

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

The Torah teaches us that our father Avraham was told to leave his home in Mesopotamia and to travel to an unknown land, which eventually turned out to be the Land of Israel. Midrash points out to us that the entire success of Avraham's mission in life – to spread the idea of monotheism and the universal God – was dependent on his living in the Land of Israel. The question naturally arises why this should have been so. After all, he could have been successful in so doing had he remained in Mesopotamia, which then was the center of human civilization and culture while the Land of Israel was somewhat of a backward, out-of-the-way place.

There are many possible answers to this question but the one that intrigues me most is as follows. Being successful in spiritual missions and growth always requires sacrifice and some physical discomfort. The prophet castigates those that are complacent and comfortable in Zion.

A person is born to toil and accomplish, to be busy and productive. Without undergoing the arduous and potentially dangerous journey to the Land of Israel, Avraham will never fulfill his spiritual destiny. Avraham is the symbol of challenges in life. The ten tests that he undergoes shape him and mold him into the father of our people and the symbol of human civilization and monotheistic progress. Only by leaving his comfortable and familiar surroundings can he achieve greatness. It is imperative for him to leave and to wander, to be a stranger and an alien in foreign society to grow into his great spiritual role of influence and leadership.

But why the Land of Israel as the desired destination for Avraham? Jewish history provides us with this insight. It is in the Land of Israel that a Jew can truly achieve spiritual elevation and development. The Land of Israel provides greater challenges to Jewish development than any other location on the face of this earth. Throughout Jewish history, the Land of Israel has posed the greatest challenge to Jewish communal living. It is no surprise that those who live in Israel find it to be a daily struggle in their lives. Nevertheless, it is the place for the greatest Jewish accomplishments and achievements. And it is the destination for Avraham in his quest for spiritual growth and attainment.

He will find it to be a difficult place in which to

live. But, as he struggles with his tests in life and rises to each challenge, the Lord promises him that the Land of Israel will be his place on earth for all his generations.

The challenge of living in the Land of Israel has never waned but God's promise to the Jewish people has always remained in force as well. It seems obvious that the ultimate fulfillment of Jewish life can only be realized in the Land of Israel. The problems faced there sometimes seem overwhelming. But the rabbis stated that according to the pain and difficulty so is the reward. As the children of Avraham and Sarah we must rise and overcome all our tests and challenges as well.

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RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The call to Abraham, with which Lech Lecha begins, seems to come from nowhere: "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, and go to a land which I will show you."

Nothing has prepared us for this radical departure. We have not had a description of Abraham as we had in the case of Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God." Nor have we been given a series of glimpses into his childhood, as in the case of Moses. It is as if Abraham's call is a sudden break with all that went before. There seems to be no prelude, no context, no background.

Added to this is a curious verse in the last speech delivered by Moses' successor Joshua: "And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the river (Euphrates), Terach, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.'" (Joshua 24:2)

The implication seems to be that Abraham's father was an idolater. Hence the famous midrashic tradition that as a child, Abraham broke his father's idols. When Terach asked him who had done the damage, he replied, "The largest of the idols took a stick and broke the rest". "Why are you deceiving me?" Terach asked, "Do idols have understanding?" "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying", replied the

child. On this reading, Abraham was an iconoclast, a breaker of images, one who rebelled against his father's faith (Bereishith Rabbah 38:8).

Maimonides, the philosopher, put it somewhat differently. Originally, human beings believed in one God. Later, they began to offer sacrifices to the sun, the planets and stars, and other forces of nature, as creations or servants of the one God. Later still, they worshipped them as entities- gods-in their own right. It took Abraham, using logic alone, to realize the incoherence of polytheism: "After he was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, how is it possible that this celestial sphere should be continuously guiding the world, without something to guide it and cause it to revolve? For it cannot move of its own accord. He had no teacher or mentor, because he was immersed in Ur of the Chaldees among foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. He continued to speculate and reflect until he achieved the way of truth, understanding what was right through his own efforts. It was then that he knew that there is one God who guides the heavenly bodies, who created everything, and besides whom there is no other god." (Laws of Idolatry, 1:2)

What is common to Maimonides and the midrash is discontinuity. Abraham represents a radical break with all that went before. Remarkably however, the previous chapter gives us a quite different perspective: "These are the generations of Terach. Terach fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot... Terach took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terach were 205 years, and Terach died in Haran." (Gen 11:31)

The implication seems to be that far from breaking with his father, Abraham was continuing a journey Terach had already begun.

