

ABRAHAM'S DWELLING

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The first two parshiyot of the Torah, Bereshit and Noach, span two thousand years of human life and events. The Torah records these two millennia in an almost fast forward mode, stopping to dwell on a few instances of historical importance - the stories of Gan Eden, Kayin, Noach, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. But basically the Torah is very sparse in detail regarding the lives and events of this long period of time. In this week's portion of Lech Lecha, the Torah slows down appreciably, barely covering a century in relating to us the life of our father, Avraham. It is as though the Torah in the two previous parshiyot was in a hurry to get to Avraham and his life and tell us the achievements and struggles. The Midrash indicates that this is in fact a true analysis of the Torah's intent when in the beginning of Bereshit it clearly indicates that the entire process of creation was enacted for the purpose of Avraham's coming on the world scene. Avraham is the pivotal figure in human history. He is the one who raises the banner of monotheism in a fashion that can be understood and followed by millions of humans. He is also the father of goodness and kindness, compassion and sensitivity towards others as a way of life, a value system, and not merely as isolated acts of momentary compassion. And perhaps most importantly, he alone emerges as the symbol of human resiliency - able to withstand "tests," and to not only overcome adversity but to grow from the experience. In this he is the true ancestor of the Jewish people, the most optimistic and productive of all nations.

The Torah purposely dwells on the details of Avraham's life, almost in slow motion, as it were, in order to impress upon us what one human being can accomplish in a lifetime. The Torah champions the individual over the state, the human being over seemingly inexorable rules of economics and social science. The world is still reeling from the ideologies that destroyed over one hundred million human beings in the last century. All those ideologies were based on the priority of the state and ideology over the life of an individual human being. The prophet Yeshayahu praises Avraham by calling him "one," a single unique individual. It is this one individual who turned human civilization away from barbarism and paganism and gave humankind a vision of what a good person and a good world can and should look like. The Talmud stresses therefore that Jews do not call themselves "the children of Noach," though biologically we certainly are Noach's descendants. Rather, we call ourselves the children of Avraham and Sarah, for it is their vision that lights our life and guides all of Jewish life and history. The Rabbis taught us to constantly ask ourselves "when will my actions and behavior be in line with that of Avraham?" Avraham remains the measuring stick of human accomplishment and spiritual behavior. There can be no greater title that a human being can bear than being called a child of Avraham.

Shabat Shalom.

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