

Lekh Lekha & The Refugee Condition

Congregation Sha'ar Zahav | HIAS National Refugee Shabbat

10.19.2018 - 11 Cheshvan 5779

At the end of *noach*, the Torah portion we read last week, we meet Avram: well before his name is changed into Avraham; when he is still a son, and not yet, and not by a long shot, a father, let alone a Patriarch. Avram is the son of Terach, ninth in the sequence of Noah's descendants. At this stage in the narrative of Genesis, we know that Avram is a really important character not from the Bible, but from aggadic sources (the narrative portions of rabbinic literature). Ginzberg, in his *Legends of the Jews* ([1909: I:5](#)), summarizes them in a story that foreshadows the birth of Moses and Jesus. A star announces Avram's birth, an evil king (Nimrod) wants all newborns dead, Avram's mother delivers him in a cave, and abandons him there:

[...] without a nurse, [...] he began to wail. God sent Gabriel down to give him milk to drink [...] until he was ten days old. Then he arose and walked about, [...]. When the sun sank, and the stars came forth, he said, "These are the gods!" But [...] dawn came, and the stars could be seen no longer, and then he said, "I will not pay worship to these, for they are no gods." Thereupon the sun came forth, and he spoke, "This is my god, whom I will extol." But again the sun set, and he said, "This is no god," and beholding the moon, Avram called it his god to whom he would pay Divine homage. Then the moon was obscured, and he cried out: "This, too, is no god! There is One who sets them all in motion." Avram was still communing with himself when the angel Gabriel approached him and met him with the greeting, "Peace be with thee," and Abraham returned, "With thee be peace," and asked, "Who art thou?" And Gabriel answered, and said, "I am the angel Gabriel, the messenger of God," and he led Abraham to a spring of water nearby, and Abraham washed his face and his hands and feet, and he prayed to God, bowing down and prostrating himself.

This story shows how the rabbis thought of Abraham as a "born patriarch" of sorts, a leader since the time he was an infant. The Midrash continues describing baby

Avram walking to town, and to the wilderness nearby, and his mom looking for him there, and him declaring to her that there's a god above Nimrod (an obviously wicked king, who posed as god):

The mother: "My son, is there a God beside Nimrod?" Abraham: "Yes, mother, the God of the heavens and the God of the earth, He is also the God of Nimrod son of Canaan."

Finally, Avram pursues Nimrod all the way to Babylon, proclaiming his truth to power. This story, all packed within the last lines of last week's parashah, helps us in reading this week's parashah, *lekh lekha*. It seems that the rabbis wanted us know that Avram was already a pretty self-directed young lad well before god made him *the* Patriarch. Actually, Avram is more than just self-directed: he is a *visionary*. A visionary who leads by the power of his vision. How do we know this? By reading the first, powerful verse of the Torah portion. It goes like this:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

Adonai said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."

If we stay with the English translation, though, Avram here is no great visionary. God first tells Avram to *lekh lekha*—which translates into "go forth!"—and then assures him that he will arrive to the land that god will show him. The key term here is *erekha*—which translates into "I will show you," but also into "I will cause you to see." So in this reading, Avram only goes forth when god tells him to do so, only sees what god shows him. But if we rely on one of the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, we find a different meaning. Here is Targum Onkelos (2nd century CE):

וַאֲמַר יְיָ לְאַבְרָם אֵיזֵל לְךָ מֵאֶרְעָךָ וּמִיְלֻדוֹתֶךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבוּךָ לְאֶרְעָא דִּי אַחְזַנְךָ

The Aramaic translation does not differ too much from the Hebrew, except for that final verb. Instead of *erekha* (“I will show you”), we read *achazinakh*, literally: “I will cause you to envision,” rather than “I will cause you to see.” Now, envisioning, or having a vision (in Hebrew, *chazon*), even when caused by god, is a whole different ball game from seeing. Having a vision means seeing what others—I dare say, god included—do not see. It also means, quite simply, having a *dream*. Dr. Martin Luther King’s foundational speech is not only about the American dream, it’s about *the dream as vision*. A prophetic vision, a vision of a world to come, in which civil and political rights—the foundational component of human rights—are guaranteed for all. Avram’s and MLK’s visions echo powerfully to this day. Especially, and once again, in our days.

Avram’s vision involves, as we have learned, displacing himself in order to establish a land (a world) ruled according to the unity of a transcending god, a transcending principle of justice *that concerns all human beings*. In this, Avram is the true heir to Noah’s generation, a generation of humans who did not know the Ten Commandments, the Torah of Moses. But Avram is also the founder of a new generation. Through his vision of displacement, Avram is about to become a Hebrew. The root of his name, עבר, is connected with both the word עברי, “Hebrew,” (or “Jewish”), and to a verb that indicates crossing, passing, moving (לעבור). Avram’s choice to displace himself makes him a Hebrew by choice, a migrant by design. His wandering, which comes to define all Hebrews, and Jews, after him, is not un-necessary. His displacement is a displacement with a purpose, and with a vision. A vision of justice and legality.

