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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Within the first words that God addresses to the bearer of a new covenant, there are already hints as to the nature of the heroism he would come to embody. The multi-layered command "Lech lecha – go forth" contains the seeds of Abraham's ultimate vocation.

Rashi, following an ancient exegetic tradition, translates the phrase as "Journey for yourself."[1] According to him, God is saying "Travel for your own benefit and good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not have the merit of having children." Sometimes we have to give up our past in order to acquire a future. In his first words to Abraham, God was already intimating that what seems like a sacrifice is, in the long run, not so. Abraham was about to say goodbye to the things that mean most to us – land, birthplace and parental home, the places where we belong. He was about to make a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a leap into the unknown. To be able to make that leap involves trust – in Abraham's case, trust not in visible power but in the voice of the invisible God. At the end of it, however, Abraham would discover that he had achieved something he could not have done otherwise. He would give birth to a new nation whose greatness consisted precisely in the ability to live by that voice and create something new in the history of mankind. "Go for yourself " – believe in what you can become.

Another interpretation, more midrashic, takes the phrase to mean "Go with yourself " – meaning, by travelling from place to place you will extend your influence not over one land but many:

When the Holy One said to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house..." what did Abraham resemble? A jar of scent with a tight-fitting lid put away in a corner so that its fragrance could not go forth. As soon as it was moved from that place and opened, its fragrance began to spread. So the Holy One said to Abraham, "Abraham, many good deeds are in you. Travel about from place to place, so that the greatness of your name will go forth in My world."[2]

Abraham was commanded to leave his place in order to testify to the existence of a God not bounded by place – Creator and Sovereign of the entire universe. Abraham and Sarah were to be like perfume, leaving a trace of their presence wherever they went. Implicit in this midrash is the idea that the fate of the first Jews already prefigured that of their descendants[3] who would be scattered throughout the world in order to spread knowledge of God throughout the world. Unusually, exile is seen here not as punishment but as a necessary corollary of a faith that sees God everywhere. Lech lecha means "Go with yourself" – your beliefs, your way of life, your faith.

A third interpretation, this time more mystical, takes the phrase to mean, "Go to yourself." The Jewish journey, said R. David of Lelov, is a journey to the root of the soul.[4] In the words of R. Zushya of Hanipol, "When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, why were you not Moses? They will ask me, Zushya, why were you not Zushya?"[5] Abraham was being asked to leave behind all the things that make us someone else – for it is only by taking a long and lonely journey that we discover who we truly are. "Go to yourself."

There is, however, a fourth interpretation: "Go by yourself." Only a person willing to stand alone, singular and unique, can worship the God who is alone, singular and unique. Only one able to leave behind the natural sources of identity – home, family, culture and society – can encounter God who stands above and beyond nature. A journey into the unknown is one of the greatest possible expressions of freedom. God wanted Abraham and his children to be a living example of what it is to serve the God of freedom, in freedom, for the sake of freedom.

Lech Lecha means: Leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable, unfree, delimited. Leave behind the social forces, the familial pressures, the circumstances of your birth. Abraham's children were summoned to be the people that defied the laws of nature because they refused to define themselves as

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[1] Rashi, 12:1.

[2] Bereishit Rabbah 39:2.

[3] On the principle, "What happened to the fathers is a portent of what would happen to the children," see for example, Nahmanides, commentary to Genesis 12:6. On Nahmanides' use of this principle throughout his commentary, see Ezra-Tzion Melamed, Mefarshei Hamikra (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), vol. 2, 950–53.

[4] R. David of Lelov, Pninei Ha-Hassidut (Jerusalem, 1987), vol. 1, p88.

[5] R. Ephraim Lundschitz, Kli Yakar to Bereshit, 12:1.

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the products of nature. That is not to say that economic or biological or psychological forces have no part to play in human behaviour. They do. But with sufficient imagination, determination, discipline and courage we can rise above them. Abraham did. So, at most times, did his children.