How are we to reconcile these two passages? The simplest way, taken by most commentators, is that they are not in chronological sequence. The call to Abraham (in Gen. 12) happened first. Abraham heard the Divine summons, and communicated it to his father. The family set out together, but Terach stopped halfway, in Haran. The passage recording Terach's death is placed before Abraham's call, though it happened later, to guard Abraham from the accusation that he failed to honour his father by leaving him in his old age (Rashi, Midrash).

Yet there is another obvious possibility. Abraham's spiritual insight did not come from nowhere. Terach had already made the first tentative move

toward monotheism. Children complete what their parents begin.

Significantly, both the Bible and rabbinic tradition understood divine parenthood in this way. They contrasted the description of Noah ("Noah walked with God") and that of Abraham ("The God before whom I have walked", 24:40). God himself says to Abraham "Walk ahead of Me and be perfect" (17:1). God signals the way, then challenges His children to walk on ahead.

In one of the most famous of all Talmudic passages, the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Metzia 59b) describes how the sages outvoted Rabbi Eliezer despite the fact that his view was supported by a heavenly voice. It continues by describing an encounter between Rabbi Natan and the prophet Elijah. Rabbi Natan asks the prophet: What was God's reaction to that moment, when the law was decided by majority vote rather than heavenly voice? Elijah replies, "He smiled and said, 'My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!'"

To be a parent in Judaism is to make space within which a child can grow. Astonishingly, this applies even when the parent is God (avinu, "our Father") himself. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker" (Halakhic Man, p 107).

This idea finds expression in halakhah, Jewish law. Despite the emphasis in the Torah on honouring and revering parents, Maimonides rules: "Although children are commanded to go to great lengths [in honouring parents], a father is forbidden to impose too heavy a yoke on them, or to be too exacting with them in matters relating to his honour, lest he cause them to stumble. He should forgive them and close his eyes, for a father has the right to forgo the honour due to him." (Hilkhot Mamrim 6:8)

The story of Abraham can be read in two ways, depending on how we reconcile the end of chapter 11 with the beginning of chapter 12. One reading emphasizes discontinuity. Abraham broke with all that went before. The other emphasizes continuity. Terach, his father, had already begun to wrestle with idolatry. He had set out on the long walk to the land which would eventually become holy, but stopped half way. Abraham completed the journey his father began.

Perhaps childhood itself has the same ambiguity. There are times, especially in adolescence, when we tell ourselves that we are breaking with our parents, charting a path that is completely new. Only in retrospect, many years later, do we realize how much we owe our parents-how, even at those moments when we felt most strongly that we were setting out on a journey uniquely our own, we were, in fact, living out

the ideals and aspirations that we learned from them. And it began with God himself, who left, and continues to leave, space for us, His children, to walk on ahead. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And [Pharaoh] said, "What is this that you did to me? Why didn't you tell me that she was your wife?" (Beraishis 12:18) When there was a famine in Canaan, Avram and Sarai traveled to Egypt where there was food. Sarai was kidnaped and brought to the king as a wife. In next week's Parsha, a similar thing would occur when they went to the land in the south after the cities of Sodom were destroyed, and once again, Sarah was taken to the king. However, when the Torah describes the incidents, there are notable differences.

When she was taken by Avimelech in Parsha Vayera, Hashem appeared to him in a dream and told him to stay away from the woman as she was married. Avimelech protested his innocence and Hashem said, "That's why I did not allow you to touch her." We don't find that Hashem appeared to Pharaoh, yet Pharaoh asks Avram why he didn't tell him Sarai was his wife. How did Pharaoh know?

The Ramban says that when Pharaoh and his household were suddenly afflicted with plagues, he asked himself, "Why is G-d doing this to us?" He spoke to Sarai and she told him she was married. That's why he called Avram and took him to task for misleading him. Even though he understood why Avram would have told the general populace she was his sister, when it came to the Pharaoh, it would be beneath him to take a married woman for himself. Since Avram didn't say anything, Pharaoh surmised she was really his sister. This is also why Avram didn't answer Pharaoh or explain himself now. It wasn't necessary.

Therefore, in order to distance himself from shame, and not have people say, "That's the married woman Pharaoh took," Pharaoh sent Avram and Sari from his land. Hashem didn't need to appear to Pharaoh because he was honest enough with himself to recognize his own mistakes and rectify them. Not so Avimelech.

