Courage and Conviction (Edited Transcript)

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This week’s parsha begins with two famous words, lech lecha? go for you. Those are the instructions that G-d gave to Avraham. Currently we are reading in the Five Books about the events of the life of Avraham and his family and what that means for us and for the world. We rely mainly for the background to the early life of Avraham on the oral tradition that was handed down from generation to generation and today is contained in the various works of the Midrash. The Five Books deal primarily with Avraham’s life from the age of 75 onwards.

A loss of belief

G-d says to Avraham, lech lecha, and he begins his journey at the age of 75. Before this we know very little about the first 75 years and his journey towards belief in G-d and his life mission. According to our tradition he began his search and quest for G-d at the age of three, and that culminated at the age of forty when he had final clarity about his belief in there being one Almighty G-d that was the Co-ordinator, Controller and Creator of everything. That’s when he established his relationship with G-d and thereby re-founded the concept of monotheism in the world. I say re-founded because it was given to Adam and Eve and to Noah. The Rambam describes how the generations between Adam and Noah and then between Noah and Avraham deteriorated. Adam and Eve believed in G-d and understood they were created by G-d. They may have sinned but they had a very clear understanding of monotheism and the fact that there is one G-d and they also had a concept of right and wrong. By the time of the flood in the generation of Noah, most of the world had lost that concept of monotheism. They were pagans worshipping idols who had lost a sense of morality and a concept of right and wrong, except for Noah and his family who were saved from the flood and re-established human civilisation. Ten generations later Avraham’s people had forgotten again.

Avraham re-founds ethical monotheism and becomes the founding father of Judaism. Avraham was a man of courage and conviction. He went through a process in order to find his convictions and his beliefs, but once he had found his faith he stood up for it. But he lived in a society of tyranny. According to the Midrash he lived within the society of Nimrod who established a very powerful kingdom that had very strict rules. It was a tyranny with no freedom of expression or thought or religion, and since the state religion was paganism, they worshipped the king as well as other forces of nature. Avraham, who believed in monotheism, was a threat to the king. But because of the courage of his convictions he didn’t keep his beliefs to himself. This is a very important feature in trying to understand the great character Avraham. He was a man who shared his beliefs with everyone and tried to convince people, starting with his own family.

The Midrash has a discussion about the clashes that took place between Avraham and his father Terach. Terach believed in the idolatry of his times, and Avraham did not. In fact, according to the Midrash, Terach actually had an idols? shop and once when Avraham was left in charge of the shop he smashed all the idols except one. Terach came in and saw what he had done and asked Avraham, what happened? Avraham placed a stick in the hands of the one remaining idol and told his father that this idol had smashed the others. This was part of his lesson to his father of the ridiculous nature of belief in idols and paganism.

Appreciating G-d’s artistry

This story, based on the Oral Tradition of the Midrash, exposes the lack of logic of those who believe in paganism. And people may ask how could they have believed in such illogical things? But we find that today there are very rational people who believe that the magnificent world in which we live could have randomly evolved. This is about as logical as saying that a stone statute smashed others. How did lifeless matter become alive and develop into this magnificent world? Consider the human brain, for example, and the billions and trillions of parts that make it up and the connections between them that enable the brain to function. How can we say that this computer which is so complex that even the most modern technology cannot replicate it came about randomly? This is the
kind of argument on which Avraham and his father clashed.

Avraham?”s courage of his convictions caused Nimrod begin to pursue him and want to have him and his brother Haran arrested and punished. Terach had three sons ? Nachor, Avraham and Haran. Avraham and his brother Haran were fugitives from Nimrod. They stuck together and were eventually arrested. According to the Midrash it was their own father Terach who turned them in. Terach was so embarrassed and probably, given the tyranny of the society, so afraid about the consequences for his own survival that he turned in his sons.

According to the Midrash what then happened is very instructive. In the style of a good tyrant, Nimrod, set up a fiery furnace for execution. Avraham was brought to the edge of the furnace and was given the choice: are you prepared to renounce your beliefs in G-d and your values system? And if you are not, then you have to be put into the furnace. Avraham was in the front of the queue and Haran was behind him thinking how he was going to answer this question. According to the Midrash Haran decided that if Avraham said I am for G-d and then gets thrown in the fiery furnace and survives through the miraculous intervention of G-d, then he would also say that he was for G-d. But if he died in the furnace, he would say that he was with Nimrod. Avraham said his allegiance was with G-d and was put in the fiery furnace but survived. Haran then said that he is with G-d, and he was put into the fiery furnace but died. The message of this is that while Avraham had the courage of his convictions, Haran was hedging his bets.

**Courage of your convictions**

Often in life we are hedging our bets. We are not prepared to say I know what?s right and I know what has to be done. But it requires courage and determination to change and to turn our lives around in certain respects. So we do a little bit of this and a little bit of that without really proceeding with direction, strength or focus. And what happens in the end is that one is caught in-between and one hasn?t really committed to one thing or another and that was really the fate of Haran.