Those who live within the laws of history are subject to the laws of history. Whatever is natural, said Maimonides, is subject to disintegration and decline. That is what has happened to virtually every civilisation that has appeared on the world's stage. Abraham, however, was to become the father of an am olam, an eternal people, that would neither decay nor decline, a people willing to stand outside the laws of nature. What for other nations are innate – land, home, family – in Judaism are subjects of religious command. They have to be striven for. They involve a journey. They are not given at the outset, nor can they be taken for granted. Abraham was to leave behind the things that make most people and peoples what they are, and lay the foundations for a land, a Jewish home and a family structure, responsive not to economic forces, biological drives and psychological conflicts but to the word and will of God.

Lech Lecha in this sense means being prepared to take an often lonely journey: "Go by yourself." To be a child of Abraham is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age. In an era of polytheism, it meant seeing the universe as the product of a single creative will – and therefore not meaningless but coherent and meaningful. In an era of slavery it meant refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, but instead challenging it in the name of God. When power was worshipped, it meant constructing a society that cared for the powerless, the widow, orphan and stranger. During centuries in which the mass of mankind was sunk in ignorance, it meant honouring education as the key to human dignity and creating schools to provide universal literacy. When war was the test of manhood, it meant striving for peace. In ages of radical individualism like today, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what we share; not what we buy but what we give; that there is something higher than appetite and desire – namely the call that comes to us, as it came to Abraham, from outside ourselves, summoning us to make a contribution to the world.

"Jews," wrote Andrew Marr, "really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it."[6] It is that courage to travel alone if necessary, to be different, to swim against the tide, to speak in an age of relativism of the absolutes of human dignity under the sovereignty of God, that was born in the words Lech Lecha. To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Abraham's journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) Our biblical tradition seems to live in a constant paradox of tension between the universal and the particular; our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family.

This tension is evident from the opening sentence of the Torah: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' While it seems these words are a clear proclamation of universality, Rashi's opening comment turns the verse on its head. He argues that the fact that the Torah begins with Creation has nothing to do with a grand universal vision, but rather everything to do with establishing Jewish rights to the land of Israel. He cites a midrash that says since God created the world, He can parcel out specific areas to 'whomever is righteous in His eyes.'

This tension between the particular and the universal also permeates the High Holy Day festival period. The universal dominates Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as the King of the entire universe, and Yom Kippur when we declare, "…for My house (the Holy Temple) shall be called a house of prayer for all people." (Isaiah 56:7)

Further, the seventy sacrifices o?ered over the course of the festival of Sukkot symbolize our commitment to the welfare of all seventy nations. But in stark contrast, Shemini Atzeret signifies a more intimate and particularistic rendezvous between God and Israel, when the Almighty sends all the other nations home, wishing to enjoy a celebration with Israel alone. Simhat Torah, the added celebration of our having completed the yearly reading of the Pentateuch during this festival, merely emphasizes the unique and separatist significance of this holiday.

[6] Andrew Marr, The Observer, 14 May 2000.

The tension is also apparent in God's dealings with Abraham. At first God instructs Abraham, "Go out of your land, and from your kindred birthplace and your father's house, unto the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

There are no introductions or apologies. It's straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the land of Israel. However, in the next verse, this ethnocentric fervor of going up to one's own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of God's next mandate: '…And through you shall all families of the earth be blessed.'

From this moment onward, both of these elements – a covenantal nation with a unique relationship to God and the universal vision of world peace and redemption – will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham's descendants.

But after all is said and done, in the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges in the historic arena as a war hero who rescues the five regional nations – including Sodom – from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings. Even after Abraham's nephew and adopted son, Lot, rejects Abraham's teachings, he still wants to continue his relationship with Lot, and even bargains with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The midrash magnificently captures Abraham's concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion of Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of God's appearance to Abraham after the patriarch's circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre. Why stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees, Mamre? The midrash explains that when God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to seek the advice of his three allies – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Aner said to him, "You mean to say that you are one hundred years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?" Eshkol said to him, "How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, di?erent from the other nations of the world." Mamre, however, said to Abraham, "How can you refuse to do what God asks you? After all, God saved all of your two hundred and forty-eight limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If God asks you to sacrifice a small portion of only one of your limbs, how can you refuse?!" Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, God chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. (Genesis Raba 42:14)

What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as 'checking out' the advisability of circumcision with his three gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be by the introduction of this unique and nationalistic sign upon his flesh. Abraham is concerned because Abraham is a universalist.