He played the innocent card over and over, and refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing. Though he was certainly not "intentionally" taking a married woman, he was slyly careful to remain ignorant and thus blameless. This was a calculated decision and shows that though he didn't actually know Sarah was married, he could have known. Thus, he was not as pure as he claimed to be.

The contrast between these two should give us

pause. Are we Pharaohs or Avimelechs? Do we seek to be honorable and above board, using our best judgment and trying to avoid sin, or do we merely seek to absolve ourselves from blame? We should hold ourselves to a higher standard, wanting to be good because it's right, not just because we don't want to be blamed. If Pharaoh could do it, certainly we all can.

R' Asher Zelig Rubenstein z"l related the story of a benefactor who had promised to send a large donation to his Yeshiva. As days turned into weeks and the check was not forthcoming, R' Asher Zelig and his finance office were starting to get agitated.

Suddenly, the donor was arrested and charged with fraud. Everyone affiliated with him in any way was investigated and publicized; their names and organizations posted, causing untold embarrassment to innocent people who had simply received charity from him.

It was at that point they finally realized how kind Hashem had been to them in not letting the donor send the check. What they thought was a loss, was a tremendously valuable kindness from Heaven. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now the Lord said unto Abram, get out of your country, and from your kindred place, and from your father's house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1-2) In these words, we have the first of Abraham's ten tests – the difficult divine demand that the first Jew leave hearth and home and follow God into a strange and unknown land. In return, there is the divine promise of ultimate national greatness and international leadership. But why does God single out Abraham?

At this fateful moment, the Torah seemingly takes Abraham's faith and religious quest for granted without providing a clue as to how, where and why this particular nomad is worthy of divine trust and blessing. In the closing verses of Noach, we read about his genealogy, the names of his father, brother, nephew and spouse. We are provided with dry facts, travelogue locations on a map, ages at time of death. But there is nothing substantive telling us how the initiator and prophet of ethical monotheism arrived at the point where he even had a relationship with God. Is this the first time God speaks to him? And if it is, what makes the Divine believe that Abraham would heed His call?

What seems to be absent from the text is made up for in a charming and famous midrash which identifies Abraham's father, Terah, not only as an idolator, but also as a wealthy businessman who actually trafficked in idols. His son Abram discovered the God of the universe by his own faculties of reason

at a very young age (See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 1.). When Terah had to go on a business trip, he left his young son Abram in charge of the idols store. The proprietor returned to find all of his idols but one smashed to smithereens. Abram explained that a woman had brought food for her favorite idol, whereupon all of the other idols fought over the sumptuous dish. The strongest one was the victor, having vanquished all the others. When Terah expressed skepticism, Abram mocked his father's belief by proving to him that even he was aware of the limitations of the works of his hands.

Terah's shop was not some fly-by-night affair rented in temporary quarters near the busiest section in town to get the crowd before the holidays. It was rather a thriving center for the idol arts – more like the luminescent chambers in any large museum with spotlights and acres of space to dramatize the repose of the idols and to explain the philosophy of idolatry. Abraham's action was not a mere childish prank. It was a revolutionary stroke which changed the way humanity perceived its own reality and the reality of the universe for all subsequent generations. In this midrash, Terah is seen as a primitive representative of an outmoded religion, whose iconoclast, revolutionary son broke with his father to create a new faith commitment which would ultimately redeem the world. 'Get out of your father's house,' says God to the 'born again' Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah more in accord with the biblical text itself? What if Terah had discovered God first – and so Abram was not so much a path breaker as he was a path follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already in an advanced state of God consciousness, a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious awareness first glimpsed at home. Terah himself may at one time have been a believer in idol power but may slowly have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an otherwise completely superfluous verse, especially when we remember that the Torah is not in the practice of providing insignificant travelogues.

"Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran" (Gen. 14:18–20).

Why is it that Terah sets out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of a call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to be recorded even though Terah never made it to Canaan?

Further on in this parsha, Abram wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive by them. The text then cites three enigmatic verses, which record that Malkizedek, the King of Shalem, a priest of God on High, greets Abram with bread and wine, and blesses him: "Blessed be Abram to God on High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, who delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen. 14:19–20).

