



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

לך לך תש"ף  
Lech Lecha 5780

## A Palace in Flames

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Avraham models for us that we must partner with God to fight evil through justice and compassion.**



### PARSHAT LECH LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

God speaks to Avraham for the first time and tells him to leave his father's house and the land of his birth and childhood. Together with his wife Sarah they leave without hesitation and set off on their journey to a new land and a new kind of faith – and so begins the adventure of Jewish history, with the Land of Israel as its central focus.

Avraham and Sarah experience some setbacks on the way. There is a famine in Israel and they have to go to Egypt for a time. Then there is an argument between Avraham and his nephew Lot, and the two part ways.

When Lot is captured in a local war, Avraham fights a battle to free him.

God then makes a covenant (an agreement) with Avraham, promising him that he will have a child who will be the next link in the generations that will become the Jewish people. The sign of this covenant is Brit Milah.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you think of any stories from Avraham's life that show us why God thought Avraham should be the first Jew?



### THE CORE IDEA

Why Avraham? That is the first question we must ask. He is the key figure in the story of our faith, the father of our nation, the hero of monotheism, important not only to Jews but to Christians and Muslims also. Yet there seems to be nothing in the Torah's description of his early life to give us a hint as to why he was singled out to be the founder of our faith.

This is very strange. The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to why God chose Noach: "Noach was a righteous man, blameless in his generations; Noach walked with God." It also gives us a clear indication as to why God chose Moshe. We see him as a young man, both in Egypt and Midian, intervening whenever he saw injustice. These were obviously extraordinary people. There is no such suggestion in the case of Avraham. So the Sages, commentators and philosophers, through the ages were forced to speculate, to

fill in the glaring gap in the narrative, offering their own suggestions as to what made Avraham different.

There are two primary explanations. The first is *Avraham the Iconoclast, the Breaker of Idols*. Avraham's father Terach was an idol worshipper. According to the Midrash, he made and sold idols. One day Avraham smashed all the idols, leaving the stick he used in the hand of the biggest idol. When his father queried who had broken his gods, Avraham blamed the biggest idol. "Are you making fun of me?" demanded his father. "Idols cannot do anything." "In that case," asked the young Avraham, "why do you worship them?"

Avraham was the first person to challenge the idols of the age and Jews, believers or otherwise, have often been iconoclasts (willing to confront accepted beliefs). Some of the most revolutionary thinkers – certainly in the modern age – have been Jews. They had the courage to challenge the

accepted wisdom, think new thoughts and see the world in new ways. It is as if, deep in our cultural intellectual DNA, we had internalised what the Sages said about Avraham *ha-Ivri*, “the Hebrew,” that it meant he was on one side and all the rest of the world on the other.

The second view is set out by Rambam in the Mishnah Torah: *Avraham the Philosopher*. In an age when people had lost their way and fallen into idolatry, one person stood against the trend, the young Avraham who, when still a child, asked: “How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no mover? Rambam notes that “He had no teacher, no one to instruct him ... until he attained the way of truth and knew that there is One God ... When Avraham was forty years old he recognised his Creator.” According to this, Avraham was the first person

to think his way through to God as the force that moves the sun and all the stars.

What was unique about Avraham according to both these approaches is that he saw the world differently from everyone else, and had the courage to ask the questions, find the truth, and live his life accordingly.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Have you ever experienced peer pressure to think one way but really believed the opposite? Did you find the courage to be different?
2. Is Judaism "iconoclastic" today (i.e. does it have different values to the wider society)? Can you think of any examples?



#### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*In the late summer of 1999, I was in Pristina making a television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. Outside every church was a NATO tank. At the start of the conflict it had been the Serbian Christians who had attacked mosques. Now they feared reprisals from the returning refugees. The mood was tense. Murders were taking place every night. Revenge was in the air. The most important task was to establish order and a return to civil peace.*

*I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what ‘my people’ had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city’s 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city’s welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. This he credited to the Jewish people. Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven.*

*The story, as I later uncovered it, was fascinating. In the early days of the conflict, the State of Israel had, along with many international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. Immediately they noticed something others had missed. The aid agencies were concentrating, not unnaturally, on the adults. There was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running around and feeling lost.*

*The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Virtually every youth group in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events, and everything else they could think of to make their temporary exile feel like a summer holiday. At all levels it was an extraordinary effort. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith. Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children’s organisation. It was in the wake of this that ‘the Jewish people’ – Israel, the American-based ‘Joint’ and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.*

*That episode taught me many things: the power of chessed, acts of kindness; the beauty and healing power of kindness extended across the borders of faith; and the way young people can rise to great moral achievements if we set them a challenge. The entire relief effort in Kosovo was a wonderful convergence of many people and agencies, from many faiths and nations.*

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How are the "Jewish people" featured in this story continuing the legacy of Avraham their ancestor?
2. How is this story connected to the ‘Palace in Flames’ Midrash that is quoted in *Thinking More Deeply*?



#### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There is a third explanation of Avraham was chosen by God, and it is set out in the Midrash on the opening verse of our parsha:

*“The Lord said to Abram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house . . .” To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. He wondered, “Is it possible that the palace lacks an*

owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Avraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the Ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."

