

Parshat Lech Lecha
Moshe Taragin

Are All Religions Valuable?

For approximately two thousand years, humanity was lost in theological confusion and moral mayhem. Finally, one great man uncovered the Creator of the universe and journeyed to the supernatural land of Divine presence. Avraham's selection dramatically revolutionizes the history of religion.

The man chosen to revamp religious history was a legendary personality who had single handedly discovered G-d, while displaying fearless courage in defending his beliefs. In the past, humankind had persistently assumed that our vast and teeming world of boundless diversity was fashioned by multiple creators. Avraham debunked this folly and discerned a One G-d who he introduced to his generation. This discovery was remarkable, given that Avraham's own father was a pagan notable who ultimately ratted out his own 'heretic' son, condemning Avraham to death by fire. Miraculously, through Divine intervention, Avraham survived this blazing inferno. Avraham was a revolutionary philosopher and defiant hero- in short- the perfect candidate to launch the history of G-d's chosen people.

Yet, surprisingly, the details of Avraham's past are repressed. The Torah introduces Avraham without providing the important background details which warranted his selection. Shouldn't this great man be introduced along with his heroic credentials? Why is this information confidential?

Nachmanides asserts that Avraham's past is suppressed to avoid expounding upon contemporary pagan religions. Detailing Avraham's religious discovery would have mandated equal "air time" for the parallel religions which he discarded. Omitting the details of Avraham's background enables the Torah to sidestep any mention of these erroneous religious systems and to present the rise of Avraham in an untainted fashion.

This decision to exclude any mention of alternate religious views isn't just stylistic- to create a neater portrait of Avraham. By highlighting Divine revelation to

Avraham without juxtaposing other religions, the Torah stresses the contrast between Judaism and other religions. Introducing Judaism alongside contemporary religions might have implied "equivalency". Presenting the evolution of Judaism in a "vacuum" emphasizes the unique and singular nature of Judaism.

The Modern Era of enlightenment and religious tolerance demands a nuanced and complex view of other religions. Without question, we value all varieties of religious experience which assist Man in his search for the Other. Religion highlights the dependency of Man upon a higher being – a recognition which is inherently valuable. Additionally, religion conditions people to cardinal virtues such as morality, family, social consciousness, and character improvement. One of the great triumphs of the past century was the convincing defeat of Communism – a system which sought to craft a society absent of religion. A religious world of paganism – as corrupt and barbaric as it may be – is certainly preferable to a world of atheism. Likewise, the modern state of world religion dominated by monotheistic systems, is far preferable to the idolatrous world of our ancestors.

We don't just value alternate religious lifestyles, but also acknowledge important similarities between our own religious experience and the experiences of what many people refer to as our "co-religionists". We form collaborative alliances with members of various religions, jointly struggling to uphold common religious values in a rapidly secularizing world. We are legitimately inspired by lives devoted to religious values, and we are even enriched by studying the religious thoughts of sincerely religious writers from other religions. Religious people share much in common and the advent of religious tolerance has allowed us to bridge across religious communities.

However, the age of religious enlightenment can also blur differences between Judaism and other religions or create a false sense of equivalence. Judaism is fundamentally different from other religions – both in content as well as in its transmission. All religions were conceived by human intellect and human imagination. Human constructs can establish language for religious experience and approximations of G-d, but they are utterly incapable of conceiving of the essence of G-d. Avraham also studied and also discovered G-d through human analysis and inquiry. According to one version he assessed all religions until he

discovered his Creator at the age of forty eight. However, his “discovery” would have been partial and inaccurate had G-d not answered Avraham’s with direct revelation coupled with direct religious instructions. This experience of direct Divine revelation launched the unique religious history of the Jews – the nation of supernatural revelation. The process begun in Genesis climaxed at Har Sinai with “mass revelation”. No religion has ever staked this audacious claim of mass revelation and none ever will. The assertion that three and half million people directly encountered the unmediated voice of G-d is the sole province of Judaism. Despite the numerous parallels with other religions, Judaism is fundamentally distinct, and for this reason the contemporary religions of Avraham’s era are textually "ignored", even at the cost of withholding Avraham’s past heroics. To avoid any sense of equivalency, the launch of Judaism is spotlighted in "a vacuum" without mentioning other religions and without implying any comparison.

We are grateful that the modern era of religious tolerance has rescued Jews from centuries of religious persecution. It is both enriching and reinforcing to acknowledge the common interests and experiences we share with members of other religions. Despite these similarities, we mustn’t assume equivalence between our own customs and mores and those of other religions. Avraham was chosen for direct revelation and hundreds of years later G-d directly spoke to his children. This process has only occurred once in history and is fundamentally different from the manner by which other religions were formed.

AFTERWORD

The venerable 19th century leader Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk would consistently walk by the estate of a non-Jewish nobleman well known for his moral and pious lifestyle. He was asked about this strange decision- to constantly stroll alongside the home of a non-Jew. He explained that when reciting the blessing of “shelo asani goy” – thanking G-d for selecting us as Jews, he wasn’t grateful to be selected from drunk or vile Gentiles. Instead, he wanted to celebrate his selection from ideal or outstanding Gentiles whose lives reflected honorable values. His evaluation of his Jewishness wasn’t based on the degradation of others but rather the celebration of his unique calling. Our unique Jewish identity isn’t built on

dismissing the value of non-Jewish lives. However, our “pluralism” in validating different lifestyles cannot erode the pride of our unique Jewish religious experience.