



## Millstone Scholars Sample Curriculum

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# Abraham and Sarah: The First Hebrews

<b>Part A</b> Orientation and Timeline	<b>Part B</b> Introduction	<b>Part C</b> Key Texts	<b>Part D</b> Final Thoughts	<b>Part E</b> For the Family Table
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# Orientation

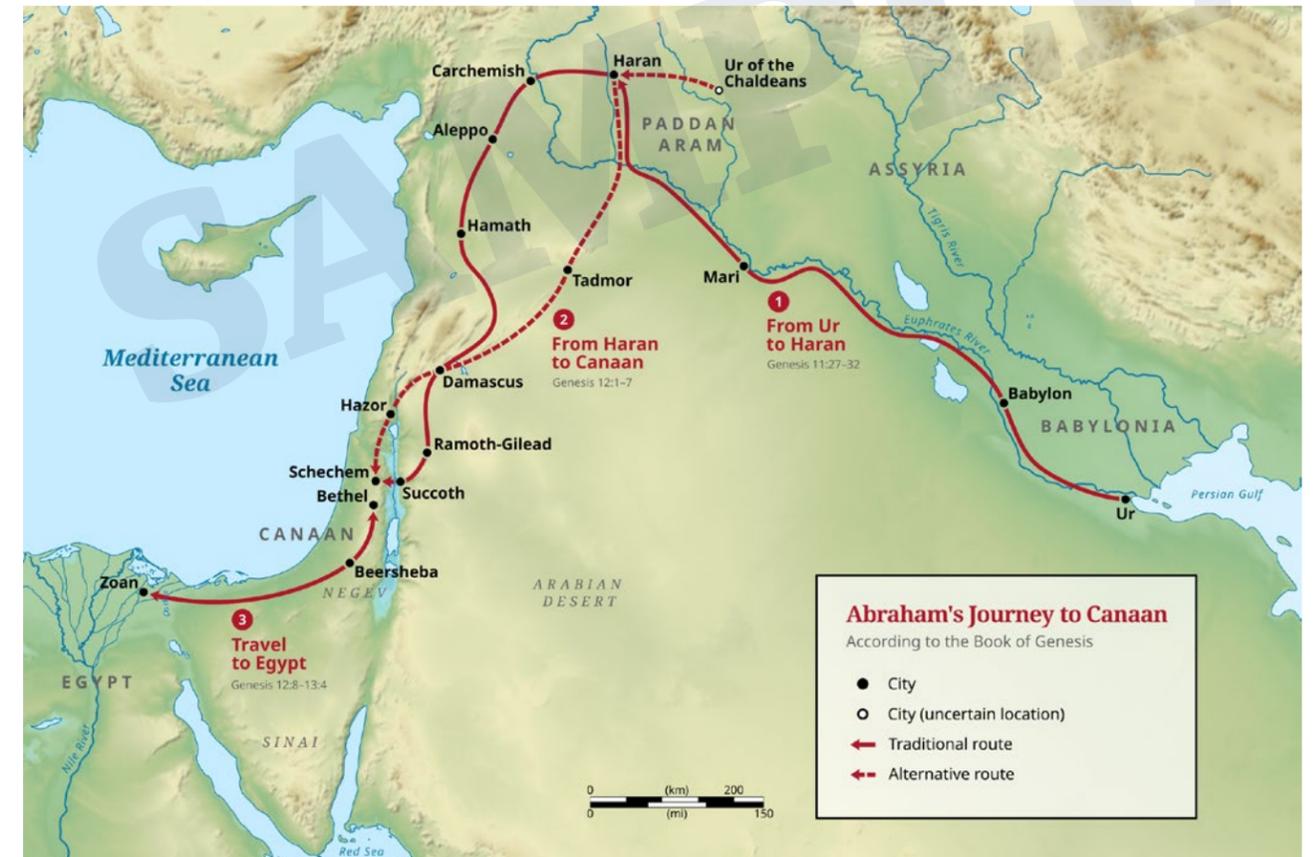
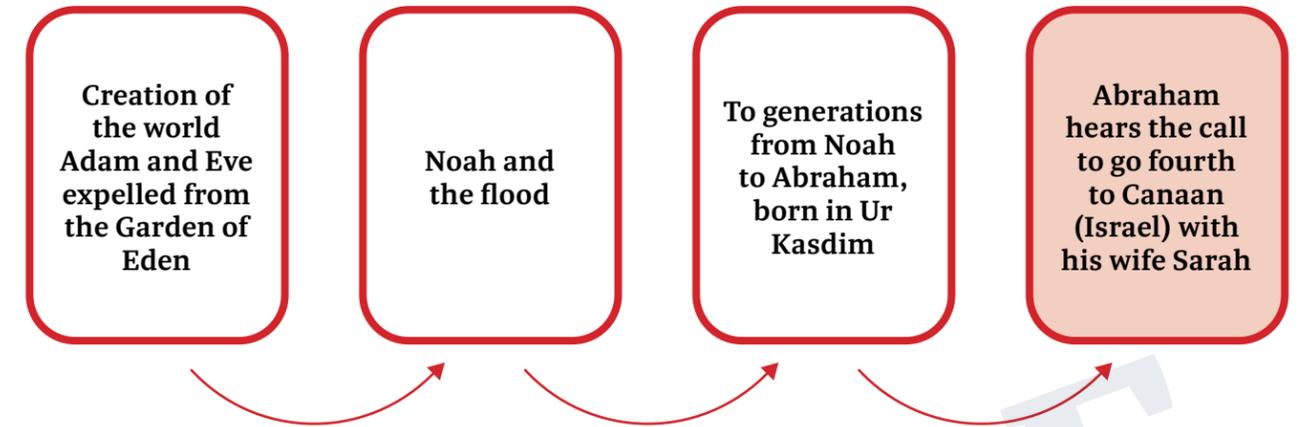
In just twelve chapters, the Torah covers almost two-thousand years' worth of characters and global events. It begins with the creation of the world and quickly turns to the first man, woman and family—Adam, Eve and their sons Cain and Abel. These narratives contain deep and essential messages for all of mankind, but the Torah dedicates relatively few words to exploring them. If you were to start turning random pages in the first twelve chapters of Genesis, you would most likely land on a page with lots of names—brief information about who fathered whom and how long they lived. There are dozens and dozens of names, with only two notable stories to break this up— Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel. These too are foundational and universal stories, but they can be counted in verses, not chapters.

