

PARSHAT LECH LECHA

2 - 8 Cheshvan 5785
3 - 9 November 2024

Torah: Genesis 12:1-17:27
HafTorah: Isaiah 40:27-41:16

YOU CAN DO THE IMPOSSIBLE

"Lech Lecha!" – "Go forth!"
These two words from the opening verse of the Torah portion of Lech Lecha are two of the most powerful words in the whole Torah. These words were not arbitrarily chosen as the title of this portion; they embody the essence of the entire story.

"Go forth," Abraham is instructed by G-d, "from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

"Lech Lecha," means "You should go," but it can also mean, "Go for you," "Go to you," or "Go within yourself."

Beyond the direct command to Abraham, G-d gives this instruction to each and every one of us, too. We are charged to dig deep within ourselves to connect to G-d, maximize our potential, and accomplish the impossible.

Whenever I think of the portion of Lech Lecha, I think of my father, Rabbi Sholom B. Gordon, of blessed memory. My father came to the U.S. from a Shtetl (small Jewish village) in Eastern Europe at age 13. By the time he turned 18, he had already developed a Brooklyn accent. A few years later, in 1942, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, said to him, "I want you to become my emissary. I'm sending you to Newark, N.J., to establish a yeshiva and, as my representative, to reach out and bring people closer to their Yiddishkeit, to their Judaism."

At age 21 my father was told, "Lech Lecha," "Go."

A few years later, after he married my mother, Rebbetzin Miriam Gordon, of blessed memory, they were sent by the Rebbe as a team to Springfield, Mass., to open a Yeshiva there.

How did two young people pick themselves up and relocate to Springfield, Mass., and later to Newark, N.J., to begin the work of reconnecting people with their Jewish heritage in the 1940s, when everyone was running away from their Judaism?

Abraham and Sarah paved the way. There were great Kabbalists and holy Tzaddikim (righteous people) even before Abraham - Noah, Shem, Eber, Enoch, et al. Yet none of them managed to influence their surroundings on the scale that Abraham did. They lacked either the strength, the willpower, or the ability to accomplish that which Abraham and Sarah did, which was to get thousands of people to break away from idolatry and to embrace monotheism.

With self-sacrifice, Abraham and Sarah opened the channel of Lech Lecha, which

allows us, their descendants, to follow suit. **Leave Your Comfort Zone**

From time to time, we feel the call of Lech Lecha - we are called upon to go and do, to give of ourselves. Often, this goes against our nature. We may feel that we can't do it, or that it's not for us, or we may simply not be interested.

We look into the teachings of Chassidus and find something fascinating: G-d said to Abraham, "Leave your homeland, and your birthplace, and your father's house." The word translated as "your homeland," "artzecha," is linked to the word "ratzon," meaning "will," referring to our desires and predilections. Our "birthplace" refers to our intellectual capacity, which gives birth to our emotions. And finally, our "father's home" represents our emotional comfort.

Abraham in Biblical times, and all of us today, are told: Leave your self-will behind and surrender your own desires; abandon the conditioning and the traits of your birthplace and leave your comfort zone. Break away from what you have decided is good for you, and from what you want, and go where you are needed.

But do I have to go? What will I lose by going? Is the loss worth the gain?

Rashi (the preeminent Biblical commentator) addresses this dilemma. Usually, when a person travels, three essential aspects of his life are diminished. The first is his reputation. To build a reputation (especially without the help of social media!) you have to be established in your community, and traveling challenges that. The second is family. It is exceedingly difficult to build a family while constantly traveling. The third is financial stability. It's challenging at best, and impossible at worst, to acquire and to hold onto wealth when you're always wandering around.

Rashi explains that G-d told Abraham: You think your reputation will be challenged? You think your family life will be challenged? You think your economic security will be challenged? I promise you just the opposite. You're going to develop an unparalleled reputation, a flourishing family, and financial success.

On the reputation front, how many Abrahams do we have? Who in our world is as well-known as Abraham? Who else holds the title of First Jew or Founder of the Jewish People? In terms of family, Abraham is the patriarch of every single Jew! And wealth-wise, we know that Abraham acquired massive wealth. He was the Bill Gates of his time! The Torah tells us, "And Abraham was very heavy with livestock, silver, and gold." Despite all odds, G-d's promises came to fruition.

But let's back up a little. Abraham sets out on his Lech Lecha mission, armed with

G-d's blessings. Things are about to get amazing, or so he believes. But what's the first thing that happens when Abraham and Sarah settle in Israel? Famine breaks out! G-d promises them that they will have unparalleled success, and instead they find trouble. Because of the famine, they become poverty-stricken. Left with no recourse, they are forced to go down to Egypt, the capital of decadence and immorality at that time.

Where do they find lodging along the way? The blessing of wealth had yet to be fulfilled, so they certainly weren't staying at the Ritz-Carlton or even the Hilton. At best, they were at the Motel 6, where Tom Bodett leaves the light on for you.

