

Hashem commands Avraham to leave his "eretz" = homeland?, moledet = culture?, and beit Av = clan? to go to a new, as yet unidentified, eretz. A reasonable conclusion is that Avraham will be tasked to create a new moledet and beit av (as we learn next week) that follow the path of Hashem and do tzedakah and mishpat.

Now Avraham certainly leaves his land, and in many ways he sets himself apart from his former culture. The extent to which he leaves his clan is debatable – his nephew Lot initially travels with him, and his wife Sarai is also his paternal cousin.

Now the word I have translated "clan" is literally "the house of his father", and that may raise the question: was Avraham permitted, or perhaps even encouraged, to maintain a relationship with his mother's family? This may seem an overly modern question, but Rashbam to Bava Batra 91a notes that Avraham is the only one of the Avot whose mother is not identified in the text of Torah. Furthermore, I have argued extensively elsewhere that maternal lineage is a crucial factor in Bereshit, specifically that the artistic and mechanical creativity of Kayin is preserved for humanity through Noach's wife. Therefore, it may be that Avraham was not required to leave his mother's clan because they were a positive influence. Of course, it is also possible that Avraham never had any connection to his mother's clan, and so did not need to be told to leave them.

For obvious personal reasons, I began thinking this week about whether we knew anything whatever about Avraham's mother. My daughter Tziporah Machlah quickly and correctly informed me that her name was known, and indeed, (Bava Batra 91a) Rav Chanan bar Rava in the name of Rav identifies her as Amatlai bat Karnevo. So far as I can tell, neither name is attested anywhere else in pre-Talmudic literature, with the exception that, Rav Chanan bar Rava in the name of Rav immediately afterward identifies the mother of Haman as Amatlai bat Orvati. Rashbam and Shitah Mekubetzet apparently disagree as to whether Karnevo is derived from "kar" = cushion or rather is the name of a (kosher) bird – it seems to me likely that Shitah Mekubetzet's understanding is derived from the very parallel discussion on Kiddushin 70b, which contrasts "Bei Orvati", Ravenhouse, with "Bei Yonah", dovehouse. I wonder if in some language Karnevo means dove.

How did Rav know her name, and/or did he have a motive for declaring that Avraham and Haman's mothers were namesakes? I have found no compelling answer to either question. The acontextuality of the name Amatlai bat Karnevo is emphasized by Shitah Mekubetzet, who uses it as absolute proof of Jewish tradition – how could the Rabbis have possibly known this unless they had a tradition, as it has no textual source whatever? Of course, a more skeptical soul might accuse them of making it up, but the name's lack of Jewish resonance makes one wonder why they would make up that name specifically. On the other hand, arguments of the form "X is so ridiculous that no one would ever have made it up, so it must be true", i.e. "credo qui absurdum est", have a poor pedigree in Jewish history. On yet another hand, if this is absolute tradition, why does Pirquei deRabbi Eliezer 26 record her name as עתדיי? Of course, she could have had two names, both preserved by the tradition. Furthermore, the Book of Jubilees records her name as עדנה – this I suspect is based on an interpretation of Bereshit 18:12, אחרי בלתי היתה לי עדנה, although I have not yet uncovered the underlying interpretation.

Do we have any information, or speculation, as to the nature of Avraham's relationship with his mother? The website [www.torahone.com](http://www.torahone.com) cites a fascinating claim from the Ari (Kisvei Arizal, Shaar Hapsukim, beginning of Sefer Iyov) that Avraham was a ben niddah, conceived while his mother was impure as the result of menstruation. The underlying theory is that Avraham's soul was so great that the Satan sought to prevent his birth, ultimately allowing it only to parents who would not stop at any forbidden act. By contrast, Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews contains a story which seems backformed from a collection of Biblical and midrashic narratives, especially those of Hagar/Yishmael and Yocheved/Mosheh. On the basis of astrological advice, Nimrod decrees that all male children shall be executed. Unlike Amram, Terach supports the decree, and Amatlai is forced to hide her pregnancy from him, which she miraculously succeeds in doing. When Avraham is born, though, she abandons him in a cave, where he is fed by ravens (cf. Eliyahu). In this version, Avraham's mother has clearly redeeming features lacking in his father.

How are we to relate to these narratives, which cannot plausibly be seen as authentically historical oral traditions? In preparation for her bat mitzvah celebration, which we hope to reschedule soon (although of course she has become a bat mitzvah regardless), my daughter Channah Leah and I spend much time discussing a variety of retellings of the death of Haran, Avraham's brother. Each of these assumed that he died as a result of the faceoff between Avraham and Nimrod which led to Avraham being thrown into the "furnace of the Chaldees", but in some versions he dies because he colluded explicitly with Nimrod, to the point of lighting the furnace, and in others for failure to explicitly side with Avraham, or perhaps simply to demonstrate that his virtue was not responsible for Avraham's miraculous rescue. I was struck by Channah Leah's rejection of the first version on the ground that it simply didn't resonate with her vision of Haran, in full awareness that the Biblical text provides essentially no information about Haran's character (I hope to share some of Channah Leah's other wonderful and more evidence-based insights on another occasion).

It seems to me that many traditional readers relate to Torah not as a text, whose world is bounded by the information contained within it, but rather as an invitation and window into a world. The purely literary legitimacy of this approach became clear to me when I became familiar with Tolkien's Silmarillion, which shows that the Lord of the Rings cycle is more a window into a fully imagined world than a bounded narrative. In this vision, all human characters are three dimensional, even if they only display one dimension of themselves in the narrative, and so one is entitled, for example, to imagine what they look like from the back and from above, even if Torah only describes them from the front.

The problem, of course, is that such imaginings seem arbitrary if the text provides minimal if any guidance – no reader of the Ring series would develop a vision of Middle Earth that precisely matched Tolkien's, just as no reader whose sole acquaintance with Hamilton was through a biography of Washington would likely imagine a historically accurate Hamilton.

Nonetheless, I think there is real power and beauty in this approach, and perhaps G-d is tolerant of historical error so long as the picture is consistent with the details He chose to share with us explicitly.

Shabbat shalom!