



Walking, Tradition, and Renewal

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Abraham¹ is “our father” in many senses. He is seen as the father of the Jewish people, the spiritual father of Judaism and of monotheistic faiths more broadly, and the father of the covenant with the one God. Yet in our *parashah*, Abraham is introduced first and foremost as a son, a descendant who must decide whether to be traditional or innovative—whether to follow the path of his forebears or to become a revolutionary.

Many *midrashim* portray Abram as a revolutionary figure. They depict him as one who “breaks the vessels”—literally and figuratively, both in practice and symbolically—in his relationship to the world in which he was raised. The *parashah* opens with the call: “לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ - Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house” (Genesis 12:1), a call answered in the positive.

In Bereishit Rabbah, for example, we encounter a foundational narrative that becomes a central anchor for later midrashic traditions. This narrative describes Abraham’s rupture, rebellion, and even scorn in his relationship with his father and with his surroundings.

¹ Even though in these verses he is still called Abram—before the letter was added to his name—I will be referring to him as Abraham, because I am speaking of him as the person he would ultimately become.



The famous *midrash* opens:

בראשית רבה לח:יג

תֵּרַח עֹבֵד צִלְמִים הָיָה, חָדָד זָמַן נִפְיָק לְאַתֵּר, הוֹשִׁיב לְאַבְרָהָם מוֹכֵר תְּחִתִּיו.

Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

Terah [Abraham's father] was a maker of idols. One day, he went out somewhere and left Avrahm to sell in his place.

The *midrash* tells us that Terah, Abraham's father, was an idol maker. For some reason, Terah had to go somewhere so he left Abraham in charge of the shop. In the context of our discussion—focused on intergenerational transitions in general, and the transmission of culture and tradition in particular—there is something poignant about the image of a father seating his son “in his place.” Terah wants his son to follow in his path, to continue in his ways. He has built something—a shop in this case—and hopes, as the language of the *midrash* suggests, that his son will carry on in his stead.

The *midrash* continues with the famous telling of Abraham's rejection of his father's trade and accompanying philosophy, trying to expose how absurd the worship of idols really is. For example: Abraham breaks all but one of the statues and leaves the club in the hand of the last one standing. When his father returns, furious, Abraham tells him that the idols were at fault. Abraham attempts to break not only his father's idols but also his faith.

Here we encounter Abraham the revolutionary, the one who creates a break between himself and the tradition of his fathers. He deviates from his father's path through a decisive rupture. In the *midrash*, his father's beliefs are portrayed as foolish, as a legacy to be rejected. In this reading, Abraham's task is to turn his back completely—totally and uncompromisingly—in



favor of a sweeping revolution—“go forth... from your father’s house” in the fullest, most absolute sense.

While the midrashic story of the idol breaking is well known, a reexamination of the biblical text depicts a different kind of behavior and a much less dichotomous relationship between father and son. I propose two readings—two interpretations that present different ways of understanding Abraham’s path in relation to his father and tradition.

A. Imitation—with a different ending

A close reading of the verses reveals a different narrative: not one of breaking away, but of imitation. According to the text, Abraham walks in his father’s footsteps: he, too, sets out with his family toward the land of Canaan:

בראשית יא:לא, יב:ה

^{11:31}וַיִּקַּח תֵּרַח אֶת אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת לוֹט בֶּן הָרָן בֶּן בְּנוֹ וְאֶת שָׂרִי כְלִתּוֹ אִשְׁתְּ אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאוּר

כַּשְׂדִּים לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: ...

^{12:5}וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת לוֹט בֶּן אָחִיו וְאֶת כָּל רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכָשׁוּ וְאֶת הַנַּפְשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן

וַיֵּצְאוּ לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

Bereishit 11:31, 12:5

^{11:31}Terah **took** his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans **for the land of Canaan**; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. ...

^{12:5}Abram **took** his wife Sarai, and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out **for the land of Canaan**, and they arrived in the land of Canaan.



Abram's departure is, in fact, a continuation of the journey that Terah had begun. Both father and son take with them their family—their close and extended kin—and both set out on the road toward the land of Canaan. The parallel movement of father and son—and the similar choices they make—are strikingly emphasized in the language of the verses.

