



Parashat Lekh Lekha

Superman or Super-Man?

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When actor and activist Christopher Reeve died there were the expected comparisons between his role in Superman movies to his real-life role as an advocate for victims of spinal-cord injuries. In his case, the person was even greater than the screen version.

We all have people in our lives, present and past, who have an aura about them that is larger than life. When I study the *parsha* from my maternal grandfather's 1860 edition of the *Humash*, I am reminded of my aunt's description of him as "one of a long line of *tzaddikim* and scholars," whose grandparents were known as "the most generous people in Vilna," and who were direct descendants of the Gaon of Vilna (the greatest sage of his time).

As proud as I am of my lineage, as well as humbled, I understand that my relatives were not perfect. They had strengths and weaknesses; they made mistakes; they did the kinds of things that make all of us "a little lower than angels." (Psalms 8:5)

I bring this issue up because this week's *parasha* marks the beginning of Jewish history and introduces us to our first Jewish ancestor: Avraham (originally called Avram). Many traditional commentators look back in time, through the lenses of a more developed Jewish religion, and see Avraham as the prototype of a Rabbinic Jew. They maintain that Avraham kept *Shabbat*, ate only *Kosher* food, held purely monotheistic beliefs and was consistently ethical according to Talmudic standards. Any action or word that might cast doubt on this perfect image (such as when he tries to pass off his wife as his sister in Egypt) is explained away as based on private, divine communications or prophecies. As readers, therefore, how could we ever possibly find fault with any of Avraham's actions? After all, he was super-human!

There is, however, another approach, one that sees Avraham's greatness precisely in his human-ness. The first verse of the *parasha* points the way. "The Lord said to Avram, 'Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" Early commentators pointed out that God did not simply say, "Go to Canaan!" Instead God "broke the news" slowly to Avram, in bits and pieces, as a way to acknowledge the difficulty of leaving one's familiar surroundings, up to and including leaving one's home.

God's request was all about change: a change of place, a change of belief, a change of personal mission. Several commentators note that the words "*lekh lekha*" (go forth) literally mean "go to yourself" – go find yourself, go become yourself. The Torah clearly presents

Avraham, not as a super-hero, but as a developing human being, a person with very real emotions, with the capacity to make mistakes, as well as the potential to do great things.

It is through carefully studying the very human struggles undertaken by Biblical personalities that we, centuries later, learn and grow. To assume that our Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs were perfect not only violates the intention of the Torah, but makes the Torah inaccessible to us mere mortals. Avraham, like my grandfather, was not Superman, but a super-man.

I think the greatest challenge and opportunity we have as parents and educators is to look at children not only as they are now, but to imagine them in terms of who they will become. It demands a balance of realism and dreaming, hands-on action and watching from the side, knowing when to help and when to let children fail...and a lot of patience and prayer! May we all see our children grow into unique super-mentsches!

AS A FAMILY:

What is one thing your (fill in the blank: grandmother, grandfather, etc.) was known for (e.g. kindness, humor, etc.).

Find out one story about that person.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. How old was Avram when he left his home?
2. Where was his home?
3. Who did Avram take with him?
4. How old was Avram?
5. Why did Avram leave Canaan for Egypt?
6. What did he tell Sarah to do when they got to Egypt? Why?
7. Why do Avram and Lot part ways?
8. How do they decide who goes where?
9. What happened to Lot?
10. What sign does God give Avram?
11. Who is Hagar?
12. Who is Avram's first son? What does his name mean?
13. Why was Avram's name changed? What does his new name mean?
14. How old was Avram when he had a brit Milah?
15. To what is Sarah's name changed?