

Lech Lecha

What's Required for a Leader

The main problem discussed in the *Torah* portion *Lech L'cha* is Abraham's concern about a successor. Abraham was worried that the message which he had to give to the world would be lost after he died. He was childless, and he desperately wanted to find a successor.

At first he thought that Lot would be his successor. Lot followed him out of Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan and even protected Abraham when he was forced by famine to go to Egypt. Lot sacrificed his home and possessions by following Abraham. He truly would be a worthy successor to him. But G-d said "No" because all Lot thought about was making money. Lot put making money over everything else.

Not that Lot was going to break a law or steal openly in order to obtain money, but he wasn't beyond finagling a little. He felt there was nothing wrong with his shepherds grazing on the Canaanites' land. After all, hadn't G-d promised all this land to Abraham? He wasn't beyond living in such a place as Sodom and Gomorrah, even when he knew that the people were of bad character and that his children would be endangered. After all, you could make more money there. Lot wasn't fit for leadership because he put making money above everything else.


Abraham then thought that the leadership should pass to Eliezer, his faithful steward, the man who ran his household and affairs so smoothly and efficiently. He was a perfect manager. But Eliezer had no imagination. He only knew how to take orders and to carry them out. He didn't have the sufficient flexibility and knowledge to know how to lead. He was too rigid. He would not do to carry on the leadership role.

Abraham then thought that the leadership would go to his son by Hagar, Ishmael--but he was a wild man. He had imagination and initiative, but he got angry quickly. He didn't know how to control his temper, and he was jealous and envious. He wasn't fit to be a leader.

Leadership was to pass to Yitzchok. "*Yitzchok*" in Hebrew means "laughter." Yitzchok had a sense of humor. He knew how to deal with people. He was quiet but firm. He did not put making money above everything else. He had initiative, and he knew how to control his temper. These are the requirements that are needed by a leader: a leader must know how to

appreciate everyone and not bear grudges; he must have initiative; and he must be scrupulously honest.

Normalcy, The Covenant, and Being Different

 One of the great problems that has always faced the Jewish people is the problem of being different. It is hard to be different, and many times we Jews would prefer not to be different. One of the underlying themes of modern Jewish history has been, how can we Jews become normal? How can we Jews stop being different? As Tevya said in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “G-d, I am glad that You made us the chosen people, but couldn’t You choose somebody else now?”

When the enlightenment grew strong in Germany in the early 1800’s, many Jews felt that they wanted to participate in it because they felt that Christian Europe had now progressed to such an extent that it now paralleled most of the beliefs that we Jews had always had. These Jews decided that they now wanted to integrate fully into European society and become normal, become just like everybody else. By 1850 almost half of the Jews of Germany had converted to Christianity, not because they believed in Christianity, but because they wanted to participate in the life of western Europe and become normal people. Even Theodore Herzl, when he was a young man, wrote in his diary that the best thing that all Jews could do would be to assimilate. The Dreyfus trial, of course, changed him forever. He realized that even after Jews had given up their Judaism, they still would be singled out and not treated normally. After all, Captain Dreyfus was a very assimilated Jew who had almost no contact at all with Judaism or the Jewish people. Herzl then felt that the only way that the Jews could become a normal people and be treated like everyone else would be to have their own land. He believed that the reason Jews were persecuted and hounded was because they did not have their own land like the other peoples, but if they would have their own land, they would be treated like a normal people. His motivation for founding the Zionist movement was not to create a Jewish state so that the Jewish spirit could flourish and make its unique contributions to the world, but his motivation was so that the Jews could be treated like normal people and anti-Semitism would disappear.

He, of course, was wrong. If anything, since the founding of the Jewish State, anti-Semitism has increased. The whole Arab world has become much more anti-Semitic, as has much of the Moslem world. Anti-Israel feelings, which is just another name for anti-Semitism, is rampant in our universities and among many of the elite in western Europe. Israel certainly has not solved the problem of anti-Semitism.

Paradoxically, even those Jews who want to be normal, who have shed many distinctive Jewish traits and who have even changed many outward Jewish rituals, have not gained the acceptance of their neighbors by doing so because when Jews say they want to be normal, that means that they want to be normal according to the standards of the country club set, the River Oaks crowd. They want to be recognized as high achievers in the arts and sciences and business, in commerce, in government, and in all the important fields of human endeavor. This means that in almost every field Jews stick out, even though they have shed their Jewishness. This means that we again attract hatred from those whom we have successfully competed against and, in effect, ousted from high positions, and from the poor who envy us and think we have gained our wealth and high positions because of trickery and deceit, and even from the middle class, who feel that we are uppity and not concerned with their problems. The truth of the matter is that we Jews are not normal people and every time we try to act like we are normal people, we end up in disaster. True, some of us manage to assimilate and disappear, but enough of us still stand out to attract the ire of our neighbors. Even those Jews who were forcibly converted in Spain were still pointed out as Jews by their Spanish neighbors and considered so even to this day.

