

Parashat Lech Le'kha 5768
Rabbi David Englander

Anyone here staying in a hotel – or have you done so recently? Ever? Well if you have you know that aside from the free laundry bags (has anyone ever used them to actually have a pair of socks washed for, like, 8 bucks?) and tv clicker, one other guaranteed appearance in just about every hotel room is...a bible. Now, the hotels aren't buying these bibles. Does anyone know which organization gives them out? It is the Gideons, as in "Gideon Bible", as in the Gideon from the Bible. And it's that Gideon I'd like to talk about for a moment.

Gideon appears toward the beginning of the book of Judges and his career spans a few chapters. When God called on Gideon to lead the people of Israel against the Midianites he asked for proof. Does anyone know the story of Gideon and the wool? He said, God, if I'm to lead the people against the Midianites, when I wake up I want this wool to be wet and the ground to be dry. And it was. And then he said now I want it to be the other way around – make the wool dry and the ground wet. And that happened as well.

Later on when Gideon does attack the Midianites God first tells him that he has gathered too many men and a way is devised to send thousands of them home, leaving at most 300. I guess this was not a battle fought by the Powell Doctrine. Then, each man was given a torch, a jar, and a trumpet, and on the count of three, they smashed their jars and blew their trumpets, causing great confusion, so the Midianites wound up fighting themselves. Some say the 300 left behind were actually the cowards – so if Gideon and 300 cowards confront the Midianite army with a jar in one hand and a torch in the other – in other words, no hands for fighting, who has caused the victory? God. At a time of Jewish history where faith ebbed and flowed, this is at least in part a narrative of God's continued direct protection of Israel in its infancy as a nation. When we grow up, we become more directly responsible for ourselves.

But the Gideon story that I want to mention especially is from before this atypical battle with the Midianites. After God calls him to his mission (which he tries to reject, like most prophets, including Moses) God tells him to take one (or two?) of his father's bulls and use them to pull down the altar of Baal which belonged to his father, and to build an altar to God instead. At night, when the people were sleeping, he did so with ten of his servants. Lo and behold when the people woke up the next day they accused Gideon of doing this but Gideon's father comes to his rescue, saying if ba'al is a god, let him fight his own battles. (Once again, a 'parent' saving a child, teaching him how to meet the inevitable challenges that will arise when 'dad' is not going to save the day?)

Now the connection to our parashah: what story that you almost undoubtedly know does the narrative of Gideon and the altar of ba'al remind you of? Abraham smashing his father's idols, the most famous midrash of them all. Now, Emily is going to refer to this midrash in a little while but I promise not to steal you thunder. She's not going to go into the details of the midrash so I'll remind you of them, at least according to the earliest of many of its versions. Terach, Abraham's dad, left his idol shop and put Abram in charge.

A woman came into the shop and asked Abram to give this big bowl of grain as a gift to the idols. Abraham instead smashed all the idols but the biggest one, putting a stick in its hand. When his father came back and accused him of breaking the idols, Abraham pointed to the biggest idol and said 'he did it.' Terach replied 'that idol is just stone – he can't do anything'. And Abram replied, 'let your ears hear what your mouth said.' In other words...why do you worship unthinking stone? For that smart comment, Terach turns Abram over to Nimrod and his furnace.

There is an assumption made by some that the narrative of Gideon and the altar of ba'al preceded, and also inspired, the narrative of Abraham and his father's idols. There are also some differences. Any that come to mind? Anything you are uncomfortable with?

We might be tempted to say 'what kind of religious tolerance is this teaching?' That would be to fall victim to trying to read contemporary values back into the text. Religious tolerance is a fairly new idea – and has not yet, as you know, exactly pervaded human existence. The Torah begins us down this path but also existed in a reality where other religious ideas weren't just considered o.k. for those born to them – they were often forced on the 'nonbelievers' – so active engagement, even fighting against, other types of religious worship were part and parcel of living in such intolerant places. We learn and we grow as people, and we learn and we grow as a tradition – tolerance is a central element of Jewish thinking now – with the caveat that tolerance is extended mostly to those not trying to convert or destroy us.

Second: obviously the parent issue is different here. Gideon's father saves his son – Abram's dad, and again this is midrash, basically consigns him to the fire. What we do when our kids turn out religiously different than we do is a huge topic worth discussion, and we will have a chance to discuss it. For now note that it seems to be on the mind of the earliest proponents of our religion as well.

Lastly – I've referred before to the test of God in the form of eating a bacon double cheeseburger on Yom Kippur and saying if there is a God, strike me down. Other than heartburn and eventual coronary artery blockage, no such heavenly justice is meted out. Has God turned ineffective or ignorant or impotent, like ba'al who didn't strike down Gideon or like the idols who didn't resist Abram? It wouldn't make much sense to pray to such a God, would it? Instead, I would suggest that faith in God grows and develops into a more mature form, just as a parent-child relationship grows, just as a view of religious tolerance has grown. A God who gives us an ongoing message of hope and strength and potential and asks us to make all of those ideas a part of our reality, that is a God I believe in. A God who acts like Superman to save the day or who metes out playground justice is, in effect, a playground god. For all of the doubts it inspires, for all the uncertainties about the ways God does work in the world, I'd rather believe in a God who gives me the capacity to rise to challenges, to learn and to grow, and, to embrace the wonder of life itself – in Heschel's words, wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge. Replace doubt with wonder and faith becomes stronger.