LEKH LEKHA: Why Abraham?

This week's Parasha begins with a Divine call to our patriarch Abraham, *"Lekh Lekha"*: Leave your land and go to the land that I will show you [Canaan, Israel]. God speaks to Abraham and invites him to leave his land and settle in a new land, Israel, where HaShem will bless him with a multitude of descendants. Very nice indeed! But the biblical text keeps its silence at a sensitive point. "Why Abraham?" What did Abraham do to deserve God's attention?

CHOICE OR DETERMINISM?

For those who are familiar with the style of the Tora, the absence of an explanation as to why people do what they do is the rule rather than the exception. Similarly, the Tora only sometimes reveals why HaShem does what He does. The biblical text does not explain, for example, the reasons for many Divine precepts. Why certain animals are pure or impure, etc. similarly (and I believe this is the most dramatic example), the Tora never reveals why God created the world. I'm not sure what the reason for that is. Still, it is notorious that Biblical Hebrew does not have the word *why* (the word *lama*, for instance, indicates the purpose of the action, not the intention of the subject; and something similar happens with the term *madua'*). Perhaps, as I once heard, this has to do with the belief in the absolute freedom of choice (for God and man). Providing the "why" will suggest certain determinism and limitations in the process of making choices.

Or perhaps, as Rabbi Menashe ben Israel explains, the Tora wants to leave the task of "why" to us. We, the readers, need to find the answers to the why. Every generation can contribute with their point of view on the text, discovering new levels of understanding of the Book of HaShem. This would not be possible if the "whys" were explicit.

Let’s go back to our initial question. Why did God choose Abraham?

ABRAHAM MADE THE FIRST MOVE

The first answer is the story that every Jewish child learns at a tender age. Terach, Abraham’s father, was manufacturing and selling idols. Statues of the mythological gods that represented the different forces of nature. I imagine that “idolatry” must have been a great business (like “art”) because all the seller needed to make a good profit was to convince the buyer that one idol had more powers than the other, and for that, the customer had to pay a higher price! Terach must have been a great salesman. But when Terach wanted to teach his business to his son Abraham, something unexpected happened. Instead of helping his dad, Abraham challenged him with an impeccable but disastrous-for-business logic: “How can you claim that these idols are our creators if they were made yesterday with our own hands? Why should we consider these statues as gods since they cannot see, listen or speak? Abraham’s father was furious with his son. He was not fit for that type of business. Eventually, God “called” Abraham and invited him to move to His land because of Abraham’s honesty. And Abraham accepted the invitation.

HASHEM CALLED FIRST

The second answer concerns a text we recite EVERY day in our Tefilla in the mornings. *“You are HaShem, our God, You chose Abram, and You took him out from Ur Casdim, and You changed his name to Abraham, and You found that his heart was faithful to You”* □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□ … □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□□. According to this pasuq (Nechemia, 9: 7-8.) God first chooses Abraham, almost arbitrarily, and then He finds out that Abraham is His faithful servant. Ironically, although we recite this pasuq daily, this viewpoint is less known (or less popular) than the first one. According to this interpretation, HaShem sought Abraham, and He prepared him and trained him to

become the patriarch of the nation of Israel through the challenges and difficulties (*nissiyonot*) that Abraham had to experience throughout his life.

ADOPTING A CHILD

Rabbi Hayim Sabato from Yeshiva Bircat Moshe in Maale Adumim (Israel) says something exciting. The text describing the past of Abraham Abinu (at the end of last week's Parasha) is very short in detail. Except for one circumstantial but revealing point: Haran, the brother of Abram, dies, and his orphan son Lot becomes now part of Abraham's family. Abraham adopted Lot as his son. This supreme act of kindness made Abraham worthy of the Divine call.

WHO ANSWERED HASHEM'S CALL?

My favorite, a fourth opinion, is the beautiful interpretation of Rabbi Yehuda Alter (1847-1905) in his Book Sefat Emet. There, he says that *"HaShem did not speak exclusively to Abraham, HaShem was announcing permanently and to many people His call to leave the land of Casdim and go to Israel, for those who wanted His blessing* (□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ '□□ □□ '□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□). But people rejected God's call or ignored it. And the only one who "picked up the phone", and responded affirmatively to God's call, and the challenges that taking this call would imply, was Abraham Abinu. I love this response for many reasons. But especially for its relevance. HaShem is permanently calling us. He constantly invites to follow Him. To follow His ways. His Voice is in His Book. The call of HaShem is in His Tora. And if we want to follow the steps of Abraham Abinu, all we have to do is open the Book and listen to His Voice.

We become God's chosen when we answer His call.