



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Ancestral Decisions

Most people do not give much thought to their ancestral origins. But some do, and I am one of them. I often wonder about my grandparents and their grandparents. Who were they? What was their world like?

Most of all, I wonder about the decisions that they made, and whether those decisions had any bearing upon my life. Suppose they had made different decisions? Would my life be any different? Would I even be here to wonder?

In my case, I knew all my grandparents and even one great-grandmother. I know a little bit about some of my other great-grandparents, including the man

after whom I was named. His name was Tzvi Hersh Kriegel, and I will always remember the portrait of him in a derby hat and long red beard, prominently adorning the dining room wall in my grandparents' home.

Somewhere back in the late 19th century, he made a decision. I know nothing of the details of that decision. He chose to leave the eastern European *shtetl* where he was born and raised and made his way to the United States. Because of that decision, he and his descendants escaped the fate of most of the rest of his family. Had he not made that decision, I myself would have been one of the millions of Hitler's victims. I would not be sitting at my desk writing this column.

Many of my other forbearers, and many of yours, dear reader, made similar decisions in their lives that determined the futures of their children and grandchildren. Reflecting upon this fact leads to many important life lessons, including the need to take one's own decisions very seriously.

In my case, I cannot go back more than three generations, so I'm not familiar with the decisions made by my ancestors much before the late 19th century. Others, like my wife Chavi, routinely refer to ancestors who lived in the 18th century and even earlier. They are still influenced

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by decisions made by those who came before them more than two centuries ago.

It remains true, however, that all Jewish people can trace their ancestry much further back than a couple of centuries. I am reminded of the retort uttered by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe to a disciple who proudly reported that he was tutoring several “Jews with no Jewish background.” The Rebbe insisted that there was no such thing. “Those Jews,” he exclaimed, “have the same Jewish background as you do. They are all children of Abraham and Sarah.”

Indeed, we are all children of Abraham and Sarah, and we remain influenced by the consequences of their decisions. Study the weekly Torah portions beginning this week, and you will discover the extent to which we remain influenced by the decisions made by our patriarchs and matriarchs millennia ago.

This week’s *parsha*, *Parshat Lech Lecha* (*Genesis 12:1-17:27*), begins with one such decision: Abraham and Sarah’s resolve to leave their “native land and father’s house” and proceed to the “land that I will show you,” the land of Canaan. That decision which reverberated across the generations still sustains our commitment to the Holy Land.

There are some lesser-known decisions made by Abraham in this week’s Torah portion. The first was his decision to personally intervene in a war conducted by four great world powers against five other kingdoms. What prompted Abraham to do so was the report that

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his kinsman, Lot, was taken captive by the invaders. Unlike some contemporary world leaders, Abraham immediately sprang into action.

Not having access to jet fighters and long range missiles, he “mustered his retainers, *chanichav*.” He enlisted the help of 318 of those who had been “born into his household,” raised and educated by him. He made the decision to draft his disciples into military service.

Was that a good decision? Not according to one view in the Talmud, Tractate *Nedarim* 32a: “Rabbi Avahu said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: Why was Abraham punished so that his children were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years? Because he used Torah scholars as his army!”

In Abraham's judgment, enlisting 318 of his disciples to help rescue innocent victims was a no-brainer. For Rabbi Avahu, however, Abraham's decision was a disaster of historical proportions. There is no doubt that Abraham's decision remains relevant down to this very day, perhaps even more urgently than ever before.

Our Torah portion continues with the narrative that describes the offer of the King of Sodom (whom Abraham defended and who had Abraham to thank for his survival) to “give me the persons, and take the booty for yourself.” Abraham, ever meticulously ethical, declines the booty but also yields the persons to the king of Sodom.

A wise decision? Not according to another

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opinion in that Talmudic passage: “Rabbi Yochanan said that [Abraham’s children were eventually enslaved in Egypt] because he impeded the ability of those persons from taking refuge under the wings of the *Shechinah*.” That is, had Abraham insisted that the King of Sodom yield those “persons” to Abraham’s care, they would eventually have converted to Abraham’s monotheistic way of life.

Abraham had a dilemma. Was he to insist on his ethical principles and take no reward whatsoever, not persons and not booty, from the king of Sodom? Or should he have engaged in spiritual outreach and taken those prisoners into his own household? For Abraham, his ethical principles trumped his goal of encouraging pagans to convert to monotheism. For Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, Abraham missed a critical opportunity. This is yet another of Abraham’s decisions with great implications for us today.

We are all children of Abraham and Sarah. In so many ways, their dilemmas remain our dilemmas. Rabbi Avahu and Rabbi Yochanan taught us that we cannot merely emulate their choices. We must assess their decisions, determine their validity, and then consider the extent to which our circumstances conform to theirs.

As we study the *parsha* each week, we must remember that we are not just reading Bible stories. We are studying ancestral decisions which continue to affect our daily lives in an uncanny way. ■



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