"And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abram was Sarai… " (Genesis 11:29)

Until that time, the women are generally anonymous, with all the ' begetting' seeming to take place because of the men alone [Gen. 5]! Hence when the Bible records: "And Abram took his wife Sarai…and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran…." (Genesis 12:5), Rashi hastens to explain based on the midrash, to 'gather souls' meant that 'Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.' At least our Sages believed that they truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord. And indeed throughout this Biblical position, Abraham is seen as a Jewish "missionary," building altars to God and calling out to the local inhabitants to believe in the God of creation and love for every human being!

Abraham truly internalized this mission of Abraham Judaism, to bring the blessings of the God of love and lovingkindness to every human on earth.

Since Abraham's vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how do we understand his willingness to cast his own flesh and blood to the desert? The Tosefta on Masekhet Sotah, commenting on the verse spoken by Sarah in Lekh Lekha: "…I was derided in her [Hagar's] eyes. Let God judge between me and you," expands this theme and demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah held two very di?erent world-views. The Sages in the Tosefta fill in the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham: "I see Ishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Isaac, the name of heaven will be desecrated," says Sarah to Abraham.

"After I gave her [Hagar] such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress [of our house], how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?," replies Abraham. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Sarah's position is crystal clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world – but not at the expense of her own son and family. She teaches us that our identity as a unique people must be forged and secure before we can engage in dialogue and redemption of the nations. God teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: "Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called." (Genesis 31:12)

Indeed, one of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it – or almost lose it. It may well be argued that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate – and be truly committed to – his only son and

heir. *© 2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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 human kind.

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. *© 2018 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At Sarah's insistence, Abraham marries Hagar. Soon after, Hagar becomes pregnant and Sarah then becomes enraged. Here, the Torah uses the word va-te-a'ne-hah, which is commonly translated "and she (Sarah) oppressed her (Hagar)." (Genesis 16:6)

Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the late tzaddik of Jerusalem, insists that va-te-a'ne-hah cannot literally mean that Sarah oppressed Hagar. Sarah actually treated Hagar no differently than she had treated her up to that time. However, now that Hagar had become pregnant and perceived herself as Abraham's true wife, the simplest request that Sarah made of Hagar was considered by Hagar to be oppressive.

Nachmanides disagrees. For him, va-te-a'ne-hahliterally means oppression. So outrageous was Sarah's conduct, that her children, until the end of time, would always suffer the consequences of this wrong. In Nachmanides' words, "Our mother Sarah sinned...as a result Hagar's descendants would persecute the children of Abraham and Sarah."

But what is it that Sarah did wrong? After all, Sarah had unselfishly invited Hagar into her home. Soon after, Hagar denigrates Sarah. Didn't Sarah have the right to retaliate?

Radak points out that Sarah afflicts Hagar by actually striking her. It is here that Sarah stepped beyond the line. Whatever the family dispute, physically striking the other is unacceptable. An important message especially in contemporary times when physical abuse is one of the great horrors challenging family life.

For Nehama Leibowitz, Sarah had made a different mistake. By inviting Hagar in, she doomed herself to failure by "daring to scale unusual heights of selflessness." "When undertaking a mission," says Nehama, one must ask whether one can "maintain those same high standards to the bitter end. Otherwise, one is likely to descend from the pinnacle of selflessness into much deeper depths…" It is laudable to reach beyond ourselves, but to tread where we have no chance to succeed is self-destructive.

Sarah's wrong is compounded when considering the following. While in Egypt with Abraham, Sarah was afflicted by Pharaoh, the master of the land. She barely escapes. (Genesis Chapter 12) Instead of learning from her oppressor never to oppress others, she did the opposite, persecuting Hagar, causing her to flee. Having herself been victimized, Sarah should have been more sensitive. Hence, whatever her rationale, her retaliation was inappropriate. The message is clear. Victims of oppression should reject rather than incorporate their oppressor's ways. Love the stranger, the Torah exhorts over and over, "For you too were strangers in Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34)

But whether one maintains this position or the position of Radak or Leibowitz, underlying this disturbing fact of Sarah's oppression is an extremely important message. In most faiths, leaders or prophets are perfect. They can do no wrong and any criticism of their actions is considered sacrilegious. While strong sentiments within Judaism exist to defend biblical spiritual leaders as perfect, there is, at the same time, an opposite opinion in Jewish thought. It maintains that our greatest biblical personalities, while holy and righteous, were also human and made mistakes. They were real people...not God.

