

Abraham the First Jew and Conversion
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We all remember the famous line at the end of the movie “The Wizard of Oz.” Dorothy clicks her heels three times and says in a dreamlike trance “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.” When I was a kid, I am not sure I understood why Dorothy wanted to go home. After all she had landed in a pretty cool place: Oz. Lollipops, fancy horses, fun people, singing, dancing. And everything was in Technicolor – unlike Kansas, which was black and white. She had killed both wicked witches by the end of the movie, so the danger was gone. Why did she want to go back home?

I think the answer is that for all the splendor of Oz, Dorothy felt out of place there. She was twice as tall as her munchkin friends. Lions and scarecrows talked in this strange place. Customs and beliefs were really bizarre. “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” Dorothy says earlier in the movie. Oz is a nice place to visit, and Dorothy makes friends among its residents, but ultimately, she feels more comfortable living at home: in a community of people whose beliefs and practices she grew up with and understands.

In this week’s Torah portion, however, we read about a very different experience. This week we read about Abraham, the very first Jew. Abraham is 75 years old, the Bible tells us, when he starts out on a journey *leaving* home *never* to come back again. God calls upon Abraham to leave his father’s home and to go to a place that God would show him. In other words, God does not tell Abraham what or where the goal of this journey will be. He just tells Abraham to go, and along the way God will guide him and make sure he gets to the right place. In exchange for Abraham having faith in God’s mission, God promises that He will make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation, and will bless Abraham and his offspring, make Abraham’s name great, and all the families of the earth will find blessing in him.

A natural question to ask is “why Abraham?” The Torah does not tell us very much about Abraham at this point. Later we will learn that he has a very powerful instinct for justice – to the point that he will challenge even God to be just and fair with respect to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Later we will learn that Abraham has unquestioning faith in God – to the point that he is willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac simply because God told him to. Later we will learn that Abraham is perhaps a charismatic figure, an astute leader and a formidable warrior – to the point that he is able to galvanize an army along with his neighbors to attack the armies of several invading Kings who had captured Abraham’s nephew Lot. All of these qualities could point to why God chose Abraham for his special mission. But we don’t read about these events until *after* the choice was already made.

Why was Abraham chosen? Our ancestors asked that very question centuries and centuries ago. They concluded that somehow, in a world that worshipped idols made of clay and wood, in a world that believed in many gods who behaved like whimsical human beings, in a world that thought all of creation was the accidental result of warring superbeings, somehow in this type of world Abraham woke up one morning and concluded everyone else was wrong.

Abraham concluded that there is only *one* Creator God. Abraham concluded that this God had a *plan* when He created the universe, that we are not an *accident*, that God in creating the Universe had taken the chaos of a formless void and made order and sense out of it. Abraham concluded that this God had no form Himself, and therefore to worship idols shaped to look like creatures of nature – human or animal or even vegetable – was vanity. And Abraham concluded

that we mere mortals could yet have a relationship with this God if only we opened our hearts, our souls, and our minds to hear God's voice calling to us.

And what does God *want* from us? Well, Abraham may well have believed that all God wants is what a later prophet named Micah would say "Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God." [6:8] These basic convictions about God, the Universe and what God expects from humanity, our ancestors tell us, were the reasons that God chose Abraham to start a new religion, a religion not seen before on Earth, a monotheistic religion that became Judaism.

Having come to these conclusions on his own, Abraham soon realized that he *had* to leave home. Unlike Dorothy in the *Wizard of OZ*, Abraham's beliefs and practices were no longer compatible with his kinfolk, his neighbors or his compatriots. He was no longer comfortable living among them, and he had to leave and find his own way. That is why God came to him and said "Leave your father's home and go to a place I will show you.."

Now I want to share with you something really remarkable. I am coordinating and teaching the conversion program here at Beth Yeshurun. This is the second year that I am in charge of the program, and this year we have around 40 people who want to learn about Jewish thought and the Jewish way of life because they believe they want to join our people. Many people ask me if converts join the program because they want to marry a Jew. The answer is emphatically: "no." I have met with every one of the people who are in our program here and that is *not* the reason they want to convert.

Times have changed. These days if a Jew and a non-Jew wish to get married they simply get married. There is no *need* to convert in order to get married. It *is* true that many of the people in the program have met Jews and may be planning to marry one, or may *already* be married to one, or perhaps the Jewish people they know are just good friends. But the *reason* they want to convert is because they see our religion with fresh eyes – and they like what they see! I wish sometimes that you could be in my office when I meet with a person who is in our conversion program. They are so enthusiastic about Judaism it makes me kvell. (Leo Rosten in his book *Joy of Yiddish* defines "kvell" as to "beam with immense pride and pleasure.")