Following the story of Babel— which tells of how and why mankind spread across the world—we encounter more names, in the style that is familiar to any reader of Genesis 1-12. But then the tone shifts. From chapters 12-50, the Torah moves slowly through the story of a single family, covering a period of only 200 years. This family—our family—became the Jewish people. And it is from here that we will begin exploring the narrative of the men and women who shaped our 4000-year-old civilization.



Abraham's Journey from Ur to Canaan by József Molnár (c.1850)

# Timeline and Map



Abraham's Journey to Canaan according to the Book of Genesis, Derivative work: DEGA MD

# Introduction

## Guiding Theme: What Qualities Make a Hebrew?

In this unit, we begin our study of biblical figures with the first Hebrews: Abraham and Sarah. Through four key episodes—their departure from home, their hospitality to strangers, Abraham’s challenge to God about Sodom, and the binding of Isaac—we will explore core Jewish ideas: **chosenness, morality, faith, and service.**

Abraham is the first figure in the Torah chosen to carry a Divine mission. Together with his wife Sarah, he dedicates his life to a purpose greater than himself—laying the foundation for what it means to be a Jew.

These stories help us understand that Judaism begins not with rituals, but with people committed to values and ideas. After exploring who the Jews are and what kind of book the Torah is, we now turn to the lives of those who first lived out its mission.

### Vocabulary

Hebrew	English
Ivri (עִבְרִי)	Hebrew
Brit (בְּרִית)	Covenant (Agreement)
Hakhnasat Orhim (הַכְּנַסַּת אֹרְחִים)	Bringing in Guests
Avot (אָבוֹת)	Fathers
Imahot (אִמּוֹת)	Mothers

### Guiding Questions:



1. What does it mean to be a Hebrew—someone on “the other side”?
2. What qualities made Abraham worthy of being *chosen*? What does chosenness mean?
3. How does Abraham’s story help us understand the idea of a Jewish mission?
4. What does it mean to challenge—or obey—God?

# Key Texts

## The Mothers and the Fathers: Why Do They Matter?

This course is built around the lives of people we meet in the Torah—figures like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and others. Each one makes choices, faces challenges, and takes part in shaping the story of the Jewish people. But before we dive into their lives, we need to ask a bigger question: Why should we care about them at all?