Abram then gives Malkizedek a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. Now the city of Shalem, JeruSalem, was the capital city of Canaan – and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means the King of Righteousness, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the City of Righteousness (Isaiah 1:26). From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)? Nahmanides maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in one place in the world – Jeru-Salem, Canaan. Indeed, the flood never damaged Canaan. Their king, Shem son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High, teaches Nahmanides. If this is the case, it seems logical to suggest that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans – and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family. He may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn't quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah's son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defy his father's way of life as he creates his own way, becoming in effect a model for many modern day penitents who radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past. In the alternate view that I propose, Abraham follows in his father's footsteps, builds on his father's foundation, redefines his father's way of life and for the first time in history paves the way for himself as well as others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing but

also advancing. Abraham is the model for those spiritual idealists who – upon embarking on a journey of religious hope – look at their pasts with an eye for reinvesting what is salvageable, attempting to improve rather than reject. Whose path survives, thrives and becomes a link to the next generation? The revolutionaries, the evolutionaries, or a combination of both? It depends probably on who and what your parents happened to have been. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Famine & Obedience

We are told that Avram (Avraham) was tested ten times by Hashem. Each test was designed to teach Avram something about Hashem or about himself. Each test was significant and played a key role in Avram's development. Parashat Lech L'cha is translated as "go for yourself, for your benefit." At the age of seventy-five, with a wife but no children, Avram was told to leave his homeland and to go to a place that Hashem would show him. One would think that when Avram agreed to listen to this command, he would have come to that place and remained there permanently. Yet, this was not to be. Avram and his wife went from one area of the land to another, never appearing to settle in any one place. One could argue that he was still within the land that Hashem had shown him, but then came a famine which changed his situation.

The Torah states: "There was a famine in the land, and Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land." There is a dispute among the Rabbis as to the actual test which Hashem was using against Avram. Rashi explains that the test was "to see if he (Avram) would question the words of the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who told him to go to the land of Canaan, and now He advises him to leave it." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch states a different view: "That Avraham should forsake the land to which he had been directed and not trust to Hashem Who knows how to provide in hunger and desert!"

We must remember that there were two opposing factors which had to be weighed with the choice to go down to Egypt: (1) the need for food, yet the problem of leaving the land, and (2) the possible endangerment of Sarai (Sarah). The famine that was in the land is described as severe, yet the Torah does not describe that others were traveling to Egypt to relieve themselves of this burden. It is also clear that the famine was only in Canaan as opposed to the famine at the time of Yosef which affected the entire region. People could have gone to other nations that bordered

Canaan for food, though it appears that traditionally Egypt was the designated area in a famine because the Nile supplied water to Egypt even though Egypt had no rain. It was logical that Avram would turn to Egypt for food.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why the statement of the famine is mentioned twice within the same sentence. He explains that the Torah is emphasizing the severity of the famine because our Rabbis say that one should not leave Israel except if the cost of food reaches a serious level or, like the Rashbag stated, there simply is no food to be found. There is a difference of opinion as to whether Avram decided on his own to leave Canaan because of the famine or whether Hashem instructed him to leave. Some believe that Avram angered Hashem by abandoning the land, while others insist that this was all part of Hashem's plan to create a history through Avram that would be repeated by his children (ma'aseh Avot siman labanim, the actions of the fathers would be a sign [repeated by] their children).

The decision to go down to Egypt carried the negative consequence of endangering Sarai. The Torah states: "Behold, now have I known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance. And it shall occur, when the Egyptians will see you, they will say, 'This is his wife!' then they will kill me and let you live." The Torah does not mean that Sarai would be free, as these Egyptians would take her as a wife for Par'oh, which is why they would kill Avram. Avram, by his decision to go down to Egypt, endangered Sarai as well as himself. HaRav Hirsch explains, "The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors, and weaknesses of our great men." HaRav Hirsch also states that Avraham decided to go down to Egypt before he had waited to see if Hashem "would feed him in some miraculous manner in the midst of the universal dearth." Even though there does not appear to be a negative response from Hashem recorded in the Torah, HaRav Hirsch assumes that Hashem was angry with Avram for this decision. The Ramban also states that, "His leaving the land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin [Avram] committed, for in famine Hashem would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the Land of Egypt at the hand of Par'oh was decreed for his children." Rashi gives us a different perspective: the test for Avram was, "to see if he would question the words of the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who told him to go to the land of Canaan, and now He advises him to leave it." Rashi's comment makes it clear that he believes that it was Hashem's decision for Avram to leave Canaan.

