

Parashat Lech-Lecha: I Will

Isaiah 51:1-2

"Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him."

This is the gospel: God is working to fill the world with righteousness, and He has chosen to use mankind--despite all our faults and failures--to join Him. Through this humble and seemingly insignificant couple, God is going to usher salvation and righteousness into this world. How? Through faith and obedience in His word. God's redemption of humanity does not require powerful armies or human ingenuity. God did not search to and fro among the earth to find the best and the brightest, the most powerful empire, nor did He call forth those who were wise and spiritual by the world's standards. God needed none of this. All He needed to initiate His plan were two people willing to hear and obey. After all, the road to righteousness and the plan of salvation had already been established since before the foundation of the world. It was faith that would set the plan in motion, and it was this steadfast couple who *heard* the call to "Get out" and *obeyed*. It was this step of faith that set a new course for humanity.

Though Abraham did not know with certainty where he was going, he trusted the certainty of the word he was following, because it was God's word. Generations later, the prophet Isaiah calls all of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and who desire to see and know the Lord, to follow Abraham and Sarah's example of obedience, an obedience driven by faith in God's unshakeable word. *"Look to the rock from which you were hewn,"* Isaiah tells us. Look to the rock from which you were cut. Abraham is the rock from which the righteous are cut. As we walk the journey of faith and obedience, we constantly reflect upon and emulate his example--his devotion, his walk, his perseverance, and his unwavering faithfulness to God's word. Likewise, Isaiah points our attention to Sarah as well: *"Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you."* Sarah, too, is the cistern from which we have been extracted; she is the mother who bore (hul) us. It's interesting that this word carries with it connotations of both joy and suffering--to twist, whirl, dance, writhe, fear, tremble, travail, be in anguish, to wait anxiously, and so forth. It is from faithful Sarah that we learn to navigate our faith. Her faith was forged by anxious waiting, uncertainly, long-suffering, and perseverance, yet we know in the end that it produced the joy, celebration, and laughter.

These are the forerunners of our faith; these are the parents from whom we have been brought forth. There has been much conversation surrounding what this entails. In fact, there were many in the time of Jesus who boastfully claimed to be descendants of Abraham, yet their spiritual fruit bore very little resemblance to his. Jesus responded to many of them, saying, *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham"* (John 8:39). This is the litmus test. Many today still put a lot of stock in being the physical descendants of Abraham, and physical lineage is certainly of value, but only if our spiritual lives are marked by the same characteristics as those we claim to descend from. John the Baptist and Paul shared the same warning to those who put their confidence in the flesh:

Luke 3:8-9

"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Romans 9:6

"For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham..."

Who, then, are the children of Abraham and Sarah? How can we know if we are truly cut from him who is the foundation of faith? Jesus tells us plainly: Abraham's children are those who do the *works* of Abraham. So, what are these works? The answer to this question is the purpose of our journey through the Torah, and it is the question that will guide our readings in the coming weeks. As we begin the journey in this week's portion, we find our initial answer at the outset of chapter 12, where we read, "**Now the Lord had said to Abraham:** *'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'* (12:1-3).

Before Abraham set one foot toward the promised land, we learn that his first "work" was this: listen. It is not Abraham who initiates the plan. The first words we read are "*And the Lord said to Abraham...*". In order to do the works of righteousness, Abraham needed to hear directly from the Author and Director of righteousness. This is beginning of his faith and our faith. Paul confirms this later in Romans: "*So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17). Did you catch that? Faith comes through hearing. Faith is not what we feel and conjure up in our hearts, but what God speaks. Every word produces an opportunity for faith. They were the foundation of Abraham's faith, and they became the foundation of all the faithful who followed, including Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

*"When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that **I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things...Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of these do you stone Me? ... If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me**" (John 8:28; 10:32, 37).*

Later, Jesus again says, "*For I have not spoken on My own authority; **but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak**" (John 12:49-50).*

All of their lives and their work were characterized by an attentive ear and a receptive heart. Many today profess to have faith yet do not immerse themselves in the very source of faith, which is the word of God. How is possible to have faith if we have stopped listening to God, stopped reading His word? Is it possible to have faith when our instruction is primarily from men

and women who decide what is necessary for us to hear, what is "relevant" in our times, and who have appointed themselves gatekeepers to truth, understanding, and correct doctrine? This has been the pattern of God's people since the beginning--we cease listening to God and turn to those who speak what they believe He means for us to hear and do. This was especially true of the religious leaders in Jesus' time. The leaders challenged Jesus, pushing what they believed God said and didn't say concerning those who belong to Him. Jesus' response is direct: "*He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God*" (**John 8:47**). These men set themselves up as God's emissaries, yet they closed their ears to the very one Whom they professed to follow--the One who had been speaking to Israel from the beginning.

