

Nov. 6, 1992 "Sometimes, Things Get So Bad You Just Have to Stay"

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You know, when a rabbi stands up like this in front of a congregation, people listen. Ever since the first time I gave a sermon, I've been haunted by the silence of people listening hard, concentrating on what I said. When a rabbi stands like this, it is because the people have given him their trust. When a rabbi speaks, she has the power built by long years of tradition. A rabbi has a responsibility that is awesome, as it should be. When I think about what I am challenged with as a rabbi, I should be humbled and terrified.

I wonder why I am here. What makes one want to be a rabbi? The power? The prestige? These are seductive lures that go with many professions and all too often with politics. But they don't belong here – and we all know that.

How did I decide to become a rabbi? Did I get some kind of Divine call? Did I walk into a Temple one day and see a wonderful vision as Isaiah did? Was I, like Debra, told what to do by some mysterious voice? I don't know any rabbis who believe they were chosen while in the womb or anointed with oil as children. We don't seem to be so different from other people. My parents took care of me, I went to school. And I'm here. Some reason brought me here.

The rabbis wanted to know where Abraham was coming from. What was his life like before he became the adult our Torah portion speaks of? The Midrash fills in the details. Abraham lived in UR. His parents loved him, he went to school, he helped his father out in the family business. And one day, when the time was right, God leaned down and tapped Abraham on the shoulder and said, "Go on." Abraham probably stood there amazed, scratching his head, and rubbing his numb shoulder. What did God want him to do? God wanted Abraham to grow. God probably said, sounding like George Burns, "You are a bright young person, you like people, you wonder about the stars and the wind and the color of the leaves in autumn. I want you to know something; I believe in you. I want you to believe in me." And Abraham did. He believed in that voice, as we all believe in our own "voices".

The next day, Abraham's father gave him the keys to the business and told him, "Mind the store." The family ran an idol-making shop, as you recall. So, there was

Abraham, behind a cash register. He was there all day, and when people came in he dissuaded them from buying anything. When you work around things people worship, it's not easy to tell them that what they really want is something else. As rabbis we are often in the position of telling people exactly that; "You really don't want this, you really don't need that. It's all empty, as cold and hard as any idol." I know how some people look at me when I speak like this. "There's the rabbi talking," they say – and roar out of the Temple parking lot.

How do I know what to tell people? I only wish that I was as sure as Abraham was when he smashed the idols. I only wish that I could take over a Rolls Royce dealership for an afternoon, wreck all the cars but one and leave its motor running. The manager would come back, and I would point, "That one, did it? They were arguing who was the most fuel efficient..." It's easy to tell what's right and wrong when you see a Rolls Royce gliding down Dodge Street.

But how can I be sure? Who am I to say, "I know the right way and that's not it." There are more than enough demagogues around; we don't need to add to their number.

I am a rabbi, see? I have this tradition behind me that is somewhat older than industrial capitalism. I have access to an amazing amount of inspired human reasoning, and I can use it to help make this world make sense to people, to Jews.

The folks I deal with, like me, want answers. Especially easy answers. They want me to be sure. They need me to know. But there aren't very many "sure things" anymore. Maybe that's why people want their rabbi to have the answers. You know, someone lied to a lot of people once when it was said, "There are answers to everything." Go home and look in your books. There are no answers. Our tradition is filled with questions and journeys. If we rabbis are unsure about the answers, at least we can direct people to consider the journey.

Look at Abraham. When you read about him, he is always going somewhere. Always moving. God said, "Lech L'cha – go on now," and he went. The journey, the process is the important thing. The process of becoming, of changing – that's the dynamic of Jewish history, the Jewish search.

What did Abraham come up with on his journeys? Well, some of the same things that we come up with on our own. He learned about right and wrong. He learned how to defend his principles. In the Torah story, Abraham's nephew, Lot was living over by Sodom when this vast army came by and grabbed him, his family and all their possessions. When Abraham heard, he was off-in-a-flash with his 318 boys, and they wiped out the army and saved Lot and his people. He could have stayed home, sitting with Sarah, watching T.V., but he didn't. His family was in danger, fellow human beings. Someone asked him about it later and Abraham sort of shrugged and said something about "the principle of the thing...my brother's keeper", and "and if not now when..." This voice came to him and said, "Abraham, Lech L'cha" – and he went. That is something we should think about the next time we talk about Soviet Jewry, or the Falasha, or pregnant teenagers or forgotten Jews of anywhere U.S.A. Or Afro-American frustration, or Native Americans. They are our family; they are our concern.

At this point where our Torah portion begins, God leaned down again and said, "Lech L'cha, get going, move!" Why did God say that? Ramban explains that Ur was full of corruption, idol worship and inhumanity. Sometimes things get so bad you just have to leave. God wanted Abraham to get out of the entire area. Even Haran was not far enough away from the evil influence of Ur. Abraham had to separate himself from it physically and symbolically, as if to say, "No, that's not what I'm into, what I believe in. I am walking away from it."

With us rabbis, it's different. Sometimes things get so bad you just have to stay. Ur is pretty much all over these days. At times it seems to fill the air. It poisons the water and people's minds. Its gods are power, and gold and it crushes the poor, the lonely and the stranger. It ruins all things. Our job isn't to get out of this modern-day Ur, it's to get into it, to throw down idols, to repair, to change and to renew. "Lech L'cha" the voice says to all of us, "Get started here, wherever you are, make it better."

There is this beautiful image of Abraham as a wondering preacher, spreading the word on his travels. "Lech L'cha," God said, "Go spread the word, and go tell the people about Me, that it doesn't all have to be like Ur." And so, we, too, wonder. We try to spread

the word. To those who would listen and to those who turn away. And we realize that to a great extent the survival of this people depends on the commitment of those like us, who care.

So, what are we going to do about that? It's frightening, all this responsibility, the feeling of having to do something and not wait. The odds are lousy – far worse than a great army against 318. It's enough to make you nervous, isn't it? There are days when I start questioning whether or not another line of work might be healthier, like real estate or oil speculation.

What am I going to do? Run? Where to? Stop reading the paper? Listening to the news? Dig a fallout shelter? Buy a gun and lock myself in? It will still find you. You are stuck with it. But, from above and from within a voice comes up and whispers "Lech L'cha."

Abraham did not hesitate, though he might have. Instead, he made a covenant with a power which moves this world. As Jews we can learn from Abraham: Abraham promised to be responsive. To tell the people "No!" when he thought that was what was needed. To help those in trouble. To take a stand. He sometimes slipped-up but he always learned from his mistakes.

The call came to Abraham alone, "Lech L'cha, go on, get yourself out of the Ur you are in." But he knew that meant to take out his wife and family, and all of his people. He was open to change. He knew his power yet controlled his ego. He watched his words. He listened carefully. We too must learn to do these things. and we must learn to tune our ears so that, like Abraham, every now and then when we see something that needs doing, we will hear the voice saying, "Go on – Lech L'cha, Lech L'cha..."