This week, on HIAS National Refugee Shabbat, as on all other weeks but perhaps a bit more so, our thoughts go to those in our world that experience needless and enforced displacement more than anyone else on earth: refugees. Who are refugees? Their definition today is bound to the legal definitions sanctioned by the United Nations in 1951. To summarize, they are human beings who not only leave their home out of necessity but who cannot return to their home without risking their lives and that of their families. In stark contrast to Avram's experience in the first verse of *lekh lekha*, refugees are those in our human family who experience directly what it means to leave home, when home, in the words of refugee poet Warsan Shire, "is the mouth of a shark." They are those amongst us who, as Jacques Derrida used to say (and also wrote, at one point), like all "exiles, foreigners, all the wandering Jews in the world," carry their "native land [...] on the soles of their shoes."

The legal definition of refugees emerged from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights formulated seventy years ago in 1948, in no small part—as James Loeffler details in a recent book, *Rooted Cosmopolitans*—thanks to the efforts of a group of Jewish legal scholars. Their references were drawn directly from the Jewish experience of the first half of the 20th century. First, with the First World War, which had uprooted millions across Europe, and beyond, including Jews. And later with the Holocaust and its aftermaths, when hundreds of thousands of survivors had no home and had to invent a new one for themselves. Their references were also drawn from the analysis of a great visionary of those dark times, a woman, the German Jewish American thinker, Hannah Arendt. In researching the "origins of totalitarianism," Arendt

had delved at length on the human condition of displacement in modern times. Her conclusions highlighted one of the most unsettling and inconvenient truths of our days. Stateless refugees do not belong, by definition, to any sanctioned national home. By falling between the cracks of a world ruled by nation states and their borders, stateless refugees are human beings who, legally, do not and cannot enjoy human rights. A crucial consequence of this dilemma—namely, that human rights can only be enforced under the umbrella of national rights—is that the legal status of stateless refugees is subject to one and only rule, that of the police. The same police that rules over criminals, making refugees *de facto* criminals. If we follow this line of thought it is easy to understand how easy it is, in our world, to criminalize refugees, to make the stranger an enemy. Hannah Arendt's lesson was reaffirmed by Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish survivor of Auschwitz whose writings are a stark reminder of the dangers of fascism. In the preface to his first memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi wrote:

To many, individuals and peoples alike, it may happen to believe, with varying degrees of awareness, that "all strangers are enemies." For the most part, such a belief lies at the bottom of the soul, like a latent infection; it manifests itself through random and uncoordinated acts, and it is not at the foundation of a system of thought. But when this does occur, when the unsaid dogma becomes the major premise of a syllogism, then, at the end of such a train of thoughts, one finds the Lager [death camp]. The Lager is the result of a world vision that has been carried to its consequences through rigorous coherence: as long as the vision exists, its consequences are a threat to us. The history of extermination camps should be understood by all as a sinister alarm signal.

The same lesson was also understood, in more recent times, by Steven Spielberg, with his 2004 movie, *The Terminal*, which is inspired by the true story of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian refugee who lived in the departure lounge of

Terminal One in Charles de Gaulle Airport for eighteen years, from 1988 until 2006. Nasserri had legally entered the French airport, but could neither be admitted into France, nor did he have a country that he could be repatriated to. At the airport's international transit area, he lived in a legal loop, where all his human rights were suspended. We may not notice this, but all of us who travel internationally routinely inhabit such legal no man's land. These moments of passage, from the aircraft to baggage pickup, should be stark reminders of the ephemeral nature of our own human rights, and of how close we are, or could be, to refugees.

To conclude with one last stark reminder, let me add that I descend directly from refugees. I often bring this up in my teaching: I ask who, in class, is or descends from illegal immigrants, and immediately raise my hand. I do not do this out of pride, but out of solidarity. One of my most prized possession is a small photograph. It depicts my mother, age two, in a refugee camp in Switzerland, where my grandparents were fortunate to find refuge since January 1944, after living in hiding in Northern Italy, where she was born the year before. In the photo, the biggest part of her is her eyes. I cherish this photograph, my own private *lekh lekha*, which my mom was generous enough to entrust me with on my own journey across the globe, because it is a powerful reminder of where I really come from, and an equally powerful warning of where I could, one day, myself, or my descendants, go, if I do not remain alert and sensitive enough in welcoming the other. A warning of what it means to be considered less than human in a world that has lost its vision for justice.