



Parshat Lech Lecha
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Two Abrahams Emerge From Depression
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In her classic study of presidential leadership entitled *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, Doris Kearns Goodwin observes that Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Baines Johnson all shared something in common: each fell into a deep depression years before they became president, and each was able to recover to the point that they could become and function as president.

Take Abraham Lincoln. He became president in 1861 when he was 52 years old. But twenty years earlier, when he was 32, he became so depressed that friends worried he might take his own life. These friends “confiscated all knives, razors and scissors from his room.” p. 98.

He felt he had failed as a legislator for the Illinois legislature. He was dirt poor. He had been engaged to a woman named Mary Todd, but he worried: how can I support a wife and children when I am so poor? Despairing that he could ever support a family, he broke off the engagement, a source of pain and shame. He wrote his then law partner:

I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. p. 100.

Now we know the end of the story. We know that he emerged from this deep depression to live a life of unparalleled impact. How did he do it?

What is so striking is that Abraham Lincoln is not the only Abraham to emerge from a deep depression. Our father Abraham, *Avraham aveinu*, also emerges from a deep depression.

We sometimes think that the story of Abraham starts with this week's portion, Genesis 12, with the famous command of God: *lech lecha*, go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. But Abraham's story does not start here. His story starts at the end of last week's portion, and if we miss that, we miss the real story.

This is how Abraham is first introduced to us:

When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. *Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah*, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans.

In other words, Abraham had a younger brother named Haran who dies. This was an age when people lived a long time. When you read the genealogies of Genesis, you see people living 200, 400, 500 years. But Haran is not blessed with longevity. He dies young. And the Torah goes out of its way to say: *Vayamat haran al pnei terach aviv*, Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

What happens to the family when Haran dies? How does his father Terah react? In typically terse and understated prose, the Torah describes what happens next:

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.

Terah says I can't stay here anymore. We need a change of scenery. Ur of the Chaldeans is where my son Haran died. Ur of the Chaldeans is now haunted for me. Let's go somewhere else. Let's go to Canaan.

Can you imagine what it is like for Abram? My brother Haran died. My father Terah is mad with grief, with a sadness that I have no answer for. How can I be happy when my brother

is dead? How can I be happy when my father is suffering? How can I be happy when it is I who will be raising my brother Haran's son Lot, not my brother Haran?

Abram lives with shadows. The loss of his brother. The grief of his father. The weight and responsibility of raising his nephew.

Pause. Rabbi Shai Held has taught us that we cannot read Torah too slowly. A case in point is what happens next.

So Terah, Abram, Sarai, and nephew Lot leave the place where Haran died to go to Canaan. But they don't get to Canaan. They give up part way. They lose steam. They stop and settle in another town. The name of that town is Haran. In English, the name of the town is Haran, which is the same name as the name of the dead son. In Hebrew, the name of the dead son is Haran, with a heh, and the name of the town where they settle is Charan, with a chet.

Is this a coincidence? That a family fleeing grief over the death of Haran settles in a city named Haran, or Charan, and that the last words of the portion are: *Vayamat Terah b'charan*, Terah died in Haran.

I don't think this is a coincidence. The father died in Haran means that the father was never able to regain his mojo. That's why they stopped mid-way. That's why they gave up. That's why they ran out of energy. That's why they settled.

When the Torah reading ends last week, Abraham is far from home, he is neither here nor there, and now he carries not only the shadow of his dead brother Haran, but also the shadow of his dead father Terah, who succumbed to a broken heart.

When Abraham gets the call from God *lech lecha*, go forth, it is not in a vacuum. It is in the context of deep and multi-tiered loss.

Both Abrahams are in a place of deep darkness, and they both emerge. How do they do it?

Lincoln put it simply: “I must die or be better.” Lincoln emerged from his sick bed by committing himself to a period of deep and serious introspection and self-improvement. How can I get better? How can I learn more? He confessed: “I am not an accomplished lawyer.” He redoubled his efforts to improve. This is the part of Lincoln’s life when he would stay up until 2:00 am. with a candle near his bed. He was intentional about working to become a more effective trial lawyer. As a trial lawyer, he was famously able to connect with juries. He spoke *to* them, without notes, in simple language that they could understand. He soon developed the largest trial practice in central Illinois. And now that he was making a living, he was able to get his personal life on track. He married Mary Todd, they brought children into the world, he became a loving husband and father. How did he go from mediocre lawyer to the best lawyer in his area? He answered: “The key to success is work, work, work.”

Lincoln applied this same work ethic to the issue of slavery that was roiling the country. Through hours of study, he became the expert on slavery, its constitutional history, the meaning of the Missouri Compromise, and when it came time for the debates with Stephen Douglas, there was no more articulate voice in the nation on this most urgent issue in the nation.

What made Lincoln Lincoln was his ability to admit and to confront his failures honestly, and to work hard and intentionally to grow from them.

When we meet Abraham our father today, in Genesis 12, having buried his brother Haran in Ur of the Chaldeans, and having buried his father Terah in Haran, what makes Abraham Abraham is his ability to say I am not staying in this depressed place. By saying yes to *lech lecha*, Abraham did not only say yes to God’s command to go on a journey to the land that God

would show him. He said yes to life itself. My brother is gone. My father is gone. But I am here. And I am going to live.

Nobody gets to live only in the light.

When there is darkness, we have the light of two Abrahams to lead our way, the Abraham who founded our faith, and the Abraham who preserved our union, both of whom said: I feel the darkness. But I am not staying in the darkness. I am moving from darkness into light. I am going to live.

May we all do the same. Shabbat shalom.