Avram's Religious Awakening and the Mission of Israel
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Parashat Lekh L'kha begins with God's life-changing call to Avram: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."[1]

But the Torah doesn't give us the back story: Why did God choose Avram instead of someone else? And why, at age 75, did Avram go?

This is where midrash comes in. Just like the show *Wicked* helps *Wizard of Oz* fans understand how Elphaba became the Wicked Witch of the West, midrash helps us understand how Avram became Abraham, the first monotheist.

God's call to Avram did not come out of the blue. In fact, they had been searching for each other most of Avram's life.

He was raised in a polytheistic world, where people thought different gods controlled different domains of life. Everyone in Avram's community believed this.

But even as a young boy, he sensed he was missing something. There had to be more than those idols of wood and stone—and Avram was determined to figure it out.

Thus began his quest for God.

The midrash imagines him walking along the river's edge and beholding the vast sky:

"When the sun set and the stars came out, he said, '*These* are the gods.' [But] afterward, when dawn broke, he did not see the stars. He said, 'I will not serve these [stars] because they are not gods.'

"Afterward, he saw the sun. He said, '*This* is my god and I will glorify it.' But when the sun set, he said, 'This is not God.'

"He saw the moon and said, '*This* is my god, and I will glorify and serve it.' But when it became dark, he said, 'This is not God.

"'[All these things] have a force that moves them.'

"While he was still speaking, Gabriel the angel came and said to him, 'Peace unto you Abraham.'

"He said to the angel…'Who are you?'

"'I am Gabriel…an emissary from the Holy One, blessed be God.'

"At that moment [Avram]…came upon a spring and washed his face, hands, and feet. There he worshipped God…"[2]

This is a profound story of religious awakening. Avram realized that there is something far greater than the idols his society held dear.

Soon thereafter, when his father left him in charge of the family idol shop for the day, he smashed all the idols to make the point that they were false gods.

It was clear as day to Avram, but his father wouldn't listen. Instead, he turned Avram in to the authorities for his heresy.

Why?

The famous playwright (and Reform Jew) David Mamet offers insight.

In a brilliant essay on idolatry, Mamet says that "The Israelites…created the golden calf not because they *doubted* Moses and his connection with God but because they *believed* in it."

The reality of a truth superior to the idols they worshipped terrified them, "and they reverted, forcefully, to the limits of the known world—their act an *insistence* that nothing existed beyond their experience.

"For…*if* a god existed… *if* this were true," writes Mamet, they "would have to abandon most of the notions and behaviors that had ruled their lives and begin again with a new template."[3]

By the time God said "*lekh l'kha*," Avram had already discovered the emptiness of idolatry. But it would have been easier to pretend it never happened.

There are significant personal and social risks to challenging people's "sacred cows," so to speak.

Rashi says Avram's decision to go cost him his family, his wealth, and his reputation—all things that are not easily recovered.[4]

But if he didn't leave, he would have had to subordinate the truth of God to conventional wisdom in order to appease those around him. And he wouldn't have been able to live with himself.

This, says the philosopher Will Herberg, is our modern impulse. "We make God into the sanctifier and protector of the idols we *really* love with all our heart and might."[5]

We want religion to validate our preexisting beliefs rather than challenge them. Because the alternative—the prospect that the Torah will confront us with truths we'd rather not hear—is too scary.

But as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, "Judaism is not a religion that reconciles us to the world.

"It was born as an act of defiance against the great empires of the ancient world…which sanctif[ied] hierarchy, justif[ied] the rule of the strong over the weak, glorif[ied] kings and pharaohs and [kept] the masses in place."[6]

From beyond, a voice calls out to those willing to listen. And God wants *us* to respond to it.

"In Judaism," says Rabbi Sacks, "faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that *is*, in the name of the world that is *not yet* but *ought to be*."[7]

"God asks one individual—eventually a family, a tribe, a collection of tribes, a nation—to serve as an exemplary role-model. …"[8]

God chose Avram of all people, because he alone had the courage and the fortitude to run against the winds of prevailing attitudes. To stand up for justice and *chesed*, and "humanize the world."[9]

This is the "mission of Israel"—and it was never meant to be easy.

As Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav said: "*kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'od*—the world is a very narrow bridge. The main thing is not to be afraid."[10]

1 *Gen.* 12:1.
2 Benjamin Levy, *A Faithful Heart: A Study Text Based on the Midrash Maaseh Avraham Avinu*," 15–18.
3 David Mamet, *The Wicked Son*, 73–74.
4 See Rashi to *Gen.* 12:2.
5 Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man*, 95.
6 Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, 30.
7 Ibid., 45.
8 Ibid., 100.
9 Ibid., 71.
10 *Likkutei Maharan*, Part II, 48:2:7 (Sefaria citation).