

Parashat Lech Lecha sermon

Bard Cosman, 11/12/16

[page references are to *Etz Hayim* chumash]

Two years ago I had a kind of negative inspiration. I should quit my position as General Surgery Section Chief at the VA Hospital, a position I held for 14 years, and go back to being a lowly Staff Physician. I did love having something that was mine--my own section--and constantly tending it, to make it work better. But as I approach the age at which my father died, I did not want my future 'bonus time' to include many meetings or performance assessments. So I resigned in favor of my partner Bill, who now leads the section way better than I did. I get to do the behind-the-scenes, technical work that feels like my inheritance. But why does being the Chief's right-hand man instead of the Chief feel so natural, as if I were born to it?

Not everyone was meant to be a leader, despite what they told you at that seminar. But whom do we celebrate in our Jewish mythology, if not leaders? Our patriarchs are the leaders of clans, and sometimes of armies. Moses and Joshua, Deborah and the Judges, David and the Kings—alpha leaders all. And the prophets, solitary voices against the powerful, are just a different kind of leader. Are there models for dedicated subordinates like myself, the technocrats who, when they do well, can make a leader look good?

In today's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, we meet a subordinate just like that. That character is Eliezer, Abram's steward. Let's start on the last line of page 82 (Gen. 15:2), where Abram—not yet renamed Avraham—complains to Hashem that he does not have a son. His nephew Lot has gone his separate way, and Abram and Sarai are infertile, so Abram laments that his only heir will be his household manager or steward, a chief slave named Eliezer. At the top of page 83, Eliezer is introduced by Abram as *ven-meshek beiti, hoo Damesek Eliezer*.

Let's read that line closely. First the proper name, straightforward enough: Eliezer, meaning "my G-d is a help" or "my G-d helps." But then there's *Damesek*, an ambiguous or orphan word, used here and nowhere else. It could be an occupational title: after all, it contains the word *meshek*, meaning household, economy, or staff, so *Damesek* may mean something like Chief of Staff or Steward.

An alternative view starts with the recognition that *Damesek* has the same spelling, although not the same vowelization, as the name *Damasek*, which is city Damascus. So before the Masoretes put in the vowels and differentiated the two words, *Damesek* was identical to *Damasek*. Most translators, though not our friends at the Jewish Publication Society, reverse the verdict of the Masoretes and assume that *Damesek* Eliezer means *Damascene* Eliezer, or Eliezer from Damascus.

Rabbis of the Midrash follow this lead back to the story of the 4 kings (Gen. 14:14). In this episode, Abram hears that his nephew Lot has been captured when 4 kings put down a rebellion in his adopted hometown of S'dom. Abram musters three hundred eighteen of his household—a formidable fighting force, in this era of sparse population—and mounts a night attack against the four kings' armies, chasing them further than Damascus and freeing Lot from captivity.

Damesek Eliezer distinguishes himself on this expedition, showing that he's not just 'domestic Eliezer.' A midrash even has it that Eliezer was Abram's sole companion when he rode out against the 4 kings, and the two of them together, the great knight and his squire, routed the four kings' armies single-, or rather double-, handed. Support for this reading comes from the gematria, or numerical value, of the name Eliezer, which is 318. So when it says that Abram mustered 318, it could just be saying that he tapped Eliezer on the shoulder and said "Hey, ol' 318, let's you and me go git 'em." And Eliezer must have replied: "Let's do it, 243!" However unlikely, this numerological reading is bolstered by the fact that there is no other known significance to the number 318.

If Eliezer distinguished himself at the battle of the four kings, when he chased them past Damascus, he may have gotten his nickname as a battle honorific, like

Scipio Africanus, who wasn't African but who won wars in Africa. "Damascus Eliezer" might be a kind of onomastic boast about his past military exploits, like calling President Harrison "Old Tippecanoe." Further midrashim support this obliquely by asserting that Eliezer was Mesopotamian and not from Damascus.

Midrashim provide the backstory, or sometimes competing backstories, to flesh out the brief appearance of characters in the canonical text. Thus, from the same source as Abram breaking his father's idols, and Abram being cast into a fiery furnace by King Nimrod, we meet Eliezer for the first time in the court of that very King, the god-king Nimrod of Shin'ar. Nimrod, the epitome of arrogance, the mighty man who declared himself a deity, vacillated between tolerating and hating Abram, who always proclaimed the truth of monotheism, a constant rebuke to Nimrod. During a period of toleration, Nimrod actually gave gifts to Abram, including the slave Eliezer. Circumcised, presumably renamed, and brought into the new faith along with Abram's whole household, Eliezer became part of the inner circle and eventually Abram's steward or seneschal. When Nimrod once again decided to murder Abram, Eliezer warned him, and they made their escape to Hebron, in the land of Canaan.

But back to the canonical text, and Abram's lament to HaShem: I have no children, and my nephew has become a Sodomite, so when I die, everything goes to Damesek Eliezer. Abram implies trust and at least some measure of affection for Eliezer, but at the same time lays out his vision of a patriarchal clan, sown by his own seed, not simply headed by his followers. Let's suppose Abram's prayer were *not* answered. What would a religious clan founded by a man with no sons look like? We have a historical model, the succession to Muhammad, who was in just that position. The founder's closest associates became family by marriage, like the first caliph Abubakr, Muhammad's father-in-law. Or like the 4th caliph, Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law.

Concerns about inheritance must have been foremost in Eliezer's mind, as he went about slaving for Abram, building the clan holdings, and wondering about the future. While he didn't have the example of Muhammad to work from, he must have had contemporary analogies. But then Abram's prayer is promptly

answered by HaShem, and in terms that belittle and dismiss Eliezer. Using an impersonal pronoun, HaShem says (Gen. 15:4) “*That one* shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue,” and HaShem’s promise is immediately fulfilled with the birth of Ishmael—to Hagar, no less, who was presumably far down on Eliezer’s payroll. Enough to make a faithful steward look for rewards elsewhere.

But Eliezer made peace with the situation, and made peace with Ishmael himself, as a midrash on the Akedah implies. The rabbis say that the two members of the household who made the trip with Abraham and Isaac to Mount Moriah were Ishmael and Eliezer. At the foot of the mountain, Avraham tells the two to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac go up to sacrifice. One can imagine Ishmael and Eliezer in feverish conversation, as they wait to see who or what will emerge from the morning mists: did HaShem’s new dispensation actually include human sacrifice? And if Isaac is gone, will Ishmael be restored to his rightful inheritance? If so, where would Eliezer stand? Another midrash gives Eliezer a daughter to bargain with. Could Eliezer strike a deal with Ishmael to marry his daughter, and so partake in the inheritance of Abraham?

But two men come down the mountain, and all those fantasies are swept aside, along with Ishmael himself. Eliezer makes peace with that too, remaining loyal to his unpredictable master. So loyal, in fact, that in the Torah portion two weeks from now, we’ll see Avraham placing his testicles in Eliezer’s hand and asking him to testify—yes, that is where the word comes from—that he’ll return to Charan and find a suitable wife for Isaac. Midrash has it that Eliezer offered his daughter on the spot as Isaac’s wife, but was brushed off by Avraham, who said that was quite out of the question. Eliezer’s daughter, he explained, was a member of the cursed race of Cham, whereas Isaac was of the blessed race of Shem, so in the interest of racial purity, better find Isaac a Shemite wife.

A word about Chamites and Shemites here: in last weeks’ Torah portion, Noah got drunk after successfully saving the world’s people and animals. Cham, his youngest son, uncovered his father’s nakedness, and Shem and Yafet, his other sons, covered him up. Noah then cursed Cham and blessed Shem. Ten generations later, cursed Chamites included Nimrod, Eliezer, all Canaanites, and

all Egyptians, and blessed Semites included Avraham, Sarah, Lot, and all the clan of Terach and Nachor back in Charan. Ishmael was a Mudblood: Chamite on his mother's side, Shemite on his father's.

Now that Avraham has explained the impossibility of Eliezer reaching above his station, complete with a casual racial putdown, Eliezer's hopes have once again been dashed. Eliezer has his dignity, though, and—luckily for Avraham—that dignity is bound up in rigid control over his own *yetzer hara*, his tendency toward evil. All Eliezer's years of service, not to mention his years of frustration, culminate in his mission to Haran, which we'll read about in Parashat Chayei Sarah. If Avraham's vision is a Shemite clan religion, then Eliezer promises to make that happen. If Avraham's mission is to build a Shemite exclave in the Chamite territory of Canaan, then Eliezer will go back to Mesopotamia and find that ethnically pure woman for Isaac. But he'll put his own stamp on the Jewish people as did no other convert before Ruth: Rebekah will not be Isaac's choice, and she won't be Avraham's choice. Rather, the first non-accidental Matriarch is the personal selection of Eliezer, the Chamite and slave. Eliezer, who has studied Isaac from birth, can easily spot a girl who can run rings around Isaac, and it is Eliezer who inserts the kind but wily Rebekah into the patriarchal family, forcing Jewish posterity towards clever Israelites instead of muscular Edomites.

The rabbis all agree that Eliezer deserved a reward for a lifetime of self-effacing, self-abnegating service to so fickle a master as *Avraham avinu*. Certainly Eliezer won his freedom, but also something more: one midrash says that, with the curse of Cham lifted, he became one of the eight select people in history who was admitted alive to Paradise. Another midrash, much less charitable, says that Eliezer had acquired so much merit that HaShem begrudged him his reward in the world to come, and instead made him a giant and gave him a kingdom in this world. In this anomalous story, a spiteful Eliezer becomes King Og of Bashan, the terror of the Israelites, who is eventually killed by Moses. Since Og of Bashan already has a convincing canonical history, as the last of the Rephaim giants, let's stick with the more coherent story of Eliezer's reward being to enter Gan Eden alive. No patriarch or matriarch, no Judge or King, and no prophet other than Elijah had that distinction. One imagines Avraham, having died at a good old age,

an old man and full of years, being gathered to his people, surprised to see his old slave, Eliezer the Chamite, not of his people, already inside the gate of Gan Eden. “Sorry I missed Sheol, sir,” says Eliezer. “What was it like?”

And Damesek Eliezer really does have a kind of eternal life in *this* world, as well. His became a standard Jewish name immediately, given to a son of Moses and to a prophet in the book of Chronicles. The Elazar variant of the same name (numerical value 308) applies to the son of Aaron, who became the second High Priest. One of my sons is Ilan Elazar, and a prominent member of this congregation is Eliezer ben Avraham Yitzchak—a name that encapsulates Damesek Eliezer’s fondest hope for inheritance. Search the Jewish Encyclopedia, and you’ll find as many entries for prominent Jews named Eliezer or Eleazar as you will for those named Abraham or Isaac. Look for the root of Eliezer’s name, ayin-zayin-resh, and you’ll find it everywhere—four times in today’s haftarah alone, not to mention in the variant names, all still current, of Ezra, Ezer, and Azariah.

No steward or servant in the entire Tanach compares with Eliezer. Few servants even rate mention of their names. We’ll see a rare named servant in next week’s haftarah, when we meet Gechazi, Elisha’s sidekick. But no Jew is ever named after Gechazi, whom the rabbis revile. In Proverbs (Prov. 30), it says the world cannot abide a servant who rises above his station to become a king. But there is a strong Jewish tradition of stewardship, not as a stepping-stone towards kingship, but for stewardship’s sake alone. The epitome of disinterested stewardship is Joseph, who, finding himself a slave in Egypt, became the trusted steward, the *ben-meshek bayit*, of Potiphar the Egyptian, and ultimately of Pharaoh himself.

Note that for any leader, it is perfectly natural to find a steward, vizier, adviser, or physician who is not a member of the ‘in group.’ Lacking a constituency among the king’s subjects, the steward figure is beholden to, and unfailingly loyal to, the king, and of course can also be blamed if things go wrong. Haroun al-Rashid had his Persian vizier Ja’far, the Lone Ranger needed his Tonto; even lowly Tommy

Atkins had his Gunga Din. And in the world of the exile, i.e. most of Jewish history, the Jew has fallen naturally into this role.

For us diaspora Jews, it's both a stereotype and an ancient, honored tradition to aspire towards trusted, technocratic, stewardship, rather than political leadership. Hence the figure, ubiquitous in history, of the court Jew. Think of the court physicians in Muslim and Christian lands, Maimonides among them. And the court financiers, the Wertheimers and the Oppenheimers. And the court advisers, like Mordechai. All these trusted technocrats, stewards of their gentile masters' health and well-being, trace their functional lineage to Joseph. But who taught Joseph, and indeed every Jew from Joseph to myself, to walk this path? Three generations before Joseph, there was the original trusted steward and outsider, the court Chamite, the once and future staff man, Damesek Eliezer. He has earned his inheritance in the house of Abraham.