Adding insult to injury, as if the Egyptians were looking to prove their immorality, as soon as Abraham and Sarah crossed the border, Sarah was kidnapped and taken to Pharaoh's palace. Trauma! Miraculously, despite having every intent of violating Sarah, Pharaoh was stricken by a plague and did not even touch her.

All Debts Are Paid

In 1990, my parents came to celebrate the bar mitzvah of our son, Eli, with our community in Encino, California. My father spoke, sharing inspiration from Lech Lecha.

There's a fundamental lesson to be taken from this whole story, my father said. Following the miracle in Egypt when Pharaoh is struck by a plague, derailing his plan to assault Sarah, Abraham is sent away laden with gifts of cattle, gold, and silver.

But then, in describing Abraham's travels back to Israel, instead of simply telling us that he traveled, the verse says, "Vayelech Lemasa'av," "And he went upon his journeys." Rashi explains that on his way back from Egypt, Abraham stayed in the same motels he stayed in on the way down. This is a lesson in etiquette: when you have to stay in certain hotels during a road trip for economic reasons, patronize those same places on the way back, even if your fortune has drastically changed. It's also a great way to accumulate points with the same travel loyalty program.

Another interpretation, says Rashi, is that on the way home, Abraham paid all the debts that he incurred on the way down. Abraham and Sarah were literally penniless as they descended to Egypt and were extended credit along the way. Returning from Egypt as billionaires, Abraham immediately paid up all his debts.

"Isn't the story of Abraham and Sarah the story of us all?" my father asked my bar mitzvah boy. We are given promises and blessings, and we do the right thing,

Psalms Daily

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.

2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Havom Yom

Mitzva is an idiom of Tzavta - "joining" or "attachment."

Whoever performs a Mitzva becomes joined to the Essence of G-d - may He be blessed - Who issues that particular command. This is the meaning of "The reward of a mitzva is the mitzva (itself)": His becoming attached to the Essence of the En Sof Who ordained the command, is itself his reward.

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but then the going gets tough. We run into bumps in the road and it seems to make no sense.

In fact, people start asking, "What happened? Why is Abraham suffering? Why is Sarah suffering? Why don't they have enough money? Why can't they stay at the upscale hotel? If they are G-d's chosen emissaries, why don't they have everything they need?"

Sometimes, it takes a little more time, explained my father. Abraham had a very tough time on his way to Egypt, but on the way back he repaid all his debts. Which debts? The debts of people talking. The debts of all the murmuring. The debts of people that said, "This is Abraham?"

On his return, everybody said, "This is Abraham! Now we see the blessings. It has all come full circle."

A Milkman in Williamsburg

At this point in his talk, my father shared a very personal story.

As a yeshiva student in the 1940s, he sported a big, bushy beard. This was before the '60s when beards were "in." Nobody had a beard. This made things very interesting when it came to meeting young ladies with the objective of matrimony. One prospective date actually told her parents, "There's a rabbi here instead of my date!"

When my father was dating my mother, her father - the great Chassid Rabbi Eliyahu Simpson, one of the pioneers of Chabad in America - was challenged by a distant relative. Rabbi Simpson was impoverished, and this relative was economically benevolent to him. But he said to him, "Eli you're going to let your beautiful young daughter marry this guy?! What is he going to grow up to be? At best, if you're lucky, a milkman in Williamsburg!"

It took many years, but my father and mother built a large and wonderful family with beautiful children and grandchildren. My father became a respected rabbi and a chaplain in two hospitals, positively affecting the lives of thousands of people in the greater Newark area and in his Maplewood community. There was skepticism in the beginning, but eventually, everyone saw that if you make the right commitments and if you do the right thing, then G-d grants his blessing. Sometimes it takes a while, but on the way back we can repay all the debts of all of the gossip that goes on around us.

Instant gratification is rarely the answer. Long-term investment leads to long-term blessing.

And that's Lech Lecha. G-d speaks to every one of us and tells us to go beyond ourselves, leave our self-created boundaries, and depart from our self-imposed limitations. You think you can't because

you're a finite being? You are not! You're a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a descendant of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. You're an extension of G-d, with the ability to achieve anything you set out to do. As a Jew and as an emissary of G-d, you can accomplish the impossible. How? Lech Lecha! Dig deep within yourself until you find the essence of your soul and the recognition that you can do anything you set your heart and mind to.

This is how the Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe sent thousands of young men and women all over the world to be their emissaries, to go to the middle of nowhere, to the strangest places in the world, to the most unfamiliar and challenging environments, and accomplish the impossible.

Impossible?

My son-in-law's grandfather was the esteemed chasid Reb Avraham Drizin, also known as Reb Avraham Mayorer. This legendary man survived the tumultuous Stalin years in Russia, was on Stalin's wanted list, on the "hit list," and miraculously survived and came to America. When his youngest daughter was about to marry, in the late '60s, she and her soon-to-be husband, Nochum Pinson, had an audience with the Rebbe.

