

# SEFER BEREISHIS: A STUDY OF TEXT, TRADITION & THEOLOGY

## AVRAHAM'S SELECTION (2) & MISSION

(1) **Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey* (NJ, 2008), pp. 19, 41-43, 45-48**

The story of Abraham's early years - how he found God - is not recorded in the Bible ... We would have liked the *Humash* to tell us about his sleepless nights when he was struggling with himself, when he began to rebel against pagan society, when he left that society. But we know nothing about him until a mature age....

In the Aggadic literature there is a controversy concerning the age at which Abraham made the great discovery (Gen. Rabbah 30:8) ... Maimonides apparently thought that the 2 opinions are complementary and not contradictory. The search began at an early age - he did not fix the age precisely. However the discovery or recognition of God occurred later. Maimonides wanted Abraham to spend some forty years searching, exploring, and questing for God ... Abraham experienced the metaphysical pull very early, at the age of three. On the other hand, to say that Abraham found God or recognized God at that young age would be tantamount to an admission that recognition of God is an easy matter ... the search began while Abraham was still an infant; the meeting took place decades later...

There were 4 basic differences between Abraham's searching and the searching in which other children engage ... these differences also characterize the unique traits of our historical experience. First, Abraham was persistent. The hostile environment did not nip in the bud his inner activities ... from age three to age forty, he restlessly sought the truth - 37 years! ... Second, there was continuity between Abraham's experiences ... even as a child [he] linked up experiences ... he retained a living memory and that is what later helped him develop a new philosophy ... Third, unlike other children, Abraham was searching not for a fantasy world but for reality, true being, for an explanation of cosmic causality and regularity ... Finally, Abraham searched not only for theory ... but for a practical way of life ... Abraham fought paganism not only in the name of truth but also in the name of justice and kindness to his fellow man...

We can visualize the excitement and the tremor that Abraham experienced when he finally came to the conclusion that there is, behind the millions of stars and flying nebulae, behind the fringes of the orderly and the dynamic universe ... an omniscient, omnipotent, eternal and infinite Being Who created all and sustains His creation. Abraham, in a feat of ecstatic joy, in a state of rapture, completely intoxicated with love and longing, would have fallen on his face and fervently prayed. "Dear God, please show me a sign that You are there, beyond everything, outside of time and space. Please reveal your majesty and splendor. Please say one word to me ... However the Almighty did not respond to Abraham. Abraham encountered an awesome silence, the silence of eternity. The mystery deepened ... cynical pagan opponents asked him: Why doesn't the Almighty answer you? However, Abraham was not discouraged ... Abraham's faith was not affected by God's silence and transcendence. He served God, teaching and proclaiming a new morality.

**בראשית רבה (פרשה לט:א)**

לך לך מארצך ... ר' יצחק פתח (תהלים מה) שמעי בת וראי והטי אונך ושכחי עמך ובית אביך, א"ר יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת, אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה, כך לפי שהיה אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה וא"ל אני הוא בעל העולם

**R. Chasdai Crescas, Or Hashem (1:3, ch. 6), in C. Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought* (NJ, 2008), p. 223**

The Sages said in the Midrash: "This may be compared to a man ... 'Is it possible that the building lacks someone to look after it?' The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, 'I am the guide, the sovereign of the universe.'" This means that while he was inclined to the truth, he did not remove himself from all uncertainty until God bestowed his light upon him, that is prophecy.

**(2) רמב"ן (בראשית יב:א)**

לך לך - להנאתך ולטובתך ... לשון רש"י. ואין צורך, כי משפט הלשון בן, "הגשם חלף הלך לו (שהש"ר ב יא) ...

**Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, pp. 49-51**

When Abraham turned 75, decades after he discovered God, he heard the voice of the Almighty for the first time ... *Lekh lekha*, go forth from your land ... According to Nahmanides, we translate "*lekh lekha*" as "Go forth" and nothing else; there are no semantics to the word; it is simply an idiom. But according to Rashi, the semantics of *lekha* means "for your sake, for your benefit." Migration, moving from place to place uproots a person and has a negative effect on his renown and wealth ... he is a stranger and does not understand the language ... the experience is usually destructive. But in this case, God said, your migration to Canaan will be for your benefit and welfare. There I will make you a great nation - but only there ... A further meaning of *lekh lekha* is "Go alone." God's intent was to separate Abraham, to break up his life and have him forget his past and start anew. The Midrash (Gen Rabbah 39:1) tells us that when R. Ytzhak read this verse he always used to cite a verse in Psalms (45:11) "... and forget your people and your ancestral home." He felt that this verse alludes to Abraham. "*Lekh lekha*" commanded a psychological break with Abraham's past, with his ancestral family and tradition. God meant for him to let out those memories.

**(3) אבן עזרא (בראשית יא:כט)**

... והעד שאמר הכתוב ללכת ארצה כנען (ברא' יא לא). וכאשר בא תרח אל חרן, ישר המקום בעיניו, וישב שם ומת. ואין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה:

**אבן עזרא (בראשית יב:א)**

לך לך, השם צוה לאברהם ועודנו באור כשדים, שיעזוב ארצו ומקום מולדתו גם בית אביו.

**רמב"ן (בראשית יב:א)**

מארצך וממולדתך – כתב רש"י ... ורבי אברהם פירש ... ואיננו נכון, כי אם היה כן היה אברם עיקר הנסיעה מבית אביו במצות האלהים, ותרח אביו ברצון נפשו הלך עמו, והכתוב אמר (לעיל יא לא) ויקח תרח את אברם בנו, יורה כי אברם אחרי אביו ובעצתו יצא מאור כשדים ללכת ארצה כנען ...

**מדרש תנחומא (שמות ס"י יח)**

רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר כל מי שנכפל שמו הוא בשני עולמות, נח נח אברהם אברהם יעקב יעקב משה משה שמואל שמואל פרץ פרץ, אמר לו והרי כתיב אלה תולדות תרח תרח, אמר להם אף הוא יש לו חלק בשני עולמות ולא נאסף אבינו אברהם עד שנתבשר שעשה תרח אביו תשובה שנאמר (בראשית טו) "ואתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום," אמר אברהם לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע כל מה שסגלתי מעשים טובים בעולם הזה אני הולך אצל אבותי, בשרו הקב"ה חייד שעשה אביך תשובה לפיכך נכפל שמו.

**Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, pp. 52-5**

Ibn Ezra says that Terah went in response to the divine command that Abraham received from God ... If we accept this interpretation we can solve another riddle. Our Sages stated that Terah repented and embraced the new faith his son was preaching ... However, what we miss is the story of Terah's conversion ... when did it happen ... According to the Aggadah, Terah was the one who informed King Nimrod of Abraham's abusive and blasphemous treatment of the hallowed images and idols ... Later - I don't know how long it took - the same Terah saw the light and realized that Abraham was right ... this was a tremendous change in Terah. What prompted Terah to act so strangely ... Surely the great revolution in Terah's thinking was precipitated by doubts, soul-searching, and reappraisal. In a word, it was the transvaluation of a *ba'al teshuvah* that was responsible for the decision to abandon Ur in Chaldea ... when the command of *lekh lekha* came and Abraham began to pack his bags he realized to his great surprise that his father's bags had already been packed long before. Father and son, hitherto locked in mortal combat, joined hands and together started out on a great march towards Canaan. Nachmanides challenges the position taken by Ibn Ezra ... I believe the question can be easily resolved ... Since he [Abraham] felt obligated to give him respect and to revere him, he made it appear to outsiders that the one who taken the initiative was not himself but Terah ... In spite of his good intentions ... Terah did not succeed. He did not reach the destination ... he had not succeeded in transforming himself totally. He still had great fears and doubts ....