HaRav Sorotzkin asks why Avram would go to Egypt when the famine was not so severe that others left or died. Yet, the Torah tells us that the famine was severe. One cannot say that there was no food in

Canaan, but one can argue that the price went up so significantly that Avram's task on Earth was compromised. Avram was tasked by Hashem to seek out converts, much like we will see next week with the three angels. Avram always offered these "visitors" food and drink so that he could teach them about Hashem. This task was compromised by the famine, and even though the famine was not as threatening to Avram, physically, it did affect his livelihood and this responsibility. Avram spent all his money on food to feed these "visitors," and could not afford the higher costs caused by the famine. HaRav Sorotzkin also says that Avram was old and sat in a tent of learning where he taught the "visitors" about Hashem and about how Man should behave. All his money went to this teaching, which limited his ability to withstand a famine. Avram saw that this "test" from Hashem was a test of his faith, to endanger himself and his wife in order to receive the blessings and gifts from Par'oh that would enable him to return to Canaan and continue his task.

There is one more reason for this "test." This was a trial of Avram's response to an illogical command from Hashem. Hashem had told him to go to Canaan, yet now told him to leave. Here Avram could understand that the famine changed the logic. But this was a precursor to the "test" with the Binding of Yitzchak. There, no logic could explain Hashem's command, but Avram understood that he must follow Hashem's command even when he could not find a justification.

There are many things we cannot understand in Hashem's commands, yet we must follow them because Hashem commanded us. May we be worthy of that task. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Circumcision (Brit Milah)

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Not all *mitzvot* are followed by a festive meal, but this is the custom when celebrating a circumcision (*brit milah*). In fact, the *Shibolei HaLeket* considers the meal at a *brit* obligatory. However, at this festive meal (*seudat mitzva*), we do not recite the blessing of *SheHaSimcha BiMe'ono* (joy is in His dwelling) as we do at a *sheva berachot*. Since the baby is in pain, it would be insensitive to say these words. This leads to the question: why at a *brit* do we have a festive meal at all?

Several reasons are suggested. One is that of *Tosafot* (*Shabbat* 130a), citing *Bereishit* 21:8. There we read that Avraham made a party "on the day that Yitzchak was weaned" (*beyom higamel et Yitzchak*). Though the verse does not seem to be referring to circumcision, some creative wordplay can help make the connection. The first letter of the word *higamel* is the letter *hey*, whose numerical value is 5. Add to that the numerical value of the second letter, *gimmel*, and

we have an additional 3. The last two letters of *higamel* form the word *mal*, "circumcise." Thus the word *higamel* can be interpreted to mean "on the eighth (5+3) day, circumcise (*mal*)." Following this exegesis, the verse means that Avraham made a party on the day of Yitzchak's circumcision.

Rashi points to another source to show that *milah* is a joyful occasion. We read in *Tehillim* 119:162, "I rejoice over Your instruction like one who finds abundant spoils." What specific instruction is being rejoiced over? The very first "instruction" given to our forefather Avraham, i.e., *milah*.

The Abudraham quotes a different verse from *Tehillim* (50:5): "Gather My devout ones unto Me, sealers of My covenant (*kortei briti*) through sacrifice (*alei zevach*)." The word *briti* clearly hints at *brit milah*, while the word *zevach* can be understood homiletically as "flowing (*zav*) on the eighth," another hint at *milah*. (The final letter of *zevach* is the letter *chet*, which has a numerical value of 8.)

Some say that a person who is invited to a *brit* and does not attend is rejected by heaven. Therefore, common practice is simply to inform family and friends of when and where a *brit* will take place, and not to issue personal invitations. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

What's the difference between "Shlach Lecha," which God told the Jews in the desert in Moshe's time, and "Lech-Lecha," which God told Avraham in these weeks parsha? When you send something you stay where you are. When you deliver it yourself, you go to the destination as well.

It's like when people tell you that they cannot attend your event, "but I'll be there in spirit." Ya, right. Unless they plan to die in the meantime, God forbid, they're not going to be there in spirit. What they really mean is something like, "I'll be thinking about you and hope all goes well even without me."

It's a nice idea, except when a person's presence is actually required. This is what God was telling the spies with the words "shlach lecha," that even though they were planning to spy the land in person, their real persons were going to remain back in the camp in the desert because that was where their hearts were. They weren't going on their mission to embrace aliyah. They were going to find an excuse to reject it.

