

**Abraham: The First Zionist?**  
**Shabbat *Lekh Lekha***  
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**Birmingham Progressive Synagogue**

The first verse of our parashah is one of the most dynamic statements in the Bible. It is, of course, a summons from God to Abraham to go forth, ‘get a move on’, undertake a journey. There are two components of this journey: *from* and *to*. ‘From’ is expressed in three phrases: *me’artzekha*, *me-moladetkha*, *u-mi-veit avikha*, ‘from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house’. In other words, this journey entails leaving everything familiar behind, except for the small number of family members who will accompany him. The attachments he has created during the first part of his life, the roots he has sunk into the soil of his birthplace, his homeland, the emotional bonds he has developed with his parents—all are to be severed. That is the implication of the three-fold ‘from’.

And the ‘to’? All he is told is *el ha-aretz asher ar’eka*, ‘to the land that I will show you’. A mystery, an enigma. No clear destination in sight, no postal code to programme in his GPS so that he would know exactly how far he needs to travel before reaching his goal. The psychology of hearing such a commandment, and of responding to it without question, without delay, is truly fascinating (just as with a comparable command that comes ten chapters later, when Abraham and his son Isaac are also dispatched to an unspecified destination: ‘one of the mountains *asher omar lekha*, that I shall tell you of’ (Gen. 22:2).

Whether or not he was a historical figure, the Abraham of our Hebrew Scriptures emerges as a character depicted with power and insight. Because of this, there has been a tendency not to allow him to remain in the distant past, but to see in him the prototype of later developments. You are, I’m sure, familiar with the claim that Abraham was the ‘first Jew’ – the first to be circumcised, the progenitor of the Jewish people, who observed all the commandments of the Torah before they were revealed. Today I would like to discuss with you a different use of Abraham as prototype: not as the first Jew, but as the *first Zionist*.

Look what Abraham did. He was living in Mesopotamia, one of the Cradles of Civilisation. Few places in the world at that time had reached the level of cultural development and sophistication that his environment had reached—perhaps only Egypt, India, China. His society was governed by the rule of law, the Code of Hammurabi; its literature included

prototypes for many of our biblical narratives; its economy, based on international commerce, allowed a relatively high standard of living to many; its technology facilitated the construction of imposing Temples with the ziggurats reaching toward heaven; its religion—though polytheist and pagan—was still characterized by dramatic rituals performed by a hereditary priesthood.

All this was to be left behind – and for what? A land that was certainly not at that time the Holy Land, or the Promised Land. It was a backwater region – not part of Mesopotamia, and not part of the Egyptian state to the south-west. The indigenous inhabitants were primarily nomads who were not likely to welcome the intrusion of strangers. Yet Abraham decides to leave behind all the attractions of Babylonian civilization for a destination that must have seemed incredibly *unpromising* when he arrived there, apparently convinced that only through that decision could he fulfil his true destiny.

It should be obvious how that model appealed to some of the early Zionists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. There were those, to be sure, fleeing persecution in Czarist Russia, and others who left their homes in eastern Europe seeking better economic opportunities. But the overwhelming majority of those Jews travelled west and ended up in England or in the United States—as if Abraham had ended up living in Egypt. It was a courageous decision for these Russian Jews to move into the Middle East. As for the smaller number of early Zionists who left cities like Vienna and Berlin, Paris and London, they were truly abandoning what seemed (at least until the summer of 1914) like the international centres of progress and culture and civilisation.

Those who decided to leave behind their familiar environment and move to part of a Middle Eastern province of the Ottoman Empire found an area filled with wilderness and swamps and soil that seemed to grow stones rather than vegetables, where the native inhabitants, who spoke a language they did not understand, were indeed less than thrilled by the arrival of these new immigrants. These Jews must have seemed deranged to others of a practical bent. Yet they were Jews who were not constrained by the conventional wisdom of their neighbours; their vision, which drove them to do something that appeared to be irrational, turned out to be the opening of a great new chapter in modern Jewish history.

In short, a convincing case can be made for Abraham as the first Zionist. Yet I would like to complicate matters a bit. For alongside this presentation of Abraham as the first Zionist, the prototype of the Zionist

movement, we might understand his story in a radically different way: not as the first Zionist, but rather as the *first Jewish exile*.

