

# "YOU CAN TAKE THE GIRL OUT OF HICKSVILLE, BUT..."

by Jon Erlbaum

- This Week's **RRR** (Relevant Religious Reference): **"...Go for yourself ("Lech Lecha") from your Land, from your Birthplace, and from your Father's House..."** - *Genesis, 12:1*
  
- This Week's **SSC's** (Suitable Secular Citations):
  - 1. **"You can take the girl out of Hicksville, but you can't take the Hicksville out of the girl"** - *From the Musical "Rent"*
  - 2. **"Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for nonsmart reasons"** - *Michael Shermer, in the September 2002 issue of "Scientific American"*

## □"BORN IN ARIZONA, MOVED TO BABYLONIA - KING TUT!"□<sup>2</sup>

Don't burst Steve Martin's bubble! Why bother informing the "Wild & Crazy Guy" that King Tut never resided in Arizona (and probably never relocated to Babylonia, for that matter)? Hey - the lyrics worked, they rhymed (sort of), and the classic Saturday Night Live song/dance/skit made people laugh, for crying out loud!

And anyway, we've got an even bigger story to focus on that came out of the Mesopotamian hood: the man who was "born in Babylonia, moved to a 'Land Unknown': Abraham!" Our pioneering Forefather moved because the "Great Landlord in the Sky" commanded him to relocate (to an undisclosed destination): "...Go for yourself ("Lech Lecha") from your **Land**, from your **Birthplace**, and from your **Father's House**...." But what a strange way of phrasing this eviction notice! If you had to pack up your bags and leave the Country, the realities of Geography dictate that you would have to first leave the house, then leave your birthplace, and only then could you leave your country. So why phrase this command in the reverse order?

## JUDAISM 101: BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT THINKER

By reversing the geographical order, the Torah reveals that G-d is commanding far more than just

Abraham's physical departure from his country. He was challenging Abraham to make a spiritual departure from his comfort zones in order to become an independent, critical thinker! The three boundaries - **Land, Birthplace, & Parents' Home - represent THREE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE upon each individual, in ascending order of intensity.** Abraham is first commanded to leave his Land: to break through the idolatrous influence of his country. Then he is to depart from his Birthplace: to abandon the customs and mores that are reflex to him. Finally, he is to take leave of his Parents' Home: to shake loose even from his primal source of identity and self-esteem.

Surmounting these obstacles is Abraham's major challenge in the development of spiritual & intellectual independence. And the same goes for each of his descendants: to actualize our potential as Jews, each of us is called upon to independently sort through the values we have inherited, and to become objective consumers of the surrounding beliefs that compete for our allegiance.

### **YALE & THE SHOCKING SHOCK EXPERIMENT<sup>3</sup>**

Three months after Nazi leader Adolph Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, a Yale University psychologist named Dr. Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment to explore the question: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders?" In order to test the conflict between personal conscience and obedience to authority, Dr. Milgram would bring two people into his lab (let's call them George and Fred - and Fred was actually Milgram's secret collaborator in the experiment). Milgram represented to them that they were participating in an experiment on how punishment affects learning. Milgram told Fred (his co-conspirator) to go memorize a list of words in another room; he told George (the real subject) that when Fred would make mistakes, he should press a button that would administer increasingly powerful electric shocks (in reality, the "shocks" and resulting screams were staged).

The great majority of subjects **continued to give electric shocks** to the point where - based on desperate-sounding screams from the collaborating "Student" - it seemed that they were doing tremendous damage to the student's health & well-being. Even while their own senses told them that the student was being physically harmed, they obeyed instructions to continue because a scientific authority figure was telling them to do so. Their instinct was to trust and obey - rather than to question - an unreasonably inhumane authority figure. Punch line: by implication, the experiment demonstrates that one doesn't have to be inherently evil or sadistic to put people into gas chambers. **Sometimes all that evil behavior requires is for people to lack the independence to ask whether what they're doing is moral.** That is one main reason that G-d's command to Abraham (and to every Jew) is to become independent.

### **TAKING THE "HICKSVILLE OUT OF THE GIRL"**

When our Forefather Abraham was commanded to take himself out of Babylonia, he was also

mandated to take the Babylonia out of the Abraham. Similarly, just as the Jew was taken out of Egypt, we are eternally mandated to take the Egypt out of the Jew - as well as extract all other influences that undermine our objectivity. Unless we examine what we believe and why we believe it, the determining factor for whether we pursue moral, immoral, or amoral behaviors might be no more than an "ACCIDENT OF BIRTH" (or an "accident of surrounding culture").

**When we don't challenge our beliefs and where they came from, we become blind followers of the masses - and what's worse, we somehow fool ourselves into thinking we're non-conformists, oblivious to the fact that others have actually determined our guiding philosophies for us!** We may very well even become those of whom it is said, "smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for nonsmart reasons!" We are Jews living in the early 21st century, in various communities that have contributed to our primal identity. All of these factors have helped to make us who we are. If we want to truly be ourselves, our best bet may be to step back and ask ourselves how we got here!

Have a wonderful Shabbos! Love, Jon & The Chevra

1. *This week's insights are adapted from the Teachings of **Rabbi Noah Weinberg** (may his memory be for a blessing), Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Aish HaTorah*
2. Lyrics from "King Tut", a classic song/dance/skit on Saturday Night Live performed by Steve Martin
3. The experiment was first described in 1963 by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, and later discussed in his 1974 book, Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View

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