This position makes the biblical narrative much more believable. Moshe, our great leader, sins by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. The great King David gives into sexual temptation and sins. It is precisely because these holy, inspirational leaders, including Sarah herself, were so human that we are able to look to them and say that maybe, just maybe, we, in all of our flaws and faults, can strive to be great leaders too.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Hatafat Dam Brit

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

What would be the law if a child was circumcised by mistake before the eighth day? Would we need another ceremony? Would we need to perform again "Hatafat Dam Brit?

The Rashba states that in such an instance no action would be required. He draws the parallel between an infant born already circumcised which in that case there must be at least "Hatafat Dam Brit" because of a special reference in the Torah "Yimol Bisar Orlato"Vayikra 12;3 ("the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised"). However others draw a difference between a child born circumcised and the case sited by the Rashba in that in the former instance usually some flesh of the foreskin is left. However since in our case the full circumcision was already completed, and there is certainly no foreskin left, nothing need be done on the eighth day.

The question however is; In such a case that was sited what do we do with the Mitzva of "Uvayom hashmini yimol bsar orlato" ("On the eighth day you must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin") which would indicate that there is a special Mitzvah to circumcise on the eighth day?

Rav Chayim M'brisk explains that though the Mitzvah of Circumcision is on the eighth day, the directive of "Hatafat Dam Brit" is not. Thus if the circumcision was performed before the eighth day one need not do anything,

However both the Shach and the Taz believe that in such a case there must be "Hatafat Dam Brit" just as we would require it of one who was circumcised in the evening and not in the day as required.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Significant Tent

Every letter in the Torah is important, and nowhere is this more clearly seen than when the Torah writes a word in one form but we are to pronounce it in a different form. This difference is between k'ri (read) and k'tiv (write). An example of this difference is found in 12:8, with the word ahalo-ahalah (his tent-her tent). The letters of the written word indicate that this phrase within the sentence should read "and he set up her tent" while the pronunciation indicates that it should read "and he set up his tent." Since Avram set up both his and Sarai's tents, this might strike us as being insignificant. That is where we would make our mistake. Many profound ideas can come from our study of the difference between the written and the pronounced words.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin deals first with the entire concept of an ohel (tent). He explains that the use of the word ohel here cannot be construed as only a place where people dwell. If that were so, the Torah would not have singled out this tent from all the other tents that Avram established. This tent is not only significant here but later when Avram returns from Egypt to the same place and rebuilds this tent between the cities of Ha'ai and BetEl. Again, when the tent is rebuilt, the same difference occurs between the written and the pronounced word. Avram also builds this tent before he builds an altar, which is exactly the opposite of what was done by Melech Shlomo when he built the Temple but first built the altar. Sorotzkin derives from this that this tent was holy as it was used to teach others about Hashem. It was a tent of study much like we find when the Torah describes Ya'akov as a yosheiv ohalim, a person who dwelled in tents (a person who studied in the Yeshiva).

