

## Lech Lecha 5775, Why Should We Care about Ancient Stories?

Rabbi Michael Safra

A couple of my students are here, but it's okay because they know what I am about to say is true. Tuesday night's Confirmation class didn't go so well. In fact, you might say it bombed. I calculate that I've taught more than 365 Confirmation classes over the past 12-plus years, so my average is still pretty good; but on Tuesday the students challenged me with their questions and I wasn't at all satisfied with my responses. Their essential challenge? Why should we want to spend time studying what ancient Rabbis or the Torah had to say about anything? We live in modern times; why should we care about something written 2 or 3,000 years ago? Why can't we just talk about current events?

As the teacher, I kind of invited the questions; but I was still taken by surprise. I usually think of myself as a modern guy; I love subversive readings of Torah text; and I am a historical agnostic, meaning that I have doubts about whether most of the events we read about every week actually took place, and in any case it just doesn't matter much to me whether or not they did. But here I was asked to explain why I take these texts so seriously, why I dedicate my life to studying and understanding them, and – the hardest part – it's fine if I want to care about this stuff, but why should they?

Lucky for me (and lucky for you?), I have another chance to answer the question. I invite you to turn in your Chmuashim to page 72. In *parashat* Lech Lecha, we began the story of Abraham, the first Jew (or at least the first monotheist), so if I can find any truth or meaning in this narrative, that would go a long way towards explaining why ancient texts should matter to us.

Before we read the text, I can say that my first answer is that this text is "ours"; the Torah is the centerpiece of our national Jewish culture, to the point that the statement "I am a Jew" is virtually impossible without it. We often quote Hillel's dictum: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" In the modern world we hardly need to defend the sovereignty of the self and the centrality of the individual. "But," he continues, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" Without the history, without the literature, without the foundational documents. .... These stories establish my identity. Why do I care? Because this is me.

Okay, so beginning on verse 10 on p. 72:

<sup>10</sup>There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. <sup>11</sup>As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. <sup>12</sup>If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. <sup>13</sup>Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

<sup>14</sup>When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was.

<sup>15</sup>Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken

into Pharaoh's palace. <sup>16</sup>And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

<sup>17</sup>But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. <sup>18</sup>Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? <sup>19</sup>Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!" <sup>20</sup>And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.

This is *my* story, but it is strange. And the fact that it is repeated twice more – once again with Abraham and Sarah and another time with Isaac and Rebecca – doesn't help much. But can we derive any relevant meaning?

For the Rabbis of the third century, the answer was that stories like this matter because history is cyclical; history repeats itself. "מעשה אבות סימן לבנים, The actions of the parents become typical for the children." So the Midrash Rabbah makes connections between what happened to Abraham and what happened to his descendants:

- About Abraham it is written: "There was a famine in the land"; and how did Jacob's children get to Egypt to be enslaved? Genesis chapter 45: "For two and a half years there has been famine in our land."
- On p. 72, "Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there" (לגור שם), and in chapter 47, the brothers say to Pharaoh, "We have come to the land to sojourn here, לגור בארץ באנו."
- Abram says to Sarai, "When the Egyptians see you ... they will kill me and let you live"; and what does Pharaoh decree? "Every son that is born shall be cast into the river, and every daughter shall be saved alive".
- When Pharaoh discovers Abram's scheme, he "put men in charge of Abram and they sent him off ... and he went on his journeys." And in Exodus after the tenth plague, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night and said, "Up, depart, you and the Israelites with you. Go! And the Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country ... And these are the journeys of the people of Israel."

The Midrash gives other examples. The literary term is typology. Don't just read the story for the event it describes. This type of a person's travels and challenges in a foreign land foreshadows the theme of Exodus, which is central to one of our most important holidays: We were strangers; the Egyptians dealt harshly with us; but the Lord heard our plea and brought us out of the Land of Egypt and towards the Land of Israel." It helps that this is the theme of all of Jewish history: We were strangers – in Babylonia, Spain, Africa, Germany, Poland, Russia – but we never lost faith in God; we never lost the connection to our homeland; we remembered who we were, and that is why we survived and thrived.

Most people wouldn't characterize life in America as "exile" – and November is a particularly patriotic month. But we are still a minority; we are still in many ways unique.

The Abraham story speaks more universally to the individual as well. I think this episode with Sarai and Pharaoh is a setback, a misjudgment on Abram's part. There are other setbacks – a quarrel with his nephew Lot, a war, the fact that he has no children. The narrative becomes a lesson that life doesn't move in a straight line. Personal journeys – like national ones – have curves and bumps; there are good days and bad days; anyone who has experienced an illness knows that some days you move forward and other days you move back, there are inevitable crises of faith, but we must strive to remain focused on our goals and our hopes and our dreams because we are not the first to experience setback.

It was Ecclesiastes who said: "There is nothing new under the sun, אין חדש תחת השמש ... Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, 'Look, this one is new!' – but it already occurred long ago, in ages that went by before us."

Sometimes taking Torah seriously means exercising humility. We want to imagine that our lives are categorically different, that we have everything we could possibly need right in front of us, that we know more and are morally superior to the ones who came before us. We need Torah to remind us that technologies have changed, situations have changed, but our way is not necessarily better than what came before us. We are living a new chapter, but it is the same story that began thousands of years before us and will continue long after we are gone.

On Shabbat Lech Lecha, as we return to the foundational story of our history, let us strive to inject ourselves into the ancient experiences of our people. Let us accept the responsibility of inheritors of a tradition – to preserve, to study, to interpret, to improve ... but never to forget or reject. Why should we care about the stories of Abraham? Because they are our stories; Abraham is us. To quote the Haggada (a few months early): "בכל דור ודור, In every generation, we must view ourselves as though we personally came out, as though we already experienced the struggles and the cycles and the vicissitudes of our history.

Shabbat Shalom.