The Jewish Work Ethic

D’var Torah (Sermon) for Lekh Lekhah or Chayey Sarah 5779/2018
Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

This d’var Torah was originally delivered at Sha’arei Orah, Bala Cynwyd, PA, for Lekh Lekah 5779. An alternative introduction is offered for Chayey Sarah (borrowing text from my sermon on the first day of Rosh Hashanah 5779). The conclusion was adjusted in light of events occurring after Shabbat Lekh Lekah.

Introduction for Lekh Lekah

Listen, daughter, see and incline your ear, forget your nation and your father’s house; The King desires your beauty for He is your lord and you shall bow to him.¹

1 Psalms 45:11-12.
2 A petichta, a common midrashic form which uses a seemingly unrelated verse, generally from a later biblical books, to introduce a Torah portion.
3 Genesis 12:1.
4 Genesis Rabbah 39:1:

It is akin to one who was travelling from one place to another and saw a burning castle. He said “should one conclude (lit: say) that there is no one in charge of the castle?” The owner appeared and said to him, “I am the owner (lit: master) of this castle.” Similarly, since our ancestor Abraham said, “should one conclude (lit: say) that there is no one in charge of this world?” The Holy One Blessed is He appeared to him and said, “I am the master of the world.” “The King desires your beauty” [means “the King desires] to make you beautiful in this word.” “And you shall bow to him,” refers to “and the LORD said to Abram [go for yourself …].”}

¹ Psalms 45:11-12.
Introduction for Chayey Sarah

In a conversation with his servant toward the end of Abraham’s life, Abraham at one point refers to God as "ה' א-לֹהֵי הַשָּמַיִם וֵא-לֹהֵי הָאָרֶץ," the LORD, God of heaven and earth," and at another point as "ה' א-לֹהֵי הַשָּמַיִם אָשֶר לְקָחַנִי מִׁבֵית אָבִי," the LORD God of heaven who took me from the house of my father." The rabbis noticed that when Abraham speaks of God’s first call to Abraham, Abraham only refers to God as “the God of heaven,” but when Abraham speaks of God at the present moment, Abraham refers to God as “God of heaven and earth.” The midrash explains:

עד שלא בא אברהם אבינו לעולם כביכול לא היה הקדוש ברוך הוא מלך אלא על השמים בלבד ... אבל משאב אברהם באים על השמים המלכים על השמים על הארץ ... Until Abraham came into the world, as if it were possible, the Holy One Blessed is He was only King of heaven ... but when Abraham our patriarch came into the word, Abraham made him King on heaven and earth.

Similarly, in the midrash on God’s call to Abraham in Parashaht Lekh Lekhah, Rabbi Yitzhak uses the metaphor of a burning castle to explain that because of the sorry state of the world Abraham wondered whether people should conclude that God was not in charge of the world. God responded to Abraham not only that God is in charge of the world, but also that it would be Abraham’s responsibility and honor to bring the people of the world to follow God’s ways. This honor is indicated in the phrase in Psalms, “וְיִתְאָו הַמֶּלֶּךְ יָפְי,” most simply translated as “the King desires your beauty” but understood as “the King [i.e. God] wants to make you beautiful,” i.e. to honor Abraham by allowing Abraham to be the one to lead people to follow God’s chosen path on earth.

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5 Genesis 24:3.
7 Sifre Devarim 313 s.v. יבוננהו. C.f.: Genesis Rabbah Chapter 59 אשובך ב', א-לֹהֵי השמים א-לֹהֵי השמים י-תאו ה-ל נַה שְׁלֹות 석ו וּלְכִתֵּי א-לֹהֵי השמים, כְּשִׁירָה י-תאו ה-ל נַה שְׁלֹות 석ו וּלְכִתֵּי א-לֹהֵי השמים, כְּשִׁירָה י-תאו ה-ל נַה שְׁלֹות 석ו וּלְכִתֵּי א-לֹהֵי השמים ג.operations
8 See footnote 4 and accompanying text.
Continuation for Lekh Lekhah/Chayey Sarah

These midrashic teachings work to answer the age-old questions of why evil exists in the world. As several of the commentators on the burning castle metaphor explain, Abraham wonders why there was suffering in the world, and God essentially responds that that suffering is by God’s design a result of humanity’s evil deeds. The challenge humanity faces is to create the kind and just world that can alleviate and eventually even eliminate suffering.

This philosophy is at the same time compelling and troubling in ways that I could not possibly do justice to in this d’var Torah. We could, and probably should, spend the rest of our lives contemplating what we think about this understanding. However, today I’d like to focus on a suggestion about how perhaps we should feel about what this analysis says about our role in the world.

Famously, in Parkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), Ben Zoma teaches, “יאוחו עשיר who is rich, the one who is happy with his lot.” On the surface, this teaching tells us to be content with what we have got in life, that we should not be desperate for more or better in ways that will lead at least to disappointment and at worst to wrongdoing. However, there is another meaning that is hinted at in the prooftext offered by Ben Zoma from Psalms: "ךְיְגִיעַ כַּפֶּיךָ כִּי תֹאכֵל אַשְרֶּךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ, you who toil by hand, when you eat, you will be fortunate and it will be good for you." Based on this prooftext, it seems that Ben Zoma is advocating not for complacency but for a sense of appreciation for the fact that we have to work for a living, that we aren’t independently wealthy and that the world is not handed to us on a silver platter. Because we have to earn our living, we can take pride in what we accomplished as we enjoy the fruits of our labor.

