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Claiming Our Ancestors

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For all of us, there is no going without leaving; and so it was for Abraham: "Go forth *from* your land, your birthplace, and the house of your father *to* the land that I shall show you" (Gen. 12:1) [emphasis added]. And when we leave places, we leave people as well. When Abraham departed for Canaan he left behind, among others, his father Terah. And it was always thus: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother" (2:24).

But the Rabbis do not let go of Terah so easily. Terah is, after all, a father, who deserves his son's honor and reverence. And for our Sages, honor and reverence are not vague and ephemeral notions; they embody concrete obligations: "What is reverence and what is honor? Reverence: a son may not stand in the place where his father customarily stands nor sit in his father's designated seat. He may not contradict his father or side with others against him. Honor: one is obligated to provide food, drink, clothing, shelter and transportation for one's parents" (BT Kiddushin 31b). And if you think that these obligations can be fulfilled merely, or even mainly, by sending one's parents a check to cover expenses you are wrong. Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud concludes that parents bear primary financial responsibility for providing for their own needs. The essence of honoring one's parents is personal service. To put it in contemporary terms, I may not be obligated to pay for my parents' groceries, but I am obligated to take them shopping. And this is true not only if they are incapable of shopping on their own. There are numerous stories in the Talmud of sages who honor their parents by bringing them water to drink. Perhaps in some of these cases this meant drawing water from a cistern, an arduous or at least inconvenient task. In others, however, the rabbi was performing a task that could have been done with ease by the parent—and that was the point. It is when we provide our parents with service and attention that are not essential from a utilitarian perspective that we honor them most.

The issue of Abraham's filial obligations to Terah arises in a midrashic discussion of a textual anomaly (Midrash Aggadah to Gen. 12:1). The Torah reports Terah's death (Gen. 11:32) before relating Abraham's departure from Haran (12:5), leaving us with the impression that this was the chronological order of events. However, the Torah records earlier that Terah fathered Abraham when he was 70 (11:26) and that he passed away at the ripe old age of 210 (11:32). Abraham left for Canaan when he was 75 (12:4). Thus, Terah lived for 65 more years after Abraham's departure.

As is often the case, this textual anomaly is explained by means of addressing yet another oddity. Terah is the last to be mentioned in a genealogical list that begins with Noah's son Shem. For each of those listed, we are given the age at which he fathered his son, the next link in the genealogical chain, and the number of years he lived after fathering him. The Torah does not provide a death notice for any of these figures except for Terah: "Terah died in Haran" (Gen. 11:32). Why is Terah the exception? The midrash explains, "This teaches you that the wicked are considered as dead even during their lifetimes"—a notion expressed frequently in rabbinic midrash and therefore neither original nor surprising. By this the midrash means to say that, although Terah lived on after Abraham's departure, the Torah considers him to have been already dead because he was spiritually moribund.

The midrash continues: "Abraham was afraid that he would be the cause of God's name being profaned; people would say that he abandoned his father in his old age and departed. God therefore reassured Abraham, saying, 'I exempt you from the obligation to honor your parents; moreover in the Torah I will record your father's death before your departure."

From the conclusion of the midrash we realize that, as is often the case, the midrash is bothered by the content of the text as well as by its form. It puts in Abraham's mouth a question that apparently bothered the Rabbis themselves: how could the pious Abraham abandon his father rather than being a dutiful son? The midrash addresses both the textual and religious difficulties as follows: Terah's death notice teaches us that he was wicked and therefore considered dead in his own lifetime. This notice precedes the story of Abraham to indicate that, because of Terah's wickedness, Abraham was not obligated to stay in Haran and attend to him. The achronological mention of Terah's death serves a second function as well. While the faithful might accept Terah's wickedness as justification for Abraham's actions, the doubters would see this explanation as a convenient excuse. Therefore, God denies them the opportunity to mock Abraham by concealing the fact that Terah was in fact alive when Abraham left Haran.

I assumed above that the problem of Abraham's inattention to Terah was raised because it was a source of genuine discomfort. However, it is also possible that the issue was raised merely because it offered a pretext both to provide an ingenious explanation of two textual anomalies, and to proclaim yet again that a life of sin is a life wasted. I would like to believe that the question was asked with some degree of sincerity. It must be admitted, however, that the initial rabbinic concern for Terah as a father is far outweighed by condemnation.

If indeed the midrash reflects a genuine concern for Terah's honor, perhaps it was inspired by a passage in Joshua's farewell speech, part of which was incorporated into the Haggadah: "In days past your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan" (Josh. 24:2–3). Verse 2 looks back at Abraham's past, in which Terah appears as the father of both Abraham and Nahor. In verse 3, God plucks Abraham from both his geographical location and his religious and cultural environment, allowing Abraham to enter into a covenant with the One God, the God who will become Israel's savior. For Abraham and his descendants, history begins anew; now only he, and not Terah, is "your father."

And yet in verse 2 Terah is described not only as Abraham's father, but as father of Abraham's descendants as well—unlike the midrash, which ultimately strips Terah of his patriarchal status entirely. Verses 2 and 3 can be seen as a sort of palimpsest. This term refers to parchment or paper on which a text is written over a previous one that is still partially visible, if only faintly. The original text may no longer be legible. Nonetheless, its presence is felt, and we know that at one time these were the only words inscribed here.

Surely Joshua mentions Terah the idolater primarily as a foil in order to dramatize and emphasize the transformative consequences of God's choosing Abraham. But the fact remains that Joshua does not ignore Terah or exclude him from Israel's past. Abraham had a father and a home; without Terah there would have been no Abraham. We may have rejected Terah's idolatrous ways, but we must not deny his paternity.

I imagine Terah seeing off his son. Did he understand and accept Abraham's decision to heed a voice that only he heard? Was he thinking of the moments of joy that he had shared with his son? Was he angry, or perhaps deeply sad? I do not know. But I also wonder whether in that moment Abraham turned to his father, embraced him and said, "Wherever I go, whatever I do, you will be with me. I follow a God that is not yours and go to a faraway land, but I will never forget your kindness and care. Know that in embracing another faith I still value what you have taught me through your words and actions. Know also that you will not be forgotten; I will tell my children and grandchildren that you are my father and therefore theirs as well."

There is no going without leaving. But it is for us to choose what we take with us.

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