Sorotzkin builds on this idea of a study tent

together with a Midrash quoted by Rashi that poses a second question about the differences in the written and pronounced word. The Midrash explains that the word "her tent" is written while "his tent" is pronounced to indicate that Avram first built Sarai's tent and only afterwards built his own. Sorotzkin explains that the Torah is teaching us a lesson about Sarai and the structure of a good marriage. Avram built these tents in the same generation as the destruction of Sodom. In that generation there was a total lack of faith in Hashem. The Midrash makes clear that at a time when faith is missing in the world, Sarai's tent was more important than Avram's. Sarai spoke to the women and imbued them with faith in Hashem, while Avram did the same with the men. As Sorotzkin explains, women have a greater tendency and desire for spirituality than men. For that reason, it made more sense to concentrate first on planting the seeds of spirituality and faith within the women before attempting the same with the men. The women would also have a significant influence on their husbands and their children. When Hashem much later instructs Moshe to reestablish the Covenant between the people and Hashem, He first says, "Thus you will say to the House of Ya'akov (the women), and you shall speak to the Children of Yisrael (the men)." Even the verbs which are used indicate that it is easier to convince the women than the men, as the verb used for the men is in a harsher form in Hebrew.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch draws on another word in the same sentence combined with ahalah, her tent. He explains that the first word of the sentence, "vaya'ateik, and he gave orders", indicates that there was a clear division of responsibilities between Avram and Sarai. The decisions which involved the house alone were Sarai's domain as internal decisions of the house were to be made by Sarai. The external aspect of submitting the whole household to the Will of Hashem was Avram's domain. As an example of this division of decisions, Hirsch acknowledges that choosing a place for their tents on a mountain range between two larger cities was perhaps less convenient for Sarai, but Avram avoided the cities because of their lack of purity. Establishing themselves between the cities also enabled them to greet travelers in smaller groups where it would be easier to talk to them about Hashem. This was part of their submission to the Will of Hashem. The house was Sarai's responsibility as we see when she exercises her leadership after the birth of Yitzchak and sends Yishmael away because of his bad influence. Though Avram was upset by this decision, Hashem told him to listen to his wife in this matter.

We return now to the Midrash which explained the importance of establishing Sarai's tent before Avram's. There is another Midrash which gives us a further insight to the first Midrash. After Sarai's death, we are told that Yitzchak did not set up the tent again until Eliezer brought him Rivka as a wife. He then built Sarai's tent and brought Rivka into it and was finally comforted of Sarai's death. The Midrash explains that the reason he was comforted is that the three miracles which had always been present in Sarai's tent now returned for Rivka. This indicated that Rivka was of the same quality as his mother. Those three miracles are important: (1) when Sarai lit oil for Shabbat, the light remained from one Shabbat to the next, (2) there was always a blessing on the dough so that it continued to increase, and (3) a cloud always appeared over the tent as Divine protection. These three miracles occur in one other place, the Mishkan (Temple) in the desert. There we find the Ner Tamid (the eternal light), the showbreads which remained fresh and warm for an entire week while sitting in an open display table, and the Cloud of Hashem was always over the Mishkan as protection. Here the comparison dictates Avram's actions for if Sarai's tent is like the tent of the Mishkan, it had to be established in its position first as did the Mishkan so that the Tribes would then know where to place their tents.

We have noted several lessons which we have learned from one word and actually from one letter of the Torah. We have seen the importance of women in the structure of the family and the holiness which is found in the home. We have spoken of the greater tendency of women towards spirituality and holiness. And we have seen that women can influence their husbands to greater heights of spirituality and holiness than they might accomplish on their own. Many Jewish women fail to recognize how much our religion depends on them. The lesson from our parasha of the difference between the written and pronounced word has enabled us to see what they have missed.

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman

The parsha begins with Hashem telling Avram, "Go to the Land that I will show you." [Bereshis 12:1] Rabbi Yochanan teaches (in the Medrash) the reason Hashem did not tell Avram where he was supposed to be going ahead of time was "to give him reward for each and every step." [Since the mitzvah was Lech Lecha (go), for every step he received a new mitzvah!]

Rav Baruch Baer, the great Rosh Yeshiva from Kaminetz, gives a "lomdishe teretz" [an explanation based on sophisticated Talmudic analysis] to this teaching of Rabbi Yochanan. He explains that if the Ribono shel Olam would have told Avram simply, "Go to the Land of Canaan" then that would have been the definition of the command and each step he took along the way would merely be a hechsher mitzvah

[preparation for accomplishing the mitzvah i.e. -- arrival in Eretz Yisrael]. However, now that the mitzvah was formulated as "Go" without being told where to go, then each step of the way was a new mitzvah fulfillment.

