

The God of Abraham

Parashat Lech Lecha

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Buber famously pointed out that Judaism's God is not the God of the philosophers. God is not an abstract concept arrived at through logic or intellectual contemplation. Instead, our understanding grows from personal experience and relationship.

According to Buber this very insight is conveyed daily in the opening blessing of the Amidah, in which we declare, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The blessing could have simply stated, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The unnecessary repetition of the words "The God of" in relation to each patriarch teaches that each of them developed their own relationship with God, and therefore, each had their own understanding of different aspects of God.

In my prayer practice this week, I found myself thinking a lot about the God of Abraham as well as drawing strength and inspiration from the spiritual lessons inherent to Abraham's life. Let me share three reflections.

The God of Constant Change:

Abraham's God commanded him to travel into the unknown ("the land that I will show you"). Abraham's sojourn required flexibility and a tolerance for change. Abraham had to embrace the journey as an end in itself. Indeed, even at the very end of that journey, as Abraham negotiates the purchase of the cave of Machpelah as a burial place for Sarah, Abraham describes himself as a resident alien to the Hittites. After all those years, Abraham is still caught in the tension of being an outsider/insider.

When we pray to the God of Lech Lecha, we prepare our own hearts for change, we open up towards greater flexibility, and we strive to acknowledge that we are never truly at home in this world.

The God of Patience:

The God of Abraham offers no immediate responses, miraculous remedies and cures to Abraham's pleas for a child. In their relationship with God, while painstakingly waiting for the promise of the birth of a child to be fulfilled, Abraham and Sarah's faith is tested again and again. The wait becomes a metaphor for all the covenantal promises made by God to Abraham and Sarah. Spiritual fulfillment takes time. You will sow in tears and you might reap in joy, and all along the way there will also be moments of laughter.

When we pray to the God who remembers Sarah and bequeathed Isaac to Abraham, we slow down our hearts and our racing mind and attempt to enter God's time.

The God of Resilience:

Throughout his life Abraham is tested ten times. A number of sources and commentators offer differing lists (see Pirkey Avot 5:3; Maimonides Commentary to the Mishnah ad loc., Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 26, Avot d'Rabbi Natan 33). Chief among these tests are God's commandments to Abraham to leave his homeland and to sacrifice his son. Other tests include Abraham's confrontation with Pharaoh, Abraham's battle with the four kings, and Abraham's troubled relationship with Hagar and Ishmael. At every twist and turn, Abraham must recommit himself to his life's mission. Every step of the way challenges Abraham to display resilience, courage, and strength.

When we pray to the God who tested Abraham ten times, we ask for strength in the face of challenges and upheavals, and we attempt to cultivate greater resilience instead of growing weary.

May the God who was present for our Father Abraham be with us during these dark times. May Abraham's flexibility, patience, and fortitude guide our lives, step by step, day by day.