



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

## SHABBAT SHALOM

30 - 31 October, 2009

13 Cheshvan 5770

Parashat Lech Lecha  
(Genesis 12:1-17:27)

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Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

In Jewish tradition there are two Abrahams—the Abraham of the Torah and the Abraham of the midrash. The Abraham of the midrash is a spiritually precocious *wunderkind*, who as a child discerned profound religious truths. This is the Abraham who, in everyone's favorite Bible story that isn't in the Bible, smashes the idols in his father's shop in an act of militant monotheism. The Rabbis created this compelling backstory to solve a mystery surrounding the Abraham of the Torah. There is a question about this Abraham that the Torah account leaves hanging: Why him? Why did God choose this man as the foundation stone of the Jewish people?

The midrashic stories of the early life of the patriarch are themselves holy texts and they convey many important teachings, but there is great value as well in the Torah's terse and mysterious account of the call of Abraham. As the Torah relates the story, we know nothing of Abraham's upbringing or his relationship with God before he is sent on his divine mission. Abraham may already know of HaShem, but as far as we know "lech lecha" — "go forth" — are the first words God has ever spoken to him.

This command and the promise to make Abraham "a great nation" come like a lightning strike, without warning or explanation. While we learn later that Abraham has commendable qualities, we also learn that he has serious flaws. The message of the unexplained choice of this complex individual seems to be that God can make any person great. One does not have to be perfect to set out on a spiritual journey. What is required is to be willing. Avram (for he has not yet become "Avraham") fulfills this requirement. He responds to God's call with action rather than words: *Avram went forth as the Lord had commanded him.*

There is no need to choose the enigmatic Abraham of the Torah over the spiritual genius of the midrash. Both conceptions are vehicles of religious truth. We can say, however, that the Abraham of the unadorned Genesis narrative is more like us. We may not be natural born theologians, but we can all be attuned to God's call. We can be ready to act when confronted with "lech lecha" moments.

Many such moments present themselves in our lives. They occur at key junction points. Should I take this job? Should I move to this place? Should I marry this person? Should I make a radical break from what I have known or is this where I belong? Although these calls well up from within, they are akin to God's call of Abraham. And like Abraham we do not need to be perfect to set out on the journey. Like Abraham, we do not have to know exactly where we are going. In fact, we cannot know this. Abraham was not told where he was being sent, but commanded to go "to a land that I will show you." We may have some idea of where we are headed, but in the end it is still to a place God will show us in due time.

The decision to found the UJC was a lech lecha moment. This was a journey into the unknown. The need for a Progressive synagogue — the call — was clear, but nothing else. Now we live in the land that God showed us, all because there were people with the courage to act when the times called out "lech lecha".

This year, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the UJC, we have again come to a place of "lech lecha." The call is different than it was 20 years ago, but just as insistent. Now that we know we can survive, we are called to thrive. Writing a new Torah is our Abrahamic act of faith. Do we know that all the families of the UJC will answer this call to fulfill the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah? Can we be certain that we all will make the necessary commitment to this next stage of our spiritual journey? We cannot know these things, but given who we are and what we have already done, we must believe that no one will let this call of "lech lecha" go unanswered.

All Blessings  
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