If this is true, then we must ask ourselves the following question: There are two times in the Torah where we find the expression "Lech Lecha". The first is our parsha [Bereshis 12:1] and the second is the parsha of the Akeida [the Binding of Yitzchak] [Bereshis 22:2] where Avram was directed specifically to go to the Land of Moriah (the location of the future Beis HaMikdash). So let us ask ourselves -- why by the Akeida did Hashem not also say to Avraham, "Take Yitzchak and go to the place that I will show you"? Just like the Ribono shel Olam is interested in giving Avram reward for every single step on the way to the Land of Canaan and therefore did not specify the destination, let the same formula be utilized regarding the command to go to the Akeida?

The Bei Chiya cites an interesting Maharal in his Nesivos Olam. The Maharal there says that if you have a Succah that is half a mile away and another Succah that is a mile away, it is not a bigger mitzvah to walk to the Succah that is a mile away. The mitzvah is to eat in the Succah. How you get there is independent of the mitzvah and therefore there is no extra mitzvah to go to the Succah that is farther away. However, the Maharal says, if there is a shul a half mile away and a second shul a mile away it IS a bigger mitzvah to go to the further shul (all other things being equal) because every single step is a separate mitzvah.

What is the difference between the Succah and the shul? The Maharal explains: Hashem's presence is in the shul. A Beis HaKnesses is a miniature Beis HaMikdash and therefore when a person is walking to shul, he is being drawn to Hashem and the very walking is a type of joining (chibbur) and clinging (deveikus) to Him." When you are going to shul, you are going to be with the Ribono shel Olam. The walking is in itself a mitzvah.

If this is true, we can understand the difference between the two Lech Lecha commands. In our parsha, Hashem wanted to give Avram reward for every single step, so He told him, "Go to the Land I will show you (hiding the destination)." Why then by the Akaida, did He tell Avraham, "Go to the Land of the Moriah (specifying the destination)?" The answer is that there Avraham also received reward for every single step because the Divine Presence of G-d was dwelling on Har HaMoriah. Therefore, since Avraham was going to Hashem, by definition, every single step was a separate mitzvah. Therefore, there was no need to hide the goal of where he was supposed to go.

Descendants Who Will Be Like The Stars -- Each One Unique

At the beginning of Bereshis Chapter 15, the Torah says: "After these events, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying 'Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.' And Avram said 'My L-rd, Hashem/Elokim: What can You give me being that I go childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer from Damascus?' Then Avram said, 'See to me You have given no offspring and see, my steward inherits me...' Suddenly the word of Hashem came to him, saying 'That one will not inherit you; only the one who shall come forth from within you shall inherit you.' And He took him outside and said, 'Gaze, now, towards the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!' And He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be!'" [Bereshis 15:1-5]

The Gemara [Yoma 28b] has an interesting homiletic teaching based on the expression "Eliezer of Damascus." The Gemara interprets the Hebrew word for Damascus (DaMeSeK) as an acronym for Doleh uMaShKeh m'Toras Rabbo l'acherim (he draws out water and gives drink [i.e. -- he would learn and teach] from the Torah of his master [i.e. -- Avram] to others.

Eliezer was a faithful disciple of the Patriarch Avraham who said over for others the teachings and practices of his teacher. He was not just a porter. He was Avram's publicist and right hand man, a stand-in for the teacher!

If that is the case, the above quoted pasuk seems strange. Avram asks desperately "What is going to become of me? I have no heir only the steward of my house who will (apparently) inherit me." Then he throws in "He is Eliezer of Damascus" which the Talmud interprets homiletically as if to say "He knows every piece of Torah that I ever said; he transmits it faithfully to others; he is my personal stand-in." How does that fit in with Avram's desperate plea for an heir?

The Rabbeinu Bechaya on the pasuk "Gaze now toward the Heavens and count the stars... so shall your offspring be." says a beautiful idea. He writes that just as every star is unique in color and shape, so too will be the case with the Sages of Israel. They will be individuals, not clones of one another. They will each be unique in spirituality and unique in terms of their insight. The Sages of Israel, writes Rabbeinu Bechaya are not going to be monolithic. They are not going to have all the same ideas and all the same components of wisdom.

The Chozeh (Seer) of Lublin said, that now we can understand what Avraham Avinu meant. Avraham said, I have no children, I have only Eliezer. Eliezer knows my Torah, but he is merely a parrot. He is just a clone of me. I do not want that from my descendants. I want my descendants to be different, to add something. I want each one to be an individual. I do not want a "one size fits all" Yiddishkeit. There need to be "different strokes for different folks" -- just as no two faces are exactly alike so too no two opinions are exactly alike.

