

# Jews of All Stripes

Parasha Lech Lecha 5779

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If I were to poll the people in this room regarding their definition of Judaism, most answers would likely involve halacha, Jewish law, in some way. Judaism, as we think about it, certainly in an Orthodox synagogue, is centered around Shabbos, Kosher, prayer, the study of Torah and other halachic obligations. We might say that at this point in our history the definition of Judaism is almost synonymous with halacha, one can hardly imagine one without the other. The halacha is both Judaism's central contribution to world religious thought – the notion that religion must include a supreme set of practices and rituals – as well as the organizing idea of Jewish life and thought.

I must confess that all this very often presents a challenge to me. American Judaism is largely uninterested in halacha and certainly does not see halacha as the supreme definition of Judaism. In my professional experiences throughout this community, I oftentimes find myself sitting at a meeting or a table with people who are discussing their commitment to Judaism and Jewish life, but I am aware that for them Judaism is not fundamentally a system of halacha. They are speaking about Judaism and I am speaking about Judaism, and we share a strong love and devotion for Judaism, but I am aware that we mean two different things. I know and understand well my conception of Judaism as a halachic concept – as Shabbos and kosher and prayers – but I struggle to understand what Judaism means without those concepts at its core.

And all of this brings us to the great figure introduced in this morning's reading, Avraham – the founding father of Judaism. We all know Avraham's immortal contributions to human history, he founded Judaism and all that has come from that. What is less clear in the text of the Torah is his actual message, in fact it's so unclear that we are almost told nothing regarding Avraham's actual teachings or way of life. The Torah tells some stories, shares some of his charitable character traits, but never identifies at any length Avraham's actual teachings and beliefs which he promoted. We are left with a vague sense of a founder of Judaism who promoted something which developed into Judaism. Not very satisfying.

A vacuum such as this of course gets filled very quickly. The Talmudic rabbis tell us that Avraham kept all the laws of the Torah and even studied extensively Talmudic law!

("Avraham's tractate Avodah Zarah had 400 chapters in it" – Avodah Zarah 14b) The Rabbinic Midrashim speak of his tremendous self-sacrifice – including being thrown in a fiery pit – in order to oppose paganism.

Maimonides, who valued a philosophic type of Judaism, retells the story of Avraham as a towering philosopher who comes to the conclusion of God's existence through the power of his logic. Kuzari, who valued prophecy over philosophy, tells of Avraham the prophet.

I had a professor who used to say that when great Jewish thinkers give their views on Avraham we generally learn more about their own way of thinking than we do about Avraham himself. We learn from all this that the Talmudic rabbis emphasized halacha as the core of Judaism, we see the Midrashim's highlighting self-sacrifice, we see Maimonides' faith in philosophy and Kuzari's reverence for prophecy. But we have yet to uncover Avraham's essential idea, which makes him our founding father.

Let us return to the text. In the text we are not told of specific belief or practices which makes Avraham the founder of Judaism. (Circumcision is the only command he's given.) Avraham is rather presented as the founder of Judaism without being tied to a particular form, and this is significant. Many have written on the differences between Judaism and other religions origin stories. Judaism's is unique in many ways. The best known difference is that whereas other religions maintain a miracle happened early on, but only a few people saw it, Judaism makes the claim that millions of people witnessed the revelation at Sinai. Another key difference involves the fact that Judaism begins with the story not of a movement, or ideology, or great leader, but of a family. Only after generations of the family living their Judaism does the great leader and movement, in the form of Moshe, appear. Moshe Rabbeinu is our teacher and leader, but Avraham Avinu is our father.

But here we have hit on another core difference. Other religions begin with a leader who sets out the vision for that religion which essentially remains unchanged. It can be tweaked, it can be polished and reformulated for later generations, but the founder is also the one who identifies the core of that religion. Judaism is different, the founder did not articulate the core beliefs in the way Moshe would. Avraham started off Judaism, and then many generations later Moshe came and changed everything by adding in the halacha. The founder was not synonymous with how Judaism would come to be practiced and that is a very unusual sort of founder.

I return to our times. The definition of Judaism for many Jews is unlike the classical one - the Torah given to Moshe at Sinai. And yet, we are inspired by the legacy of Avraham, to continue to work together. We have in Avraham a model of Judaism which was less clear, and less defined by the Torah, as if to say, that as Jews we are bound even to those who don't share our vision of halacha. Jews are commanded to obey the halacha by Moshe, but Avraham taught that we are bound by something prior to that.

It's still unclear to me what Judaism is without halacha, and I have not clarified that through these comments. But in that murkiness we are encouraged by the Torah's description of Avraham to continue forth, to find ways to connect with Jews, even if they differ drastically with us in their viewpoints. And that is Avraham's legacy.