God, Who knows the deepest secrets or a person's heart, knew theirs too even if they had yet to learn them. When he told the people "shlach lecha," He was basically telling them that they were doomed to fail before they even left, well, at least physically. In their case, they physically went to the "event," but it was their spirit that they left back in the camp that didn't

make it.

That's why God followed up His command to Avraham with, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house" (Bereishis 12:1). He was telling him, "For this to work, you have to sever all ties with where you came from. Otherwise, you won't be going to your self, but away from it," like the spies would eventually do hundreds of years later.

Lech lecha doesn't only apply to going to Eretz Yisroel, which God did not even mention by name. No matter where a person is headed physically or spiritually, they are always on a journey to their self, the person they are meant to be. Just look how much we change from year to year without even trying, all of which is based on a person's mehus -- inner being.

Deeper yet, life is a journey to the soul. We start off as one in the womb, and then switch over to a body-led existence at birth. The rest of life is for returning back to a soul-led life, but this time with the body on board. We call someone who does that a tzaddik, and someone who goes in the opposite direction, a rasha -- evil person.

The rest of us are beinonim, middle-of-the-road types who have good days and bad days, positive periods and negative ones. We might waver between inspired growth and dejected withdrawal. But at least we're still in the game, struggle was we may to remain so.

The fact that so many people have gone off in search of themselves in one way or another shows knowing who we are in essence is essential for happiness. When people don't, then they usually distract themselves material pleasures and call themselves happy when, deep down, they know they're not.

This helps to answer a question many psychologists have asked in recent years. They want to understand why so many people in a society that has so much can be farther from contentment than ever before. It's one of the most anxious generations since World War II.

But that itself is the answer. Material extremism is not the source of joy, but the measurement of how much it is lacking. Only one thing makes a person truly happy in life, complete self-knowledge, and when they have it, they find they need little else. Anything else they have in life is merely "icing on the cake."

That's what God was really promising Avraham Avinu with "lech lecha," and anyone else willing to follow in his spiritual footsteps. © 2025 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Long Distance Call

Good deeds deserve good dividends, but there is one deed mentioned in this week's portion that is veiled in anonymity. However, its dividends lasted

so forcefully that the impact was realized almost 500 years later.

The Torah tells us about a war that took place. Avram's nephew Lot was captured. The Torah tells us "Then there came the fugitive and told Abram, the Ivri, who dwelt in the plains of Mamre..." (Genesis 14:13) It obscures the name of the refugee and does not even directly state his message. The next verse, in a seemingly disjointed manner, tells us, "and Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house -- three hundred and eighteen -- and he pursued them as far as Dan" (ibid v.14). The Medrash tells us that the refugee was Og, a giant of a man who escaped an attack on his fellow giants. He informed Avram that his nephew was alive, albeit taken prisoner with malevolent intent. He figured that Avram would try to liberate Lot and be killed in battle. Og would then marry Sora. (Perhaps that is the reason that the Torah seems to separate what Avram heard from what the refugee told.) For this piece of disguised information, Og receives a seemingly disproportionate reward. He is granted not only longevity, as he lived until the final days of the Jews' sojourn through the desert, but also the impact of his deed was so potent that Moshe was afraid to attack him before entering the Land of Canaan! Imagine. Og lived for 470 years after the deed, and then Moshe had to be reassured that he need not fear his merits!

Rabbi Berel Zisman, one of the few remaining from his illustrious family of prominent Lubavitch Chasidim spent a portion of World War II in a concentration camp in Munich. After the war, he was allowed entry to the United States, but had to wait in the town of Bremerhaven for six weeks. During that time he decided to travel to Bergen-Belsen the notorious concentration camp which was transformed to a displaced person camp to visit a cousin who was there. Dozens of inmates came over to him with names of loved ones scattered across the free plains of the USA. They wanted to get them messages. Berel took their messages. To Sam Finkel from Abraham Gorecki: "I am alive and recuperating. Please try to guarantee employment to allow me to enter the US." And so on. One card was for Jacob Kamenecki from a niece from Minsk. "Please be aware that I survived the war and will be going back to Minsk."

Armed with lists of names and some addresses, Berel arrived in the US where he became a student in the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Crown Heights. Knowing no English, upon his arrival he asked a cousin to address postcards. Each had a message written in Yiddish "My name is Berel Zisman. I have just arrived from Europe -- and have regards from..." He filled in the blanks and ended the brief note on each card with, "for further information, I can be contacted at the Lubavitch Yeshiva, corner Bedford and Dean in Crown Heights."