After all, the Zionists had clear alternatives. They could have remained where they were and wait for God to redeem the Jewish people by sending the Messiah at the time of divine choosing. They could have remained where they were and joined the struggle for a radical improvement of their own society by joining revolutionary socialist movements. They could have headed across the Atlantic Ocean to the *Goldene Medine* with its promises and opportunities. Abraham's only alternative was to ignore the voice that he heard deep within his soul and that apparently became so compelling that he had to submit.

Furthermore, the Zionists who left Europe for Palestine were conscious that on some level they were moving not to an unknown destination with few attractions, but rather to the ancestral home of their people. The contemporary human landscape was strange, but the geography was familiar to them from the Bible: Jerusalem, Hebron, Jaffa, the Jordan River, the Galilee, Mt Carmel in Haifa, Beer Sheva in the Negev.

Abraham, by contrast, had no sense of going home; he was going away from home, to a land that was entirely alien and enigmatic. There was nothing in the landscape that he loved. The only guide he had was a God who—unlike the familiar Babylonian gods whom he had rejected and abandoned—could not be seen. Apparently He could be heard, but in a voice that others could not detect. For Abraham, the sense of going into exile when he went forth from his land, his birthplace, his father's house, must have been viscerally powerful. And then, before he establishes roots in this new, foreign land, he leaves it for another form of exile: the totally alien environment of Egypt, where there was more food.

Exile is a central theme in the Jewish past, as in the experience of other peoples as well, including many of the Palestinians. The sense of being away from home, in a land that is not fully yours no matter how long you have been living there, living among people who consider you to be an outsider – not really belonging there as they do, needing to learn a new language and adapt to a different culture, while still trying to retain something of the memories and the baggage brought with you from afar, still trying to remain true to something left behind, still hoping perhaps to return: this is an integral part of Jewish historical experience.

Three generations later, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph would become another prototype of the Jewish exile, coming into an alien envi-

ronment against his will, reaching the highest level possible for an outsider in that society, contributing significantly to the Egyptian economy and to the power of his protégé the Pharaoh, enabling his family to settle securely in a new environment—yet his contributions were forgotten soon after his death, and his descendants were resented, humiliated and enslaved until they leave in the midst of violent conflict.

This pattern of the exile continued throughout the centuries. The leaders of sixth-century BCE Judea were brought as captives to Babylonia and expressed their anguish in the question, ‘How can we sing God’s song in a foreign land?’ (Psalm 137:4). Yet they established themselves and built a community that would flourish in that foreign land until the middle of the 20th century, not only singing God’s song but creating the Babylonian Talmud, the foundation of all traditional Jewish life.

Or the Jews who arrived as slaves to the Roman legions following the destruction of the Second Temple, and established a Jewish community in Rome: the one great European city from which there has never been an expulsion in more than 2000 years. Jews were indeed expelled from England, from France, from the Iberian peninsula, from German cities, and they found new homes and established new communities in other lands of the Diaspora. But even when things were going well for these Jews, the sense of living on some level in Exile remained.

Despite the disruptions and upheavals of enforced demographic mobility, in some way this experience of exile that Abraham may have felt in the unfamiliar land of Canaan has on the whole been fruitful for Jews. I would argue that it was precisely the tension between an encounter with great alien cultures and our own tradition, and the challenge to mediate between the two, which provided the dynamic stimulus to Jewish creativity through the ages.

We have been able to digest and internalize the best values of the alien culture in a manner that enriched Judaism. At the same time, the Jewish dissent from the majority culture stimulated by our own distinctive tradition has enriched the civilization of the majority. Feeling at home and yet not fully at home, understanding ourselves as belonging and yet in some way belonging somewhere else as well: this has been the leitmotif of the Jewish role through the ages. And for this, Abraham can legitimately be seen as a prototype.

These two prototypes—Abraham as the first Zionist, Abraham as the first exile—together suggest a creative counterpoint in Jewish iden-

tity. By all means, we must recognize the centrality of *Erets Yisrael* for Jewish life: the land of our historic memories, the land where the Hebrew language was brought back to life and a vibrant Jewish culture has been created, the land which is a home for our brothers and sisters in need: a home where, as Robert Frost wrote in a different context, ‘when you have to go there, they have to take you in’.

At the same time, we recognize that the Zionist movement, with all its successes, did not put an end to *galut*, Exile—which we understand to refer not just to the geographical dispersion of the Jewish people, but to the sense of living in a history that is still so far from redemption. Abraham’s message to us in the opening verses of this *parashah* is that wherever we are, no matter how deeply we may sense our roots, we must remain open to the Voice the summons us with the words *Lekh Lekha*, to go forth, and to move onward.