People come to our conversion program either because they were not raised with any religion themselves, or because they were raised with a religion they cannot understand, one that has no meaning for them as adults. In their search for a religion that makes sense, that emphasizes good works and morality in this world, that has a straightforward belief in only one God, that has rituals of beauty and meaning, and that creates a warm and inviting community, they find Judaism – and they have found a new home!

Like Abraham the first Jew, they have heard God's voice calling to them to leave behind the spiritual world they grew up in and to take journey to a new religious universe. Like Abraham, they may not be sure where exactly they will end up, but they trust that God will help them to arrive at the Promised Land in Judaism. That journey takes tremendous faith, and tremendous courage, and I can only marvel at their enthusiasm.

Maimonides, the great doctor and Jewish scholar of the 12th century, was once asked a question by a convert to Judaism. It seems that this convert had gotten into an argument with one of his Jewish teachers about a matter of Jewish law, and his teacher had not only told the convert that he was wrong, but apparently berated him and humiliated him as well. The convert then wrote to the great authority of his age – Maimonides – to find out if he was right or wrong. Maimonides, never one to mince words, wrote back:

“Was he [your teacher] intoxicated that he forgot the thirty-three passages in which the Torah commands us concerning “strangers”? [These passages command us to love and care for the stranger because we were strangers in the Land of Egypt.] For even if he had been in the right and you in error, [Maimonides continued] it was his duty to be gentle; how much more, when the truth is with *you* and *he* was in error! ... And how great is the duty which the Law imposes on us with regard to proselytes. We are commanded to honor and fear our parents; we are ordered to hearken to the prophets. A man may honor and fear and obey without loving. But in the case of ‘strangers’ we are bidden to love with the whole force of our heart’s affection. And he called you a fool! Astounding! A man who left father and mother, forsook his birthplace, his country and its power, and attached himself to this lowly, despised ... people; who recognized the truth and righteousness of this people’s Law, and cast the things of this world from his heart – shall such a one be called a fool? God forbid! Not witless but wise has God called your name, you disciple of our father Abraham, who also left his father and his kindred and inclined Godward. And He who blessed Abraham will bless you, and will make you worthy to behold all the consolations destined for Israel, and in all the good that God shall do to us He will do good to you, for the LORD has promised good to Israel....”

In Jewish law, a convert to Judaism is considered a Jew in all respects. We are *commanded*, as Maimonides wrote, to welcome converts into our midst and treat them with utmost respect and admiration. I am saddened when I occasionally hear that a Jewish person has done otherwise. Perhaps those among us who are sometimes suspicious of converts are really wondering why the heck anyone would want to convert to Judaism. Like Dorothy at the beginning of the *Wizard of Oz*, we too may sometimes look at the rest of the world with envy. Perhaps we sometimes imagine that it would be nice to live in the big wide Technicolor world without the restrictions of living a Jewish life. It would be nice to live life without encountering anti-Semitism directed at us, or reading about anti-Semitic acts and statements in the newspapers. Perhaps our world seems too mundane, cast in black and white like Dorothy’s home town. But I would suggest that is simply because we take the wonder and beauty of Judaism for granted. We forget all the richness of our traditions: holidays and life cycle celebrations, the wealth of wisdom and scholarship of our sages, philosophers and intellects. We should remember the end of the movie. Dorothy in the end is *not* dazzled by the trappings of Oz, or perhaps she is in some ways. But she recognizes that it is *not* her home. The customs, practices and beliefs of the inhabitants of Oz are too strange for her, they lack the comfort of familiarity, they lack the common sense and camaraderie of Kansas.

And what of Abraham, that first Jew. If he is a model for people who are on the road to conversion, taking a spiritual journey like Abraham did, should he not be a model for us as well? Yes, but in our case, I would focus on Abraham later in his life, after he has *settled* in the Promised Land. Then, our tradition teaches, he opened the doors of his tent – his home – in all directions so that he could be sure to welcome the stranger from whichever place that stranger might come. As Dorothy said, “There *is* no place like home.” We *are* home now, in our faith, and among our people. But now it is our duty to welcome those who wish to join in our company, the strangers in our midst who are *truly* the children of Abraham.

Shabbat Shalom!