These stories are thousands of years old. What do they have to do with us—modern Jews—living in a very different time and place? To help us answer that, we’ll look at a powerful idea from one of Judaism’s greatest thinkers: **Ramban** (Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman aka Nachmanides, 13th C Spain), who tells us why the Torah spends so much time on these people—and why it still matters today.

### Text 3a: Ramban, Genesis 12:6 (C)

I will tell you a general principle by which you will understand all the upcoming passages about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a great idea, which our Sages briefly expressed when they said (Bereishit Rabbah 39:8; Tanchuma 9): **‘Everything that happened to the fathers is a sign for the children.’** That is why the Torah spends so much time on the journeys, the wells they dug, and other events. Someone might think these are extra details with no purpose, but in truth, all of them come to teach us about the future.”

**Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman** (1194-1270), known as Ramban or Nachmanides, was a Spanish rabbi, philosopher, and physician. He is best known for his comprehensive commentary on the Torah, which blends peshat (plain meaning), midrash, mysticism, and deep moral insight. Ramban’s writings profoundly shaped Jewish thought, and his commentaries remain central to traditional Torah study.

According to our sages, “everything that happened to the fathers is a sign for the children.” In modern terms, one might call this an archetype. An archetype is like a pattern or mold—something that repeats because it captures a deep truth. Like a superhero or a villain. They may have different names, settings and superpowers, but their stories are mostly the same.

Ramban says that the Torah doesn’t just tell us stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to teach us what happened in the past. These stories are predictive. They show us what kinds

of things will happen to the Jewish people again and again, and how we should think and act when they do.

That means the Torah's characters are more than just heroes from long ago—they are archetypes. Abraham's journeys, Isaac's sacrifice, Rachel's struggles—they each reveal something lasting about Jewish life. By studying these stories, we're learning about ourselves. That's why every detail matters. They aren't just stories—they're blueprints.

### Discussion Questions:



1. If these stories are “blueprints,” what does that say about how we should read them? What's different about reading a blueprint vs. reading a bedtime story?
2. Have you ever read or watched a story where a character reminded you of someone else—even if the setting was different? How does that idea connect to what Ramban is saying about the Torah's characters?

## The Journey Begins

### Text 3b: Genesis 12:1–5

And the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed.” And Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him and Lot went forth with him, Abram being seventy-five years old when he left Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew and all the goods they had gotten and the souls they had made in Haran, and they set out on the way to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ  
וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה׃  
וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְגֹי גְדוֹל וְאַבְרָכְךָ וְאֶגְדְּלָהּ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה  
בְּרָכָה׃  
וְאַבְרָכְךָ מִבְּרָכֶיךָ וּמִקְלָלֶיךָ אֲרָ וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְּךָ כָּל  
מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה׃  
וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה' וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶתֹן לוֹט  
וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־חַמֶּשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ  
מִחָרָן׃  
וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת־שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בֶּן־אָחִיו  
וְאֶת־כָּל־רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת־הַנַּפְשׁ אֲשֶׁר־  
עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ  
כְּנָעַן׃



"Abraham's Journey to Canaan" by Pieter Lastman (c. 1614)

### Text 3c: Ramban, Genesis 12:1 (C)

The reason for mentioning out of thy country, and from thy birthplace, and from thy father's house is that **it is difficult for a person to leave the country wherein he dwells, where he has his friends and companions.** This is true all the more if this be his native land, and all the more if his whole family is there. Hence it became necessary to say to Abraham **that he must leave all** for the sake of his love of the Holy One, blessed be He.

### Discussion Questions:



1. What is the difference between “land,” “birthplace,” and “father's house”? Why list them separately?
2. What kind of personal change would it take to leave each of those?
3. In the Hebrew text, the words “go forth” are lekh lekha (לֵךְ לְךָ) and can be read as “go to yourself”. What can this teach us about where we should start a journey?
4. What does this tell us about how we grow or transform—is it a single act of willpower or a journey/process?

### ✓ Simplifying the Idea

The journey to Jewish identity required leaving behind the external influences that define most people—geography, culture, and family norms. Judaism started as an idea that required a change in thinking, not just a change in location. The courage to ‘go forth’ was not found in some external place, but within Abraham himself.

