

Lekh I'kha

Genesis 12:1 - 17:27

October 30, 2009

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Shabbat Shalom...

Let me set the scene for you...

The year was 1874, a 14 year old boy somehow slipped onto a passenger freighter at the dock un-noticed. The ship was one of those newer ones, powered by steam engine, but with a set of back up sails just in case the engine would fail. Steam puffing from the chimneys, the anchor was being hoisted up, it was ready to leave port. (Hold this image in your head, I'll come back to this story later.)

This week's Torah portion Lekh L'kha begins with God telling Avram, "*Lekh I'kha*" - Go-you-forth; "*Lekh I'kha*" can also be translated as, "Go for yourself," "Go by yourself" or "Go to yourself", you can choose any, or all of the above on how you want to read this.

"*Lekh I'kha*, Go from your land, from your birth place, from your father's house, to the land that I will let you see". God continued, "I will make a great nation of you and will give-you-blessing and will make your name great. And you shall be a blessing!"

Avram, later renamed Avraham, is known in the Torah as "*ha-ivree*", - "The Hebrew." One meaning of "*ha-ivree*" is "one who is on the other side", or "one who crossed over" .

Both Avraham, and the 14 year old teenager that I mentioned earlier, were about to embark on a journey that would inspire my own journey.

Neither of them knew exactly where they were going, nor what and who they would encounter along the way, nor did they know how the stories of their journeys would affect others; but they are leaving behind their home, their home land, and all that they knew. They are willing to "cross over boundaries" or "go over to the other side"; and I don't mean just physically crossing over, that's the easy part. For most of us, it is our emotions, our own fears of the unknown that hold us back from going forth, from doing things that we want to do.

Avraham was not afraid to think differently from others. There is a midrash (a legend) that goes like this: (and some of you may already know this story) Terah, Avraham's father, was an idol-maker. One day he left Avraham alone to watch his shop. While he was gone, Avraham broke all the idols except one. When his father came back, he asked Avraham who had done this. Avraham replied, "one of the idols smashed the others." Terah said, "don't be silly, they're just stone, they can't do anything." Avraham then replied, "so why do people worship them?"

Remember the teenage stowaway on the steam ship? He too was bold. Let me

tell you a bit more about him. He was 5'3, slight in build; his skin was golden brown from the sun, and he had really long, straight, black hair. It was so long that he wore it in a long braid from the back of his head, and he wrapped his braided hair several times around his head so that it wouldn't get in his way.

The teeanger was my great-grand father (may his memory be a blessing) and he boarded the ship at the port of Shanghai. Back then, to travel across the ocean would take a least 3 to 4 months in not so comfortable condition.

According to family oral legend and found documents later, my great-grand father came over to California by himself from China in 1874 when he was just 14 years old, maybe for the gold rush or to work as a laborer on the railroad, but he was documented as a cook at age 16 in San Joaquin, and later ran a "Hash House" in Prescott, Arizona. (I know what some of you are thinking, but "Hash House" is a term that is coined in the 1800s to describe a cheap railroad restaurant, or lunch stand.)

My great-grand father lived through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, in order to stay in America, he assumed the name Charlie Wan in 1894 and became a paper son, (those are falsified legal certificates where he pretended to be someone's son in the states). He took English classes at a church and became a devout Christian. In 1902 at age 42, he returned to China, changed his name back to his birth name Cheng Con Sheng, and founded a hospital, a couple of Churches and Department stores, he became a very successful business and family man. (I have some copies of photos and original documents with me tonight if you want to take a look later)

Throughout the years when I was growing up, I heard many family stories on how generous my great-grand father was to the needy, how he provided shelter to refugees during the world wars at the house he built, the house I grew up in.

But there is one story that stood out for me, it was the story of how my great-grand father destroyed all the carved Buddhist statues in his home upon his return from the US, and encouraged family members to stop worshiping idols. Sound a bit like Avraham's story?

When I was on my journey to become Jewish 13 years ago, one of the biggest obstacles I faced was not knowing how I could be both Chinese and Jewish. In other words, I was stuck, I didn't know how to step away from my family tradition that my great-grand father had created, I didn't know how to "go to the other side".

Then during one of the Torah Study classes here at BCC, while reading this parsha, "*Lekh L'kha*", I remembered my great-grand father's story and his journey, and realized that he himself had "crossed over", that my great-grand father had to break family tradition in order to start a new tradition - so if he broke tradition in order to believe what he believed, why couldn't I do the same?

When God said "*Lekh I'kha*", "Go forth", "Go for yourself," "Go by yourself" or "Go to yourself." "Go from your land, from your birth place, from your father's house, to the land that I will let you see." I don't think that God is telling us to

forget our past, and leave everything behind to start anew.

For me, it was looking into my past that allows me to go forth. My great-grand father's story propelled me forward in my journey. When my great-grand father embarked on his journey 135 years ago, I don't think he was thinking that his actions would inspire his great-grand daughter to become Jewish one day. And, I would not have dug out this history of him, if I didn't start on my own journey toward Judaism! So at the end, I got to be both Jewish and Chinese.

Life really is an on-going journey. Each day we begin a new journey, if we are true to ourselves, and make the journey for ourselves, willing to cross boundaries and step away from our own comfort zone; not only will we be able to make a positive difference in our own life; who knows? The stories of our journeys may one day inspire someone 200 years down the road, and change his or her life.

As God told Avraham, Go to the land that I will let you see. And you shall be a blessing.

Lekh L'hka! and Shabbat Shalom.