This is a mysterious Midrash. It is far from obvious what it means. In my book *A Letter in the Scroll* (published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now*) I argued that Avraham was struck by the contradiction between the order of the universe – the palace – and the disorder of humanity – the flames. How, in a world created by a good God, could there be so much evil? If someone takes the trouble to build a palace, do they leave it to the flames? If someone takes the trouble to create a universe, does He leave it to be disfigured by His own creations? On this reading, what moved Avraham was not philosophical harmony but moral discord. For Avraham, faith began in cognitive dissonance. There is only one way of resolving this dissonance: by protesting evil and fighting it.

That is the poignant meaning of the Midrash when it says that the owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." It is as if God were saying to Avraham: *I need you to help Me to put out the flames.*

How could that possibly be so? God is all-powerful. Human beings are all too powerless. How could God be saying to Avraham, I need you to help Me put out the flames?

The answer is that *evil exists because God gave humans the gift of freedom.* Without freedom, we would not disobey God's laws. But at the same time, we would be no more than robots, programmed to do whatever our Creator designed us to do. Freedom and its misuse are the theme of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the generation of the Flood.

Why did God not intervene? Why did He not stop the first humans eating the forbidden fruit, or prevent Cain from killing Abel? Why did the owner of the palace not put out the flames?

Because, by giving us freedom, He bound Himself from intervening in the human situation. If He stopped us every time we were about to do wrong, we would have no freedom. We would never mature, never learn from our errors, never become God's image. We exist as free agents only because of God's *tzimtzum*, His self-limitation. That is why, within the terms with which He created humankind, He cannot put out the flames of human evil.

He needs our help. That is why He chose Avraham. *Avraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God.* Avraham was the man who said: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" Where Noah accepted, Avraham did not. Avraham is the man of whom God said, "I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." Avraham was the father of a nation, a faith, a civilisation, marked throughout the ages by what Albert Einstein called "an almost fanatical love of justice."

**I believe that Avraham is the father of faith, not as acceptance but as protest – protest at the flames that threaten the palace, the evil that threatens God's gracious world. We fight those flames by acts of justice and compassion that deny evil its victory and bring the world that is a little closer to the world that *ought to be.***

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does Judaism today continue the legacy of Avraham, demonstrating "faith as protest" and partnering with God to "put out the fire" of evil?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Avraham's journey begins... the easy answer would be to deny the reality of either God or evil. Then the contradiction would disappear and we could live at peace with the world. But to be a Jew is to have the courage to refuse easy answers and to reject either consolation or despair. God exists; therefore life has a purpose. Evil exists; therefore we have not yet achieved that purpose. Until then we must travel, just as Avraham and Sarah travelled, to begin the task of shaping a different kind of world."*

***A Letter in the Scroll, pages 57-58 (published in Great Britain as Radical Then, Radical Now, p.55.)***



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What are the three different approaches given to answer the question, "Why Avraham?" Which of the three do you find most inspiring?
2. What do the palace and the fire represent in the Midrash quoted? Are they a contradiction to each other?
3. Who has to put out the fire? How?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Although we don't have any firm information on Avraham's early life before he was chosen, this question allows you to retroactively answer the question by searching through the many stories about his life after he received the call from God. There are so many directions this conversation could go in, but if we limit our answer to just the themes explored in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, then the stories when Avraham challenged his father about idol-worship, and argued with God to save *Sodom and Gomoroh*, and the *Akeidah* (binding of Yitzchak) are good places to start. Avraham was also known for his *chesed* (kindness) and hospitality, as well as his commitment to education. These are all indicators of the qualities God saw in Avraham when He chose him.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. We all experience peer pressure, children and adults alike. We also experience pressure from the norms of the society in which we live (which is also a form of peer pressure), and these are sometimes at odds with our religious or personal values. Finding real examples from our lives helps us to understand the courage and commitment that Avraham models for us.
2. Judaism's values are often at odds with the norms of society. For example, our society is becoming more and more individualistic, and while Judaism does honour the rights of the individual (and in fact brought this idea to the world in an age where this was unheard of) Judaism also values family, community and peoplehood.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The efforts made by these young Jews to help children in a terrible situation in a war-ravaged country is a great example of continuing the legacy of Avraham, who partnered God in fighting the evil in the world, making the world a more perfect place (see *Thinking More Deeply*).
2. The palace in flames in the Midrash represents the evil and chaos created by humans in the world that God created. This story takes place in a backdrop that describes just that. When Avraham asks why no one is putting out the fire, God extends His hand and says 'Join Me in this task.' This story shows young Jews fighting the flames of war and disaster, helping the victims to rebuild their lives.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Jews have always been at the forefront of improving the world, making it a better place for humanity to live, through innovation, fighting for justice, and social activism. Such actions are all set out in the core values of the Torah.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The three approaches are:
  - a. *Avraham the iconoclast, the breaker of idols*
  - b. *Avraham the philosopher*
  - c. *Avraham, God's partner in Tikkun Olam (fixing the world)*
2. The palace is the orderly and beautiful world God created. The fire is the chaos (and evil) humans create. Some (fundamental religious thinkers for example) believe there is no contradiction because God creates the fire, for reasons we sometimes cannot understand, but normally to punish us. Some (for example atheist scientists) believe there is no contradiction because there is no order to the universe, only random chance. Judaism refuses to say there is no injustice and evil (it is created by our exercising freewill) while still believing that there is order to the universe (God as Creator, who acts in history).
3. It is humanity's job to join God in partnership to put out the flames. The Torah is a manual on building a society based on the values that will help us to put out the flames and bring the world to a state of redemption (*Tikkun Olam*).