

Dear Chavraya,

The journey that begins in this week's Torah portion, *Lech L'cha*, is a journey with a radical message that yearns for fulfillment. Told to go forth, *Lech L'cha*, Avram and Sarai, begin the journey of the Jewish people. In the city of *Ur* in ancient Mesopotamia, Avram is quite literally an iconoclast, one who smashes idols. Challenging the idolatries and dogmas of their time and place, the message Avram and Sarai are entrusted to carry forth into the world is no less radical today than it was then.

Avram and Sarai go forth to follow the One Universal God, in Whose image all people are created. In God's Oneness is the elusive challenge and hope of the journey, affirmed every time we say *Sh'ma Yisrael...*, *Listen Israel, God is our God, God is One*. If God is One, and all people are created in the image of God, then all people are one. That there is an ineradicable bond that joins us all is the most simple and profound truth that waits for all of God's children to grasp.

During the past week, I had the good fortune to attend a reception for one of my heroes, James Carroll. Following the reception, in a talk entitled, "God and War: Religion as Resistance," Carroll spoke of the scourge of religious intolerance as "the first step on the road to religious violence." He spoke to what I would regard as a triumphal misconception of monotheism that says, "one God, mine, is right, yours is wrong." The locus of *Parashat Lech L'cha* as the third portion in the Torah underscores that the journey to follow one universal God cannot be separated from the creation of all people *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of that God. For this reason, the Torah begins with universal history, with the story of all people, only then allowing the telling of the particular story of the Jewish people to begin.

As we take the first steps in the journey of the Jewish people, it is a journey away from the narrow vision of idolatry toward a vision of God that embraces all people. If from the core of our religious belief, we come to live in the awareness that human oneness is the corollary of God's oneness, so we respond to what I heard as James Carroll's prayerful exhortation that religion "must be more than ever a resistance to violence." As war represents the greatest expression of people divided against each other, and therefore the greatest idolatry, there is particular irony for us in the start of Avram and Sarai's journey from the place that is modern Iraq.

Engaging Torah we engage life in a context of sacred discourse. To read Torah in the spirit of the journey that begins in *Lech L'cha* is to challenge and to be challenged, and to strive toward fresh insight. It means we may need to leave the familiar and comfortable, as Avram and Sarai did. We are bidden to take new knowledge of head and heart out into the world and to make real the ultimate ideals that pulsate through Torah. Sometimes it is hard to engage the ultimate. We don't probe deeply enough. We are afraid. We don't ask the right questions. Warning against despair, James Carroll said, "Hope is a choice. The alternative to hope is the victory of evil." At times willfully, at times innocently, we close our eyes to new ways of seeing and being, and we close out the other. So it is in the

world itself. When we remain stuck in one way of being, one way of reading the text and of seeing reality, we impede the emergence of deeper knowledge and truth. Before they could lift their feet and take the first steps of a new journey, this was the challenge for Avram and Sarai, and it is ours.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor