SOUL OF TORAH נשמת התורה

A Chassidic Take On The Parsha

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What Faith Asks of a Parent

At the beginning of this week's parsha, God tells Avraham, לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך, "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house." Avraham leaves his family, his community, and the world that shaped him.

His departure establishes a demanding religious principle: sometimes one's values must take precedence over one's kin. Familial commitments cannot always determine the convictions we hold or the lives we choose to lead.

But as Avraham's story unfolds, this principle seems to extend beyond its original circumstances. Having left his father's home to follow God, he will come to relinquish his own children in service of a higher calling.

As the arc of his story continues in next week's parsha, Avraham expels Yishmael at God's instruction and later prepares to sacrifice Yitzchak. The religious demand changes, but the underlying assumption remains: even our closest familial relationships must yield to God's will.

József Molnár: "The migration of Abraham and his relatives to Canaan" (1850)

This is where I struggle with Avraham's story. Leaving one's parents to follow God and relinquishing one's children cannot be justified on the same grounds. Choosing our own religious path does not release us from responsibility for the children we brought into the world. As a parent, I find it difficult to imagine that drawing closer to God could require me to turn away from my children.

Indeed, the Zohar and talmidei ha-Baal Shem Tov emphatically reject the idea that devotion to God can justify abandoning one's children. The Zohar voices that criticism in startling language.

As father and son walk toward the altar, Yitzchak asks where the animal for the offering is. Avraham answers that God will provide. The Torah introduces his answer with ויאמר אברהם, "Avraham said." Why, the Zohar asks, does it not say "his **father** said"?

Its answer is harsh: "ולא כתיב ויאמר אביו, דהא לא קאים עליה כאבא, אלא בעל מחלוקת הוה ביה." "It does not say, 'His father said,' because he was not standing toward him as a father; rather, he was in conflict with him" (Zohar I, 120a).

At that moment, Avraham is no longer acting as Yitzchak's father. His willingness to sacrifice his son has displaced the paternal relationship. The Torah's wording registers that loss: the man answering Yitzchak is called Avraham, without the designation "his father."

The Zohar seems to be criticizing Avraham here. In preparing to sacrifice his son, he has failed him as a father. His willingness to obey God does not shield him from that criticism. Strikingly, the Zohar finds the criticism in the Torah itself: God's own word withholds the designation "his father."

The lesson of Lech Lecha, then, has its limits. Our commitment to our children differs fundamentally from our obligation to our parents. Leaving the home into which we were

born and sending a child away from the home we created carry very different moral weight.

Our parents chose to have us; we had no say in the matter. We owe them gratitude and respect, but we are not unequivocally indentured to them. If our conscience leads us elsewhere, we may have to follow it.

Not so with our offspring. Since we chose to bring them into this world, we assume a responsibility we cannot simply relinquish. Their presence may complicate our faith and hinder our spiritual growth. They may challenge our values or choose lives we struggle to understand. None of that releases us from being their parents. We do not cut ties with them.

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The Haggadah, read through a Chassidic lens, likewise insists that religious devotion cannot come at our children's expense.

At the seder, the Haggadah describes the *ben harasha*, the wicked child, as excluding himself from the community by asking, "What is this service to you?" To you, rather than to us. It instructs us to respond sharply: "הקהה את שיניו," commonly rendered "knock out his teeth," and tell him, "אילו היה שם לא היה נגאל," had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

For years, I struggled mightily with this passage. He is sitting at our table, asking his question, however provocatively. Are we really supposed to respond so harshly and tell him that there is no place for him?

Eventually, this passage was redeemed for me by a teaching of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The crucial word, he explains, is שם, "there." There, in Egypt, before Matan Torah, this child would not have been redeemed. After Sinai, however, our relationship with God is irrevocable. God

Vincent van Gogh: First Steps, after Millet (1890)

addressed each of us personally: אנכי ה' אלקיך, "I am the Lord your God." That bond cannot be severed. Even the ben harasha will ultimately be redeemed.

The rebuke remains, but it must convey the certainty of his belonging: even as we challenge what he says, we refuse to give up on him. Whatever he says about his relationship with God and the Jewish people, he cannot undo it.

We might imagine that receiving Torah would make belonging more conditional: now there are commandments to observe, expectations to meet. Yet the Rebbe finds in Mattan Torah the assurance that the bond endures even when those expectations go unmet.

That spiritual claim has profound consequences for parenthood. Our children's place in our lives cannot depend on their religious choices. Their bond with God reaches deeper than the beliefs they articulate or the practices they observe. Our responsibility is to remain their parents while we struggle with those differences.

Lech Lecha teaches us that serving God may require leaving our parents' home. But the Torah we received at Sinai binds us to a God who does not relinquish His children. Invoking our closeness to God as a reason to abandon our own children misunderstands the relationship we seek to deepen. Our faithfulness to God must include an enduring commitment to them.