

PARASHAS LECH LECHA

The Kindness Factor

Kindness is gentle. Faith is fierce. Kindness is soft. Faith is inflexible. Kindness is accommodating. Faith is dogmatic. Does this mean that a person cannot be kind and faithful at the same time. Of course not. A person can certainly be kind-hearted to other people yet rigidly faithful in his own beliefs. Nonetheless, these two characteristics tap into distinctly different parts of the psyche.

And yet, in this week's Torah portion we find a strange paradox. Abraham, the first patriarch of the Jewish people, is introduced as the paragon of faith. In a world seething with idolatry, Abraham sees through the myth and the nonsense and recognizes the one and only eternal omnipotent Creator. With extraordinary faith, he follows Hashem's commands enthusiastically and without question. He becomes the ultimate man of faith, the perfect role model for all future generations.

At the same time, Abraham emerges from the pages of the Torah as a man of incredible kindness. Amazingly, he even begs leave from a divine encounter to run after three ragged dusty travelers and invite them into his home. There is no greater role model for kindness and hospitality than Abraham in all the history of the world.

Is it merely a coincidence that the same person achieved the ultimate levels of kindness and faith, these two widely disparate virtues? Or is there indeed some connection between the two?

Let us reflect for a moment on a rather intriguing question. For twenty generations before Abraham, idolatry had held the world in an iron grip. No voice of reason declared the unity of the Master of the Universe until Abraham. Why was this so? Were there no intelligent people among the millions who passed through the world during this time? Was there no one clever enough to discern the utter foolishness of the idolatrous cults?

Quite likely, there were considerably more than a few people capable of recognizing the Creator in the centuries before Abraham. Why didn't they? Because they preferred not to think about it.

Idolatry demanded a considerable amount of obeisance from people, but it also allowed them unlimited license. The idolatrous cults espoused no systems of morality. They did not encourage self-improvement and the striving for transcendent spirituality. Instead, they

allowed, and even encouraged, the indulgence of every carnal impulse. The people of those times were steeped in greed and all sorts of gratification, and they had little interest in ideologies that would restrict their pleasures.

Why then was Abraham able to escape this mold? Because his innate kindness and compassion led him to rise above base egotism. Because he was able to look beyond himself, he recognized the truth of the universe. It was his kindness that led him to faith.

A young man from a religious family strayed and eventually abandoned his religion altogether. His family persuaded him to discuss his newly chosen way of life with a certain great sage.

"Tell me, young man," said the sage. "Why did you abandon the ways of your forefathers?"

"Because they didn't make sense," the young man replied, and he went on to list numerous questions and arguments.

The sage listened gravely and nodded from time to time.

"Very interesting," he said. "You know, of course, that it's not the first time we've heard these questions. When did you first think about them?"

"Well," said the young man, fidgeting. "In the last year or two."

"When you discovered the outside world?" asked the sage.

"Yes," the young man replied, his voice barely audible.

"You are an intelligent young fellow," said the sage. "Yet you didn't have these question until recently. You know why? Because you had no need for them. But now that you see what kind of opportunities await you out there, you needed these questions to set you free."

In our own lives, contemporary society constantly presents us with all sorts of distractions and temptations which can easily lead us away from the pure path of Judaism. In these circumstances, it is easy to rationalize, to tell ourselves that the Torah is being unnecessarily stringent in certain things and that a little bit of this and just a wee bit of that cannot really do any harm. But is it truly our rationalism speaking? Or is it perhaps our wants and desires? Only when we rise above our self interest can we expect to recognize the true meaning of life.