Although Terach was a man who believed in idolatry and succumbed to the pressures of tyranny and was a wicked man, he also had conviction. There was Avraham versus Terach ? good versus evil. But at least both had conviction in what they believed. Haran didn?t have conviction. Haran had a son, Lot. He was Avraham?”s nephew who journeyed with him. What Lot inherited from his father was the same kind of vacillation and lack of conviction. This very important journey of Avraham is introduced with two words ? lech lecha ? go for yourself. Avraham was commanded by G-d to leave his environment and journey towards the land of Israel in order to continue with his mission and journey of establishing ethical monotheism in the world, and Judaism. Lot and Avraham were obviously very close. But there was a clash between the shepherds of Avraham and the shepherds of Lot so they decided to part ways. Lot chose to move to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which the Five Books describe as a very fertile and prosperous region in spite of the fact that it was a place filled with evil. Lot had the choice between staying with Avraham and living close to his goodness or moving to a more spacious, prosperous and easy life lacking Avraham?”s moral presence. He chose the easier life, hedging his bets again.

When the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, Lot was saved because he did manage to hold onto his principles but they were very watered down and in a sense he inherited the vacillation of his father, that inability to fully commit and to have the courage of his convictions. This was different from Avraham who had great courage of his convictions. Avraham is typified by these two words ? lech lecha ? walk, go. That sense of walking, going and moving is about conviction. People often talk about a person who walks with a sense of purpose; that he is going somewhere. Rabbi Hirsch interprets it as go to yourself. Meaning: isolate yourself if necessary, go on your own path, and walk on that path that you have to go on, even if you have to be alone in the world to do the right thing ? that is the path you have to stay focused on. And that is why Avraham was called ?the Hebrew?. The word ?Hebrew? comes from the word ivri which means ?the other side?. Coming from across the river, Avraham was always the one who came from across the river. Geographically it means that he came from across the Euphrates River; but what it means conceptually is that he stood on the other side. As our Sages in the Talmud say: Avraham stood on one side of the bank of the river, and the rest of the world stood on the other? worlds apart? because he had the courage of his convictions to do what is right and to go on his journey in order to pursue the good and the right. That took great courage because of all of the opposition he faced.

Terach was a man who had great conviction about worshiping idols. But according to the Midrash, in the end Terach repented and
accepted the arguments and convictions of Avraham. Here was a man who had lived with conviction for bad and then turned that into conviction for good. Obviously lack of conviction is better than conviction for bad but the best is conviction for good. It took tremendous courage on the part of Terach to change his ways and return and repent. Our Sages praise as a very fine quality the ability to look at one’s life and say: there are areas that require improvement; let me improve, let me change and become a better person. That’s what courage and conviction is all about. That is the very opposite of hedging one’s bets; instead to actually have courage and conviction to change and to become a better person and that’s what Terach did.

Keep moving forward

In essence that is what is contained in the words lech lecha? walk, move. The instruction from G-d is that we continually improve and become better and stronger people in every part of our lives. We should look for improvement in every sphere of our lives and in the good deeds that we do, no matter what area of life it may be. We have to keep on walking, moving and changing and becoming better. That’s what it means to really live with focus and conviction.

This background information into Avraham’s life is contained in the Midrash and our Oral Tradition. Almost none of it is in the text of the Five Books which only begin describing the life of Avraham from the age of 75 when G-d said to him lech lecha, go. Why is this information only in the Oral Tradition and in the Midrash and not in the written text of the Five Books? Rav Mordechai Gifter explains that the words lech lecha are very significant because they are the first time that G-d gives a commandment to Avraham, and in a sense that’s where all begins. Because at the heart of the enterprise of Judaism is one Hebrew word which is called a mitzvah, a commandment. The essence of Judaism is service of G-d, obedience to G-d and being a true servant of G-d. Doing positive things simply because we recognise it is important to do so doesn’t transform a person into being a servant of G-d. Avraham’s life until 75 was an important moral and spiritual journey. But fundamentally it was Avraham’s personal journey where he was seeking out G-d but he wasn’t yet a servant of G-d. He only became the servant of G-d when he was given his first mitzvah, his first commandment where G-d said go to the land of Israel? become a servant.

That ties in with a comment from the Baal Hatuirim, one of our great commentators of the Middle Ages, where he says that the verse begins with the words va yomer, and He spoke, which echo the beginning of the Book of Genesis where G-d spoke and said, let there be light. He refers to a passage in the Talmud in Ethics of Our Fathers where we are told that G-d created the world with ten statements. And so in the same way that a physical world was brought into being by the word of G-d, so too was a spiritual and a moral world and the infrastructure of that spiritual and moral world are G-d’s Commandments. That is what transforms a person into being a server rather than a chooser. What defines us at our core is the fact that we are indeed the servants of G-d. That is why the Talmud says that a person who does something because they are commanded to is on a higher level than someone who does it voluntarily; which is contrary to conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom is that volunteerism is on a higher level, but when a person acts voluntarily it is because they choose to do so; when a person acts because they are commanded they are doing so as a servant of G-d and that is, indeed, the greatest level that we can strive for.