

## **Who Called First—God or Abram? Lekh Lekha 5787**

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The portion Lekh Lekha opens with an abrupt call from God to Abram, “*Lekh Lekha*—go forth.” Seemingly out of nowhere God calls on Abram to leave his home and family and set out for a new land. While we were introduced to Abram in the concluding verses of the portion No’ach, the Torah gives us no clear reason why God would select Abram to embark on a new spiritual journey.

This is where Midrash steps in. Ancient readers of the Torah sensed that there was a backstory to God’s call to Abram. So, where the Torah itself is silent, legends developed as to why God called Abram. Two principal stories found in Midrashic literature tell us why God called Abram. The better known of the two, found in Midrash Genesis Rabbah 38:13, is the story of Abram smashing his father’s idols. According to this story, Abram’s father Terah ran a shop where idols were sold. One day when his father was away, Abram smashed all the idols except one, which he left holding a staff. When Terah returned and found all but one of his idols destroyed, he asked Abram what had happened. Abram explained that the idols had fought amongst themselves and only one had survived. When Terah dismissed Abram’s story as nonsensical, Abram pointed out that Terah through his own words was admitting that idolatry had no basis. As the story continues, Abram is reported to the authorities, who commit him to the judicial ordeal of a fiery furnace. Miraculously, Abram survives this test of faith. The midrash ends here. Its sense is clear: Abram believed in the one God. His faith was put to the test and survived. God had found a suitable partner. What follows? God’s call to Abram.

A separate midrash, found in Midrash Genesis Rabbah 39:1, presents a different backstory to God's call. It describes Abram as coming to his own conclusion that the world must have a guiding force. This midrash compares Abram to a person traveling from place to place who sees a palace lit up (birah doleket) and says to himself that the palace must have a guide. At that point, the owner looks out and says, "I am the owner of the building." The term birah doleket can alternatively be translated as "a palace in flames." If we read the text as speaking of a palace in flames, then the observer in the story, beholding a palace in flames, is questioning whether the palace has a guide. At that point the owner peers out from the window and says, "I am the owner." As we understand this midrash as applied to Abram, Abram sees a world aflame and refuses to believe that the world has no guiding force. Taking note of Abram's perception of a world aflame and his insistence that the world must indeed have a guide, God then calls to Abram.

I understand these midrashim on several levels. They are telling us that God called Abram because Abram reached out to God first. According to the first midrash, Abram was an iconoclast who literally shattered the idols of his generation and of his own father. In the second text, we see Abram as a thinker who contemplated the state of the universe and, seeing a world aflame, questioned if the world indeed has a guiding force. Abram's questioning leads to God's response.

I believe these midrashim are not just telling us about Abram. As we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah, I believe these midrashim are calling on us to continue in the path of questioning the values of the societies in which we live, and of deep questioning of the injustices of our world. As we engage in our own spiritual quests and ask our own questions, we are continuing in that path set out by Abram and Sarai as they followed God so many years ago.

*This week's Torah commentary was first published in 2024. All commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year have been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.*