In Israel today we find many who echo the philosophy of Herzl and who think that the purpose of the Jewish State is to make us normal. They try to pretend that if only we will be like all other states, the world will love us and care for us, but the world demands from us things they will never demand from another state. Nobody in Europe demands that Russia and Poland give back to Germany the territories that they seized after World War II after they fought a defensive war, but the whole world demands that Israel give back the territories we won in 1967 after we fought a defensive war. The whole world demands that Israel maintain the highest standards

of human rights for all peoples, even sworn enemies, while they do not demand that of Israel's neighbors or the PLO. The whole world demands that Arabs who live in the State of Israel be allowed full rights and even, as they are doing now, determine who the government of Israel should be while, at the same time, considering it is perfectly proper that Jews should be banned from living in Arab countries and not given any rights at all. According to the prophet Isaiah, Israel is to be a light unto the nations, and perhaps the nations of the world are right in demanding that Israel live by higher standards, but by so doing, they are telling us that we are not a normal people. More is expected of us. We are truly to be a moral example to others. That, of course, is what Judaism has always preached.

That's what we learn about in the *Torah* portion *Lech Lecha* where Abram was singled out to leave his father's land, his birthplace, and his family to go to a land which G-d would show him. G-d told him that He would make him into a great nation, that He would bless him and make his name great and that he would be a blessing to the world. G-d never promised Abram that he would not be cursed and that he would not be persecuted. He only promised him that those who would bless him would be blessed and those who would curse him would be cursed. Abram goes to the land of Canaan, but he still does not know that he is going to be special. He thought he was just going to be given a land. Abram was not told about his covenantal relationship with G-d until the end of this *Torah* portion. He was just told to go to the land of Canaan so he could live according to his beliefs. Other people also live in their own land so they can live according to their beliefs.

When Abram gets to the land of Canaan, G-d does not change his name. He does, though, promise that He will give him this land. Abram then leaves the land to go to Egypt almost immediately because there is a famine in Canaan. When he returns to the land of Canaan after Pharaoh, in fact, kicks him out of Egypt when he learns that Sarai is really Abram's wife and not his sister, he separates from his nephew Lot because he does not share Abram's business scruples. When Lot is captured in battle, Abram rescues him and puts to rout mighty kings. G-d then appears to him again and tells him that his legacy will continue, that he will have children. He has now been promised land and children, but he still thinks he is going to

be the father of a normal people who will live according to the values he chose. It is only after Ishmael, his son by Hagar, turns out not to be a worthy heir that G-d appears to Abram again, and this time He tells Abram that there is to be a covenantal relationship between him and G-d which will last forever throughout the generations through Abram's children.

He then tells Abram to change his name to Abraham and to have his wife, Sarai, change her name to Sarah, and He commands them about circumcision, *Brit Milah*. The Jews from now on were to be different. Abraham was not just to be the father of Ram; he was to be the father of many nations. He was to have the name of G-d in the middle of his name. Abraham was to add the Hebrew letter "Hay," which is a symbol of G-d's name, to his own name and Sarah was to do the same. From now on there would be a mark on the flesh of Abraham's male descendants which would always single them out as being Jews.

The *Medrash* says that when Abraham heard this he was upset. He thought that he would now be completely separate from all his friends. How could his values influence others if he were different? He asked his friends what they thought about him becoming circumcised. All his friends pooh poohed the idea except for Mamre. He thought it was a good idea because you can only learn from people who are different from you. If you want to learn to play the violin, you have to go to someone who is an expert violinist. You cannot learn from someone who does not know how to play the violin. The Jew was to stand out and to be different so the nations of the world could learn from him. When Abraham heard this, he was happy. He would have circumcised himself anyway, but he wanted to have confirmation from at least one of his friends that his being different would be beneficial, even to his friends. We Jews cannot escape our destiny. As the prophet Ezekiel said G-d said, "I will rule over you with might and power." Jews will be forced to be Jews, if not by their own conscience, then by a Hitler or another enemy. Jews can seek a land, as Abraham first did, seek Jewish continuity through our children, as Abraham also did, but G-d has told us that the only way we can achieve both these goals is if we realize that we are in a unique covenantal relationship with G-d. G-d has asked us to carry His message and that we must always strive to do. The nations of the world know this, and they expect us to live by this message,

to be different.

It is interesting to note that when Joshua conquered the land of Israel, he was able to give to the land of Israel only a temporary holiness. When the Babylonians conquered the land, they removed this holiness from the land. When Ezra brought the Jewish people up to settle the land, wherever the Jewish people settled remained holy even after the Jewish people were exiled by the Romans from the land of Israel. What was the difference, the rabbis ask, between the conquest of Joshua and the settling by Ezra? The answer is that Joshua concentrated on the physical conquering of the land. The Tabernacle remained a temporary Tabernacle, and it was not until almost 500 years later that Jerusalem was established as the spiritual center of the Jewish people. When Ezra went up to the land, he concentrated on building the spiritual center first. He knew that the land would always remain holy in the Jewish consciousness only if it were associated with the spiritual values of Judaism. There is only one answer for Jews in the world, and that is that they embrace their uniqueness and not try to be a normal people. Trying to be normal will only lead to hatred and bloodshed, as the Holocaust proved. We should embrace, as Ezra did and Abraham did, Jewish spiritual values. We should be wholehearted in our role as being a light unto the nations. If we do that, they the nations of the world, as Abraham's friend Mamre told him, will respect and admire us, but if we try only to be a normal people, then the world will always end up despising us. Everything is really dependent on the covenant between G-d and Israel.

Let us always try to uphold that covenant. If we do, we will not only eventually gain the respect of the world, but we will also have the great spiritual satisfaction of knowing that we are doing G-d's work, bringing the redemption of the world closer when peace, justice, love, and brotherhood will reign forever.