Sometimes rebellion takes the form of imitation. Perhaps this is how we should understand the text before us: descendants simultaneously express separation and belonging. They seek to assert individuality and connection at the same time, and they often do so through imitation. Abraham may well be rejecting his father's influence and asserting his own unique voice—but he does so precisely by adopting Terah's model and revising it from within.

What is fascinating about Abraham's imitation is that it generates innovation. Abraham introduces something new in several ways—one being that, unlike his father, he actually reaches Canaan. This difference carries profound consequences.²

The Torah does not describe Abraham as being in conflict with his father. On the contrary, he leaves Ur of the Chaldeans **with** his father, and later sets out again in his footsteps, in a manner that echoes his father's earlier departure. Yet Abraham is not a mere replica of Terah. He does not settle in Haran, but continues until he arrives in the land of Canaan.

B. Completion—with a different beginning

Another way to understand Abraham's movement is as an act of completion, bringing to fulfillment what his father began. Although this act of completion also constitutes the very essence of the difference between them.

² Some of them are described in the verses themselves: "...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.... To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:3, 7).



Terah embarks on a journey he begins but does not finish. The order of events in the verses is described as follows:

וַיִּקַּח תֶּרַח אֶת-אַבְרָם ... וַיֵּצְאוּ ... לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם ... וַיָּמָת תֶּרַח ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ ... מִבֵּית אָבִיךָ ... וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה' ... וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת-שָׂרִי ... וַיֵּצְאוּ לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

Terah took Abram ... and they set out ... to go to the land of Canaan; but they came as far as Haran and settled there ... Terah died ... and God said to Abram, “Go forth ... from your father’s house ...” And Abram went as God had spoken to him ... Abram took Sarai ... and they set out to go to the land of Canaan, and they arrived in the land of Canaan.

According to the narrative sequence, not only does Terah fail to complete what he set out to do, but he is no longer able to complete it—because he dies. His journey ends unfinished. This allows Abraham to complete the process that his father began. In the shadow of his father’s death, there is no way for him to simply do exactly what his father did; no way for him to be a mere imitation. By definition, the son must act differently from the father.

And it is not just the ending of the journey that is different—the points of departure for the father’s and the son’s journeys are described in the verses as distinct as well. The Torah does not state Terah’s motive for leaving, but it does state Abraham’s motive—and it does so using language of the relationship between father and son:

בראשית יב:א

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

Genesis 12:1

God said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s



house, to the land that I will show you.”

God’s command to Abraham is a command to leave from—and one of the things Abraham is told to leave behind is his father. Thus, even though Abraham’s actions resemble those of his father, and even though he is in some sense merely completing the movement that his father initiated, something about the orientation of his journey is fundamentally different.

Paying attention to this sequence of events raises interpretive, psychological, and theological questions. Did Terah also set out because God told him to, or is one of the essential differences between Abraham and his father precisely that there was no divine call to Terah? Was it his father’s death that allowed Abraham to hear God’s call? Was his father’s death—his father who had already modeled leaving one’s father’s house—a kind of bequest, a charge to Abraham to complete his father’s journey? Or does his death serve as a kind of summons to Abraham to go forth, to distance himself—from his land, his birthplace, and the house of his now-deceased father?

Attentiveness to these verses invites a reconsideration of the midrashic line of Bereishit Rabbah, and suggests seeing Abraham not necessarily as a rebel or a revolutionary, but as an innovator from within relationship and tradition. Perhaps his actions grow out of resemblance to his father, yet their outcome is unique. Or perhaps his point of departure is essentially different. In either case, Abraham’s movement is organic and rooted in tradition, even as it unfolds in departure from his father’s house.

Indeed, like his father, Abraham is a man of faith, one who leaves his land and is accompanied by his family. He continues and renews while remaining in conversation with those who came



before him—sometimes receiving and sometimes rejecting, at once continuing, turning, completing, and transforming.

Before us stands Abraham our father, who renews traditionally and invites us to recognize that revolution and continuity, innovation and tradition, are interwoven far more deeply than we often assume—and to understand ourselves as acting in greater harmony and less in dichotomy.