I wonder if we might apply a similar approach to how we feel about the challenge that we have inherited from our ancestors, the challenge to perfect God’s world. A perfect world is not handed to us on a silver platter. Rather, day in and day out, just as we are challenged to make a living, we are challenged to make our world a better place. The midrash on Lekh Lekhah applies to Abraham the words, "וְיִׁתְאָו הַמֶּלֶּךְ יָפְיֵךְ, God midrash be`turo, but we have to

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9 See e.g. Pardes Reshe on Vayikra 26:3, where he writes, "ואל חといった מה 정 말ל לביהמה 'הוא ירא את", וראה الأمير מדרש ברה מובא בה Thế.

10 Mishna Avot 4:1.
11 See e.g. Rashi’s commentary on Avot 4:1.
12 Psalms 128:2, quoted in Mishna Avot 4:1.
13 I forget where I originally heard this observation, but it is vaguely hinted toward in the comment where he writes, "... ואילו לא היה משמח מיגיע כפו הוא אוכל מאי אשרי איכא" and in the following comment:

מפרוש ה' מימושי אוגות,column שני ערך בsetLabel א
איהו עשיר כו' ישיבנו אתו יומינו או"ל ישיאו הוא שעון עריות הכה על יראייה בחלקה ובחלקה והנה מיגיע

:ככו דעותינו לעצירת שאם עשו האמת
desires to make you beautiful,” by arguing that God was honoring Abraham by allowing him the opportunity to be responsible for bringing humanity toward recognizing God as the master of the universe and toward following God’s chosen path. It is our honor to be able to continue that as-yet incomplete mission.

The prophet Isaiah teaches that “יָדוֹ ה’ יְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יִגְבַּהוּ צְבָא־אֵל הָאֵל הַקָּדוֹש נִקְדָש בִּצְדָקָה the LORD of Hosts is exalted through justice and the holy God is sanctified through righteousness.” It follows, then, that if our lot in life is to continue Abraham’s mission of establishing God’s kingdom on earth, we fulfill that mission through acts of caring and compassion, justice and righteousness.

An imperfect world can certainly drag us down. There are many things we lament about our world – a lack of justice, a lack of civility, the pain of the hungry and the anguish of the bereaved. A kind and just world doesn't grow on trees, and sometimes we wish it did. What Ben Zoma teaches about our financial state applies equally to our sociological state. We can be happy, indeed fortunate, if we accept that our lot in life is not so much the disappointments we experience but the challenge that is set before us to respond to those disappointments – to work as hard, day in and day out, to establish justice and goodness in the world as we do to provide a living for ourselves and our families. In so doing, we have the opportunity to take pride in the justice and righteousness that we establish on earth through our deeds as individuals and as a community.

Tragically, the past week or so has forced up to grapple with where we, as a community, have failed. We had politically motivated letter bombs, followed by a man trying to get into an African-American church with his gun and eventually instead killing 2 African-Americans in a Kroger grocery store, followed by 11 Jews shot dead at Shabbat davening in Pittsburgh. But while those moments may have dominated our consciousness for the moment, we shouldn’t allow them to dominate our sense of the goodness of humanity. Because this past week also featured so many examples, great and small, of our compassion for one another. First responders rushed to the aid of the people in need. Countless laypeople and clergy from countless ethnic and religious backgrounds gathered to proclaim their commitment to peace and brotherhood. My friend and colleague Rabbi Stephen Belsky of Oak Park, Michigan, reported on Facebook that he “got an unexpected hug from a Non-Jewish stranger expressing sympathy for the antisemitic massacre in Pittsburgh.” His friends responded with other examples – an Arab gentleman giving a Jewish person free parking in downtown Detroit; a Jewish woman in Birmingham, Michigan, who had to assume that the stranger who wished her “a really nice day,” was responding to the tragedy in Pittsburgh; a woman in Los Angeles who reported how her “coworkers hugged, texted or checked in”

14 Isaiah 5:16.
15 CF my sermon for the first day of Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018 at https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/rosh-hashanah-making-god-king/.
16 See e.g. https://utj.org/viewpoints/videos/sussman-vigil-pittsburgh/.
with her so that she “felt much warmth in this horrible aftermath.” Yes, there is ugliness in this world – and it is our responsibility to shout aloud against it and mourn its existence. But let’s not let that anger and hurt cause us to lose sight of how many people there are of all faiths and backgrounds who take part in realizing Abraham’s mission every day.

As God called on Abraham to begin his mission, God promised Abraham ‘ךָוְּאֶּעֶּשְךָ גָדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶּכְךָ וַאֲגַדְלָה שְמֶּךָ וֶּהְיֵה בְרָכָה’ and I will make you a great nation and I will magnify your name, and you will be a blessing.” The honor God brought to Abraham was the benefit that he would be privileged to bestow upon the world through his own deeds and the deeds of his successors. Who is rich? The one who is happy with her lot. May our lives be enhanced with the realization of our awesome privilege, opportunity, and responsibility to continue Abraham’s mission and to do our part in establishing on earth God’s dominion, and with it the gifts of justice, kindness, and compassion.