Abraham heard the words, and through these words, God spoke His will to Abraham, His divine plan: "*I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all families of the earth shall be blessed*" (**12:2-3**). This has been the divine plan from the beginning, the gospel as we know it. God has certainly filled in the details through history, but this is still the blueprint, and the power of this blueprint can be summed up into the two words that God repeats in these promises:

Go to a land **I will** show you
I will make you a great nation
I will bless you
I will bless those who bless you
I will curse those who curse you
To your descendants **I will** give this land.

In the scriptures, patterns and repetitions are used for emphasis and are given to help us remember. There is no question God repeats these words because the faith of the righteous are built upon and sustained by hearing and trusting these two words. What did these words mean to Abraham? Paul tells us that Abraham believed that "*God, who gives life to the dead and **calls those things which do not exist as though they did** [I will]; who contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.'.. **He did not waver at the promise** [I will] **of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised** [I will] **He was also able** [I will] **to perform.**" (**Romans 4:17-21**). When Abraham heard the words "I will" he knew with certainty that God was affirming the certainty of the promises, though they were still in the distant future. In other words, Abraham didn't just cross his fingers and hope that God would bless him, multiply him, and grant him the land. He was convinced that once God spoke it, it was done. Even though Abraham never saw the fullness of God's promise in this lifetime, he was already certain that he would experience it in the world to come. Thus, where most people's faith would crumble in doubt and despair, he did not waver in belief but was strengthened in faith. From the world's perspective, men like Abraham are fools, because when there appears to be no hope, no future, no kingdom, no fulfilled promise, and plenty of reason to walk away, their hope comes alive and their faith gains strength. It is because Abraham and Sarah possessed this level faith that Hebrews tells us that, "*these all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off **were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth***" (**11:13**).*

So, what evidence do we have that Abraham possessed this level of faith? How can we know that we are moving toward this level of faith? God helps us by testing us, because He, too, wants to know if we trust His "I will". Abraham's first test was this: "*Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house to a land that I will show you*" (**Genesis 12:1**). Immediately, God put Abraham to the test. This was the only way to know if Abraham truly believed that God would perform what He promised. Not only that, but will he believe it with such certainty and conviction to put his life, his future, his safety, and his assurance on the line? What was Abraham's response? Almost immediately, we read that "*Abraham departed as the Lord had spoken to him...*" (**12:4**). Like Abraham, God will test our faith as well. This is certain. Like Abraham, He tells us where we, too, must start: "*Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land I will show you*" (**12:1**). If we truly believe His "I will" then we pack up our things and depart--leave your home, your family, your security, your certainty, your worldly attachments, your plans, all of it, and follow this: "I will". Just saying this stirs up consternation in people.

Many of us profess to "believe" in our hearts that God will do as He promised, yet we struggle--and often refuse--to believe that God would actually call us to abandon those things that are near and dear to us. We have faith, but is it a faith we are willing to put our lives, our future, our time, our relationships, or our security on the line for? We profess faith, but is it a faith safe within the confines of religion, tradition, and prefabricated theology? Let us ask ourselves. Are we ascribing to a faith that may challenge us a little but still grants us permission to indulge in all sorts of worldly comforts and pleasures? In other words, does it permit us to follow God from the comforts of Babylon? Who wouldn't want this faith-- a faith that promises immunity, while reassuring us that certain aspects of our lives are of no concern to God? This may be an ideal faith to some, but it is not the faith of Abraham. His was a faith attuned to one Voice, and when this Voice spoke and said "I WILL," Abraham listened. These words produced a radical faith in Abraham.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when He was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8) He did not know where he was going, but he certainly knew who and what he was following.

I WILL.