They asked the Rebbe what they should do once they were married, and the Rebbe said that Nochum should study in kollel. The Rebbe often encouraged newlywed men to study in kollel for a year or two in order to get a solid foundation in Torah. When Nochum asked how he should support a family while sitting and studying, the Rebbe said, "Your father-in-law will support you." At the time, Reb Avraham Mayorer did not have two pennies to rub together, often relying on collected funds to cover his own expenses. He certainly didn't have money to support his son-in-law! Nochum couldn't believe it. "My father-in-law will support me? That's impossible!" But the Rebbe responded, "Ever since I've known your father-in-law, he has done the impossible!"

Lech Lecha is a message from G-d to you and me and each and every one of us: it's a new world; it's a world in which the Jewish people can accomplish the impossible! You don't think you can? Dig a little deeper. Lech Lecha - go within yourself, find those deep, profound divine energies, and bring them out. Harness yourself to the mission of G-d.

When the world says you can't do it, when people look at you and question, "If you're doing the right thing, why are you suffering?" hang tight. Eventually, everything will fall into place, and the world will look on in admiration as they acknowledge the clear manifestation of His blessings.

May we all merit to see these blessings in every aspect of our lives in the most abundant and revealed way.

By Rabbi Yehoshua B. Gordon

LECH LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Lech Lecha," means "Go Forth" and it is found in Genesis 12:1.

G-d speaks to Abram, commanding him, "Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." There, G-d says, he will be made into a great nation. Abram and his wife, Sarai, accompanied by his nephew Lot, journey to the land of Canaan, where Abram builds an altar and continues to spread the message of a one G-d.

A famine forces the first Jew to depart for Egypt, where beautiful Sarai is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram escapes death because they present themselves as brother and sister. A plague prevents the Egyptian king from touching her and convinces him to return her to Abram and to compensate the brother-revealed-as-husband with gold, silver and cattle.

Back in the land of Canaan, Lot separates from Abram and settles in the evil city of Sodom, where he falls captive when the mighty armies of Chedorlaomer and his three allies conquer the five cities of the Sodom Valley. Abram sets out with a small band to rescue his nephew, defeats the four kings, and is blessed by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem).

G-d seals the Covenant Between the Parts with Abram, in which the exile and persecution (Galut) of the people of Israel is foretold, and the Holy Land is bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage.

Still childless ten years after their arrival in the Land, Sarai tells Abram to marry her maidservant Hagar. Hagar conceives, becomes insolent toward her mistress, and then flees when Sarai treats her harshly; an angel convinces her to return, and tells her that her son will father a populous nation. Ishmael is born in Abram's eighty-sixth year.

Thirteen years later, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham ("father of multitudes"), and Sarai's to Sarah ("princess"), and promises that a son will be born to them; from this child, whom they should call Isaac ("will laugh"), will stem the great nation with which G-d will establish His special bond. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his descendants as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you." Abraham immediately complies, circumcising himself and all the males of his household.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Monday, 3 Cheshvan 5785 - 4 November 2024

Passing of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (2013)

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a leader of Sephardic Jewry and Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, passed away on 3 Cheshvan, 5774 (2013), at the age of 93.

A widely published author on Jewish law, Rabbi Yosef was considered by scholars of all backgrounds to be a rabbinical authority with a rare grasp of nearly every area of Torah scholarship. He was known for his encyclopedic knowledge of a wide swath of halachic texts, ranging from the well-known to the most obscure. In his halachic rulings, he would often list dozens of previous rulings and then decide in accordance with what he perceived to be the majority opinion.

Tuesday, 4 Cheshvan 5785 - 5 November 2024

"Purim Algiers" (1541)

In 5301 (1541), Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of Spain, led a fleet in an attempted attack against Algiers, on the African coast. Miraculously, a storm capsized many of the attacking boats, resulting in the expedition's failure and rescuing the city's Jewish community from anti-Semitic Spanish rule. In commemoration of the miracle, the local community marked 4 Cheshvan as a "minor Purim," omitting the penitential Tachanun prayers and partaking of festive meals.

Thursday, 6 Cheshvan 5785 - 7 November 2024

Maimonides Visits Jerusalem (1165)

After leaving Morocco and before settling in Egypt, Maimonides visited Jerusalem and prayed at the site of the Holy Temple on 6 Cheshvan 4925 (1165). Three days later, on 9 Cheshvan, he visited Hebron and prayed at the Cave of Machpelah.

Maimonides resolved to keep these two days - 6 and 9 Cheshvan - as a personal holiday.

Shabbat, 8 Cheshvan 5785 - 9 November 2024

Passing of Rabbi Jonah of Gerona (1263)

Rabbi Jonah was a thirteenth-century scholar who lived in Spain. Although originally opposed to Maimonides' philosophical works (most notably, his Guide for the Perplexed), he later changed his views, and even vowed to travel to Maimonides' gravesite to posthumously beg for forgiveness. (He indeed began the long journey, but passed away in Toledo, Spain on 8 Cheshvan 5023, or 1263, before completing the trip.) Rabbi Jonah authored Shaarei Teshuvah (an ethical work on repentance), a commentary on Rabbi Isaac Al-Fasi's halachic compendium, and a commentary on Ethics of the Fathers, among other works. (Others date his passing as 1 or 28 Cheshvan.)