## Being Chosen and Being a Blessing

### Text 3d: Ramban, Genesis 12:2 (C)

You will be the blessing by whom people will be blessed, saying, “G-d make thee as Abraham.” To this He added that all families of the earth will cite him in blessing, not just the people of his country alone. It may be that the expression, And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed, means that they will all be blessed on his account.

### Text 3e: Rabbi Shlomo Mondschein, Pshat V’Omeq BaMikra, JP

Note also that from a grammatical standpoint, the word “veheyeh” is not in the future tense but in the imperative. Therefore, even though its main meaning here seems to be a promise—since it appears within a series of promises—it also carries an element of command: God is commanding Abraham to “be a blessing,” that is, to conduct himself in such a way that makes him fit to receive the blessing of Heaven and to serve as a source of blessing for his surroundings and for the entire world.

**Rabbi Shlomo Mondschein** is a contemporary Israeli Rabbi and commentator. Descended from a family of prominent rabbis and Tanakh professors, Rabbi Mondschein was a 2022 International Bible Contest laureate. He has authored over a dozen books on Tanakh, Jewish law and Jewish philosophy, with a particular focus on grammatical analysis and understanding the plain meaning of the Torah’s text.

### Discussion Questions:

1. According to the commentary, is “being a blessing” a promise or a responsibility? What difference would that make in thinking about Abraham and his descendants being ‘chosen’?
2. Practically, what does it mean to “be a blessing” for others? What are some actions a person could do in order to “be a blessing”?

### ✓ Simplifying the Idea

Abraham’s journey wasn’t just about leaving—it was about *becoming*. God’s promise that he would “be a blessing” means that Abraham’s life would influence the world. Being chosen isn’t just what a person is—it is what they are called on to do for others. Jewish law uses this verse to give us a practical way of remembering Abraham—and his mission which we carry on—every single day. This should remind us to live with purpose: to grow, to go forward, and to bring goodness to others.

Abraham and Sarah have the personal courage to leave everything they know behind, but they’re also great teachers who don’t want to keep their message about believing in one God and living ethically to themselves.

But even though they can teach and influence many people, nothing compares to the most powerful form of teaching—when parents pass their values on to their own children. At this point in their lives, Abraham and Sarah have not been able to have a child together. Sarah decides to give Hagar (her maidservant) to Abraham to bear him a child who can carry on the legacy of these ideas into the next generation.

Hagar does become pregnant, but instead of solving their problem, it creates new ones. Sarah becomes jealous of Hagar, and their relationship falls apart.

Sarah treats Hagar so badly that Hagar runs away into the desert, where she meets an angel of God. The angel gives her strength to return, and she gives birth to a son named Yishmael.

This could have been the end of the story, with Yishmael carrying on their legacy. But God speaks directly to Abraham and makes a special agreement with him—the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*—בְּרִית מִילָה). During this conversation, God officially changes their names from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, and makes an incredible promise—Yishmael will not be the one to continue the covenant. Instead, Sarah will have her own son

named Isaac. Abraham laughs at this because both he and Sarah are very old. Still, he obeys God's command and circumcises himself and his son Yishmael.

This brings us to chapter 18, which opens with Abraham sitting outside his tent, still recovering from his circumcision. Three mysterious strangers approach him, and what happens next will move our story forward.

## Abraham and Sarah: Welcoming Guests

### Text 3f: Genesis 18:1–8 (T)

And **the LORD appeared** to him in the Terebinths of Mamre when he was sitting by the tent flap in the heat of the day. And he raised his eyes and saw, and, look, three men were standing before him. **He saw, and he ran toward them** from the tent flap and bowed to the ground. And he said, “My lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be fetched and bathe your feet and stretch out under the tree, and let me fetch a morsel of bread, and refresh yourselves. Then you may go on, for have you not come by your servant?” And they said, “Do as you have spoken.” ‘And Abraham hurried to the tent to Sarah and he said, “Hurry! Knead three seahs of choice semolina flour and make loaves.” And to the herd Abraham ran and fetched a tender and goodly calf and gave it to the lad, who hurried to prepare it. And he fetched curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and he set these before them, he **standing over them under the tree, and they ate.**