Rabbi Zisman does not really now how many

people received his cards, but one person who lived in a basement apartment on Hewes Street definitely did. When Rabbi Jacob Kamenetski, one of the United States' leading sages, came to the Lubavitch yeshiva looking for Berel Zisman, a war refugee who had arrived at the yeshiva only a week ago, no one knew why.

Berel was called out of the study hall and met the elderly man, filled him in on all the particulars about the status of his relative, and returned to his place. When the young man returned to his seat, he was shocked at the celebrity treatment he once again received. "You mean you don't know who that Rabbi was? He is the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath!" Berel shuddered, feeling terrible that he made the revered scholar visit him. A while later, he met the Rosh Yeshiva and approached him. "Rebbe, please forgive me, I had no intention to make you come to me to get regards. Had I known who you were I would surely have gone to your home and given the information to you in person!"

Reb Yaakov was astounded. He refused to accept the apology. "Heaven forbid! Do you realize what kind of solace I have hearing about the survival of my relative. I came to you, not only to hear the news, but to thank you, in person, for delivering it!"

Imagine. Avram was nearly 80 years old, he had no descendants, and the only link to the house of his father's family -- at least documented as a disciple of Avram's philosophies -- was Lot. Now even the whereabouts and future of that man were unknown. And when Og delivered the news of his whereabouts, perhaps Avram's hope for the future was rekindled. Perhaps his gratitude toward Og abounded. And though Og spoke one thing, and Avram heard another, the reward for the impact on Avram's peace of mind was amazingly powerful.

We often make light of actions and ramifications. The Torah tells us this week, in a saga that ends five books and some four hundred years later, that small tidings travel a very long distance. © 2015 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

“The heavens / ha'shamayim declare the glory of G-d, and the firmament tells of His handiwork” (Tehilim 19:2). [How can this be?] The heavens are fixed in their place and do not move! Rather, although everything is His and everything is His handiwork, He rejoices only with the descendants of Avraham, as it is written (ibid. v.3), "Day following day utters speech." What is the nature of these days? This refers to Moshe's day, which foretold Yehoshua's day. [The midrash continues by describing how Moshe made the sun stand still during the wars against Amalek and Sichon and how Yehoshua made the sun

stand still during the war against the Canaanites.] (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah, ch. 2)

This midrash obviously requires explanation. R' Shmuel Heide z"l (died 1685) explains as follows:

When we say that heavenly bodies praise and glorify Hashem, we refer to the fact that their movements in their orbits in accordance with His Will declare that He is their creator. The proof of this is that when Yehoshua wanted the sun to stand still, he did not say, "Sun, stand still," but rather (Yehoshua 10:12), "Sun, be silent." The sun's [perceived] movement is its praise of G-d. To the sun, being silent and standing still are synonymous.

In contrast, the heavens themselves are inanimate; they are always "silent." How then do the heavens declare the glory of G-d?

Because of this question, the midrash concludes that the reference to "heavens" is a metaphor. Indeed, the gematria of "ha'shamayim" equals the gematria of "neshamah" / soul. Just as when a person praises Hashem, it is not his body which offers the praise—the body by itself is lifeless— but rather it is his neshamah, so the "shamayim" of our verse also refers to something living: the descendants of Avraham.

Why the descendants of Avraham? We read in our parashah (14:19), "Blessed is Avram to G-d, possessor of heavens and earth." Avraham, says another midrash based on this verse, acquired the heavens and the earth through his deeds. (In fact, says that midrash, the sun refused to obey Yehoshua until Yehoshua reminded it that Avraham had previously "acquired" the heavens.) We also read in our parashah (15:5) that Hashem told Avraham to gaze towards the heavens, for his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. This symbolizes, say Chazal, that Avraham and his descendants would not be subject to the laws of nature (for Avraham and Sarah were naturally infertile).

Rather, Avraham's descendants would be subject only to Hashem's direct providence. The many miracles that Hashem was destined to do for Avraham's descendants would themselves "declare the glory of G-d and... tell of His handiwork." (Zikukin De'nura) © 2001 S. Katz and torah.org



"Just imagine, our posterity will be as numerous as the stars – and I'm going to put you in charge of remembering birthdays!"