Yes, Eliezer knows all my Torah, but that is not

what I am seeking. If I am going to build a Nation, I need offspring that will be more than just exact replicas of their ancestor. When Yitzchak was born, his mode of Service to the Almighty was totally different from that of his father. Avraham's approach was Chessed [Outward directed Kindness]; Yitzchak's approach was Gevurah [Inner directed Strength]. When Yaakov Avinu was born, he too was totally different and each of his twelve sons had their own unique path and method of Divine Service. We have 12 windows in our synagogues -- representing these 12 approaches to Judaism, represented by the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

This was Avraham's request when he complained that he did not have an heir -- only Eliezer of Damascus. He wanted diversity among his offspring, not just clones. To that, Hashem responded, "Go outside and look at the stars. Thus will your offspring be." Do not worry. You will have children and they will be different from one another. Oh, will they be different! You will have Gedolei Yisrael [great men of Israel] who will have differing opinions. This one will stress this aspect and this one will stress that aspect. Do not worry, Avraham, you will have descendants whose differences will span as broad a spectrum as the light of the stars. *© 2018 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org*

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

"And Hashem said to Avram, 'Go (to) (for) yourself, from your land, from your birth place, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.'" (Breishis 12:1)

"For yourself: For you own good!" -- Rashi

"Why was Avram not told immediately where he was going? HASHEM wanted to intensify the test of his leaving... to place a test within a test. Is there a person that goes and doesn't know where he is going?" (Midrash Tanchuma)

A few years back I went to Israel during the week of Parshas Lech Lecha with one of my boys in spite of the fact that violence against Jews in Israel was just starting to gain a terrifying momentum. We heard that Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel the Rosh HaYeshiva of Mir in Jerusalem gave a class on the weekly portion at his house Erev Shabbos, in English. We made sure to get there early to get a good seat. The room filled and then the Rebbe entered.

Weak but courageous and barely audible even at close range he began to read and translate, "And HASHEM said to Avram, 'Go for yourself from your land from your birthplace from your fathers' house to the land that I will show you.'"

When he translated those last words, "to the land that I will show you" he took a deep and eerie swallow and with an other-worldly look he said, "It's not easy not knowing where you are going!"

I thought to myself, "Is he speaking to the assembled students and all their unanswered questions of life like marriage and livelihood, or was he talking about the situation of the Jewish People in Israel, or was he reflecting aloud as an elder with infirmities on the ultimate journey of life? Afterward I had a brief discussion with my son he said, "Probably all of the above and more"..

It's not easy not knowing where you're going! The question remains though, "Why not tell a person where he is going?" How is it for his-our good?

When one of my girls was filling out an application for high school she came to me for help. One of the questions she was asked to respond to was, "What do you hope to learn in high school?" She did not know where to begin. "How am I supposed to describe what I hope to learn in high school if I didn't go to high school yet?"

I told her that that was the answer, which confused her even more, and then we got to work. I think she was pleased in the end and so was the school. She was accepted.

Why was Avram not told where he was going? Why was he not given a specific address? Why was it left open-ended, 'to the land I will show you'? The Talmud says, "Hearing cannot be compared to seeing!" A witness hearing about an incident is not comparable to a witness seeing it. Seeing is a greater quality of clarity. Try explaining to a blind person what rainbow looks like, or any color at all. There are not enough words or a rich enough vocabulary to bridge that gap.

When HASHEM introduces the idea of Avram starting his journey of leaving familiar ties with land, birthplace, and family, HASHEM is speaking to Avram. Later after he arrives in the Holy Land HASHEM appears to him. The quality of the revelation and relationship is greatly improved. He is guided to "the Land that I will SHOW you". It will be a visual cue.

I heard a line this past Shabbos that I liked very much. "Life only begins when you leave your comfort zone. Avram was being told in essence, "Leave your comfort zone! Be open to experiencing more! You will then be able to perceive what is beyond words. *© 2018 Rabbi L. Lam & 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!"