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֵינוּ מִמְרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פְּתַח־  
הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים  
עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיִּרְץ לִקְרָאתָם מִפְּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ  
אֲרָצָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם־נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל־נָא  
תַּעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ:

יִקַּח־נָא מֵעֵט־מַיִם וְרִחֲצֵנוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֵנוּ תַּחַת  
הָעֵץ:

וְאָקְחָה פַת־לֶחֶם וְסִעְדֵנוּ לְבָכֶם אַחַר תַּעֲבֹרוּ כִי־  
עַל־כֵּן עֲבַרְתֶּם עַל־עַבְדְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה  
כְּאִשֶּׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ:

וַיְמַהֵר אַבְרָהָם הָאֵהָלָה אֶל־שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־רָּ  
שָׁלַשׁ סָאִים קֶמַח סִלַּת לְיֹשִׁי וְעֵשִׂי עֲגוֹת:

וְאֶל־הַבָּקָר רָץ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח בֶּן־בָּקָר רֶגֶל וְטוֹבֵ  
וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הַנֶּעֱר וַיְמַהֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתוֹ:

וַיִּקַּח חֶמְאָה וְחֹלֵב וּבֶן־הַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן  
לְפָנֵיהֶם וְהוּא עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת הָעֵץ וַיֹּאכְלוּ:



Abraham and the Three Angels, c. 1896-1902, by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (French, 1836-1902)

### Text 3g: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a (OT)

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, as when Abraham invited his guests it is written: “And he said: Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please pass not from Your servant” (Genesis 18:3). Abraham requested that God, the Divine Presence, wait for him while he tended to his guests appropriately.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. The Talmud says that “hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.” How does Abraham’s behavior in Genesis 18 show this idea?
2. Did Abraham do the right thing by interrupting his conversation with God? Give one argument for each side.

## Text 3h: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Vayera: Covenant & Conversation (C)

Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

### Discussion Questions:

1. According to Rabbi Sacks, why is it “easy” to receive the Divine when God appears as God, and why is it harder when it’s through strangers?
2. Does Rabbi Sacks’ explanation differ from that of the Talmud? How can his explanation help us understand the Talmud differently?



*Abraham Entertaining the Angels,  
Rembrandt c. 1656*

## Text 3i: Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, Welcoming Guests, Shabbaton (C)

However, the primary path to hospitality was, is, and always will be the welcoming of another into one's inner home—the opening of the heart. Many guests seek to enter our homes. They long for the inner warmth of the heart, for the empathy granted from one person to another, for the smile and the willingness to listen. A person does not need to own a house with rooms and windows and a roof in order to host guests. A person carries themselves wherever they go, and within themselves they can host others in the deepest way. There, in their very being and soul, they can offer hospitality as they wish—and in doing so, they give what is truly lacking.

**Rabbi Yuval Cherlow** is a leading Israeli Religious Zionist rabbi and ethicist. He heads the Yeshivat Hesder Amit Orot Shaul (where students combine Torah learning with army service) and was a founding member of Tzohar, a group of rabbis focused on bridging gaps between religious and secular Jews. Known for his public engagement and thoughtful halakhic writing, Rabbi Cherlow often addresses modern ethical issues in medicine, government, and technology.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What verse in the Torah's text above supports Rav Cherlow's assertion that “A person does not need to own a house with rooms and windows and a roof in order to host guests”? Where does the entire episode take place?
2. Does Rav Cherlow's explanation differ from that of the Talmud? How can his explanation help us understand the Talmud differently?

### Simplifying the Idea

We now know another quality of what it means to be a Hebrew: seeing opportunities to connect to God through service to our fellow man. This may even be a more difficult task. Alternatively, it may mean that we have more opportunities to connect to God than we realize.

## Final Thoughts:

In this unit, we studied the first steps of Abraham and Sarah's mission, beginning with their journey from Haran. We learned that becoming the Jewish people required leaving behind familiar influences—land, culture, and family—and beginning a process of self-transformation rooted in values. Abraham and Sarah are portrayed not just as travelers, but as teachers: highlighting Judaism's core commitment to influencing others through education and connection.

By refusing to stick to themselves and lead quietly pious lives, Avraham and Sarah embodied the idea of 'being a blessing'-- which can be understood as a promise or a command. As a command, being a blessing is a call to act in a way that makes others want to emulate you. Alternatively, it is a call to act in a way that positively impacts your environment. This is the true meaning of being 'chosen'-- not an inherent status, but a charge and responsibility to act.

