

## **Thoughts on Lech Lecha**

*based on a 2007 sermon,*

*and the teaching from the 2013 Rabbinic Advisory Council Annual Meeting*

By Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin

We often only want to look at Abraham's merits because he is the founder of our tradition. But, in our attempt to always see him in a positive light, we have overlooked some basic details that paint a darker picture of a man who abused his family. He was paid when Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's harem. One could interpret this as prostitution. He abused his son and attempted to murder him. It is not unlike stories that we might hear of today when abusers beat, rape, degrade and humiliate their loved ones or put their loved ones in a position so that others may do so. Abraham abused his family.

The necessity of seeing this aspect of Abraham is to have a clearer picture of who he was, and therefore, who we are. We don't like to think of someone so important to us as a perpetrator of abuse, but if we ignore it and explain these difficult passages away, then we encourage ourselves to ignore it and explain abuse away when we see it in our own communities. We don't like to think of Jews as perpetrators or victims of abuse, but it happens in our communities at the same rate as any other community. The big difference is that Jewish victims often wait longer to seek help because of the myth that things like this don't happen in Jewish families.

Seeing Abraham as a perpetrator of abuse also enables us to send a message to abusers in our communities. The fact that Abraham abused his family does not erase the fact that he founded our tradition and that he righteously argued for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gemorrah. We can still look up to him for the ways in which he was righteous. The good and the bad exist together in Abraham, and in everyone else. The good can still be appreciated as long as someone actively works to change his or her negative behavior. And Abraham does. After the angel stops him from killing Isaac, thus, after someone told him that what he was doing was wrong, we don't hear any more difficult stories about the relationship between Abraham and his family.

Denying that Abraham abused his family, an idea that is relatively clear in the text, makes it permissible for all of us to ignore what is clearly in our communities. But if we can keep ourselves open to the possibility that Abraham was a perpetrator of violence, then, we are open to the possibility that anyone, no matter who they are, could be as well.

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