

“From Abraham to Auschwitz to Washington”  
Lech Lecha 2003

With this week’s Torah portion, the story of the Jewish people begins. Its beginning is a dramatic call to a lonely man of faith, Abram. Along with his wife Sarai, and his family, he sets out for an uncertain destination, a new land, a promised land, a land of hope and opportunity. Without any specific assurances at the time of the initial call, he sets out to fulfill his destiny and calling.

Later, God assures him that he will be a blessing, and that the nations of the world will be blessed through him. Those who bless him will be blessed, and those that curse him and his offspring will be cursed.

There are many times when I think about this passage. It actually is more prominent in Christian theology than in Jewish theology. There are times when it appears to be true, and there are times when one cannot help but wish that the prophecy would be fulfilled.

An examination of the history of the world, reveals most assuredly that in almost every instance the first sign of the decline of a great nation or civilization was when it began to mistreat and expel its Jews. The demise of those who mistreated the children of Abraham inevitably followed.

I especially reflected on this theme last week, when I attended the Reunion of Holocaust Survivors at the Holocaust Museum here in Washington DC, on the occasion of the museum’s tenth anniversary.

I thought about Abraham and his journey. I wondered, if he only knew, and incidentally our midrash tells us he did know the fate of his descendants, at least in biblical times, if he only knew, would he have still accepted the call to become a follower of God and to establish a people.

Benjamin Meed, the driving force behind the founding of the museum spoke in his opening remarks last Sunday about the resilience of the human spirit. The fact that the survivors and their offspring have gone on to live productive lives is evidence of what he means. A few years ago, a major business magazine, I think it was Forbes profiled the achievements and accomplishments of a number of Holocaust survivors.

Elie Wiesel called the efforts of the survivors to preserve the story of what happened a victory over forgetfulness. It saved the victims from a second death. Although the victims often felt abandoned in life, they went on to rebuild their lives. The museum, the telling of the stories, the memorials and ceremonies are all meant to insure that what happened to their families and the loved ones they lost would be chronicled and not forgotten.

I saw people seeking friends from their villages. Flora Singer, a Holocaust survivor, and local resident, whom many of you know, told me she found someone who knew the family who helped her escape. For me the most touching moment came when I saw an elderly man I know. When I asked how he was doing, he simply looked at me and said, with a smile, “I am celebrating our victory.”

It reminded me of the story told in Yaffa Eliach’s book, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust about the German soldiers who commanded a group of Jews to sing a Yiddish song for them. Standing around mocking them the Jews, were silent, until one started to sing, a familiar tune, but slightly changed the words. All quickly joined in and sang, “We will outlive you. We will outlive you.”

I subscribe to the teachings of the recently deceased great Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, with whom I had the privilege of studying when I took a course one summer during college at Hebrew University. He said that we Jews who are alive today must not grant Hitler a posthumous victory. He formulated what he referred to as the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment: It is our responsibility and obligation to deny Hitler the victory he sought. Since the goal of the Nazis was the eradication of Judaism and the death of the Jewish people, Fackenheim said, we must not allow him to achieve what he sought to accomplish.

In the evening there was a wonderful concert of Jewish music, primarily of Yiddish music. The demise of this rich wonderful language of our people, which flourished for over a thousand years, and was the means of expression of our hopes, longings and agony is lost. I must confess, that it saddens me that I only understand a bissel. Appropos to the theme of the day, the concert concluded with a rousing rendition of Am Yisrael Chai, the people of Israel lives.

And that is the message of the gathering, as well as of this week's torah portion. The people of Israel still lives. Am Yisroel chai. It lives when we observe the mitzvoth. It lives when we practice Judaism in our homes, synagogue and community. It lives when we are proud of our heritage and people. It lives when we study its teachings and are inspired by its message. It lives when we attend services on a regular basis. It lives when Judaism is passed on to our children.

May we continue the journey of Abraham.  
Amen

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