In welcoming strangers, Avraham and Sarah acted as role models and positively influenced those around them. They demonstrated, through their bold actions, that service to others is not separate from service to God—it is one and the same.

### Exit Ticket:

1. What did Abraham and Sarah have to leave behind when they began their journey, and why was that important for starting the Jewish people?
2. Give an example of how Abraham and Sarah influenced others. How is this connected to Judaism's focus on education and relationships?
3. How did the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming guests show that helping people is part of serving God?

### Recap

- Abraham and Sarah came from Ur Kasdim and later, Haran. They had to leave behind their physical space, extended family, culture and customs when they began their journey.
- Avraham is told to 'be a blessing'-- which is both a promise and a command. He can and will become a blessing if he acts to positively influence those around him. Being chosen is thus a responsibility, not a birthright.
- The story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming guests despite being in the middle of a conversation with God showed us that helping people is not in tension with serving God, but a part of it. Perhaps the highest level of religious worship is when you see God in your fellow man.

### Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- Rabbi Alex Israel— Lekh Lekha | Abraham's Journey (<https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-lekh-lekha/lekh-lekha-abrahams-journey>).  
*What is the purpose of a mission of this nature? What does it aim to achieve?*
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks—The Power of Example | Lech Lecha 5772 (<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/the-power-of-example/>)  
*How can values and faith be embodied in real people for the world to learn from them?*
- Rabbi David Fohrman and Immanuel Shalev— Parshat Lech Lecha: Was Abraham The First Wandering Jew (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xu61DEXOAE&list=PLmGOINuEBb3BHcFiSS8mqo6n80hhMBZcn&index=5>)  
*What is it about Abraham that really makes him special, and the father of our nation?*

## For the Family Table

### When History Got Personal—Rabbi Berel Wein

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/rabbiwein-5779-lech-lecha/>

The pace of the narrative of the Torah abruptly changes with the events described in this week's reading. Until now the Torah has dealt with large periods of time and many, many generations and different numbers of human beings and nations. It concerns itself apparently with a broad overview of the origins of human civilization and of the formation of societies, tribes and nations.

Its narrative confirmed the idea expressed so vividly in the story of the building of the tower of Babel, that the individual human being was relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of things and that individuals mattered little in the development of the course of civilization and nation building. All of this dramatically changes with the appearance of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah.

The Torah now dwells on details and the lives of individuals, their hopes and disappointments, their struggles and achievements. The story of the individual thus becomes the story of the world in its entirety. Judaism teaches us that the life of an individual is really to be considered the life of the world itself. We become privy to the innermost thoughts and aspirations of Abraham and Sarah. We read of their great trials and the vicissitudes they endure in following the path of goodness and holiness in a world that was corrupted by idolatry and poisoned by violence and greed.

The story of mankind becomes a stand-alone narrative. Even though the big picture is certainly in the background, it is the actions and beliefs of individuals that truly set the course for the further development of civilization and humankind.

How often do we feel insignificant and of little consequence in the overall scheme of society, government and world affairs? After all, in a world where millions of votes are required to win a major election in democratic societies or where the rule of police and government crushes individualism in totalitarian societies, of what value is there to what an individual may think or believe?

But all of history has shown us that it is the individual that sets the course for human civilization and that literally a handful of people are responsible for the great changes, defeats and definitive struggles that have marked human history from its onset until today. I think this is the strongest lesson of the narrative of the lives of our father and mother, Abraham and Sarah, as recorded for us in the immortal words of the Torah.

The prophet Isaiah will characterize our father Abraham as being an “individual” -- one,

alone and different from all others. In this way his greatness has made him the founder of the people who are smaller in numbers but enormous in influence and who have fueled the progress of human civilization over the many millennia.

The rabbis have taught us that we are to attempt to be Abraham and Sarah in each generation of human society. We are to represent what is right and moral, lasting and valuable, to be righteous individuals in a world that often loses its moral compass and godly direction.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the Torah suddenly “zoom in” on Abraham and Sarah’s individual story instead of continuing to tell us about large groups of people?
2. Rabbi Wein says we can feel “insignificant” in a big world - how did Abraham and Sarah’s journey and hospitality show that individuals *do* matter?