I read this week portions of the new and much heralded book by the Israeli Nobel Prize winning economist, Daniel Kahneman, called Thinking Fast and Slow. I had never read such exuberant praise. One writer enthused, "This is a landmark book in social thought, in the same league as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*." As I read this extravagant praise, I wondered what was this book's secret sauce? What could explain such adoration?

Kahneman shares three teachings that, taken together, can help us think about our own lives in crucial new ways.

The first is the importance of how we frame reality. When we complicated human beings make decisions, we are often not rational actors making rational decisions; rather, our

decisions are affected, nonlogically, *by how an issue is framed*. The classic example was a study done with doctors at Harvard Medical School who offered a patient population two different descriptions of the exact same outcome of a surgery. Some patients were told that there is a survival rate of 90%. Other patients were told that there is a mortality rate of 10%. The predicted outcome was identical. Yet, patients were far more likely to opt for the surgery if they were told that the survival rate was 90%, and far less likely to opt for the surgery if they were told that the mortality rate is 10%.

What matters to us is not only reality in some objective sense, but how we frame our reality. Do we see ourselves as bricklayers, breadwinners, or cathedral builders?

The second teaching of Kahneman is the crucial distinction between what he calls the “experiencing self,” and the “remembering self.” There is life as we live it, in real time. That is the experiencing self. But then there is life as we remember it, what we are left with, what sticks with us. He gets at this same point by talking about the difference between experience and memory. What matters most to people’s emotional well being is what they remember after the event, not the experience of the event itself.

As I read this part of the book, I was thinking about a conversation I once had with a graduate of MIT. This person made that point that many undergrads at MIT, while they are there, for example in a first year physics or chemistry class with some of the brightest physics and chemistry students in the world, are not loving their experience in real time. Hard work. Intimidating fellow students. Daunting curves. This graduate shared the MIT aphorism that it takes ten years for nausea to turn into nostalgia. Or in Kahneman’s language, 10 years for the experiencing self, nausea, to be replaced by the remembering self, nostalgia. But it is the remembering self that we are left with and that matters.

And the reason that it is the remembering self that matters is Kahneman's third teaching: all of us have the need to see our life as a story, a good story, in which we are in his words a "decent hero." When we look at who and what is in our life, whom we love and who loves us, how we spend our time, our passion, our money, what does it all add up to? Our life: what story does it tell?

I thought of Kahneman's three core points as this week we encounter Abraham.

What is the objective reality of Abraham's story? The answer is: trial after trial, ordeal after ordeal. The experiencing self of Abraham could only have found excruciating pain.

There is the trial of being an immigrant, a stranger in a new and strange land. And when Abraham and Sarah get to that land, they confront a famine so severe that they have to go to Egypt, where she is promptly kidnapped and taken into the Pharaoh's harem.

There are the years of infertility with Sarah.

His nephew Lot is kidnapped by invading kings, and Abraham has to wage a war to get him back.

There is strident discord in his home between his wife Sarah and his concubine Hagar.

He has to circumcise himself at the age of 99.

He has to banish his son Ishmael and Hagar.

He is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, and is estranged from Isaac when he is prepared to do so.

Sarah dies, which leaves him all alone.

Broken relationships with his wife, his concubine, and his two sons. Brokenness. Loneliness.

This is Abraham's objective reality, the facts of his life. But the meaning of our life is not based on the raw facts. It is based on how we frame them, how we remember them, and how we see what they add up to.

How does Abraham frame his life? Each of these trials is part of his story as a covenantal partner of God, a man of faith, who believes that in the end his life will be a blessing, and that he will bring into this world descendants who will be a blessing. He sees not the bricks, but the cathedral. That is why, looking back, despite a life of real pain and loss, the remembering Abraham is described as *zaken v'saveah*, old and contented.

Kahneman and Abraham teach us that the hardest and most painful parts of our life can be redeemed if they add up to something, if they are part of a larger life story.

For example, you just lost your job. This is scary and unsettling, especially in this economy, especially with a family to feed. That is the reality. How can that be framed? What if it becomes part of the story of your reinvention: how losing a comfortable place where you were in a rut forced you, of necessity, to stretch and grow and learn and ultimately make a different and more satisfying type of contribution.

Somebody you love is struggling, physically, emotionally, or professionally. How can that be framed? What if it becomes part of the story of a relationship of a constant and nurturing presence? You are just so with that person. What if you are able to love them through it, so that they get to the other side?

There was a woman named Dorothy, and the facts of her life were hard. When she was just a girl, her parents' marriage turned violent. After their divorce, they sent her alone on a train far away to live with grandparents, who turned out to be severe disciplinarians. One year Dorothy went trick or treating, for which she was grounded in her room for a year. She was so

miserable in her grandparents' confines that she went out on her own at age 14 to work as a housekeeper, while attending high school at the same time. After she put herself through high school, she moved back to her mother, who had subsequently remarried, hoping for reconciliation and perhaps even that her mother and her second husband would pay for her college education. Instead, her own mother asked her to work as their housekeeper and was not interested in healing the broken relationship. Years later Dorothy was asked why she had returned to her mother in the first place, and she answered:

I'd hoped so hard that my mother would love me that I had to take the chance and find out. When she didn't I had nowhere else to go.

With nowhere else to go, she married a traveling salesman and settled down to raise a family of her own, one daughter and two sons. She was a stay-at-home mom.

These are the facts of her life. But our life is not *our facts*. Our life is *our story*. We redeem our facts by reframing them. We redeem our suffering by growing from it. What do all these facts add up to?

Here is what Dorothy did. She decided that she was going to be a wonderful mother, the kind of mother she never had; and she was going to teach her children about being tough, strong and determined. One day her daughter came home crying that she had been set upon by a group of children. Dorothy told her daughter you can't come running inside. You have to face things and show them you are not afraid.

That daughter did grow up to be tough, strong and determined. That daughter is Hillary Clinton, our Secretary of State. Her mother Dorothy Rodham died this week, but she redeemed the hard facts of her life by turning them into a story about resilience, strength and the ability to overcome.

Bricks. Those are just the facts of our life, and we all have them. Our question is, can we turn those bricks into a cathedral? Shabbat shalom.