


A Journey To One's True Self: Avraham's Odyssey As A Lesson For His Descendants

Lech Lecha; Genesis 12:1-17:27

 By Eli Touger
From the Sichos in English Collection

Adapted from

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. V, p. 57ff; Vol. XX, p. 59ff, p. 301ff;
Vol. XXV, p. 52; *Sefer HaSichos* 5750, p. 96ff.

What the Torah Chooses to Highlight

Every child knows the story of Avraham how he discovered G-d as a lad, broke his father's idols, was thrown into the furnace by Nimrod and saved by G-d.¹

None of these details, however, can be found in the Written Torah. The Torah mentions Avraham² only briefly at the close of *Parshas Noach*,³ telling us that he was born, that he married, and that he accompanied his father on his journey from Ur towards Canaan. But the focus of these verses is on Terach, not on Avraham. It is only in *Parshas Lech Lecha*, with the command,⁴ "Go out of your land, your native country, and your father's house," that the Torah begins unfolding the history of the founder of our people.

Why this emphasis? Before receiving this command to leave his father's house, Avraham had already attained a high level of Divine service. He had "recognized his Creator"⁵ at three, and from that age onward continued to grow in faith. He had been willing to sacrifice his life for G-d, and a miracle was performed to save him.

All this, however, represented merely *his own striving* to approach G-d. The command *Lech Lecha*, "Go out of your land," began a new and deeper relationship with his Maker. For as our Sages state:⁶ "A person who observes a *mitzvah* because he is commanded to do so is greater than one who observes it without having been so commanded."

The word *mitzvah* (מצוה) and the word *tzavta* (צוּתָא), meaning "together," share the same root.⁷ When a person fulfills a divine command *because he has been commanded to do so*, the act connects him to G-d in all His infinity. Were, by contrast, the person to perform the same deed without having been commanded to do so, the act, however worthy, would remain merely a good deed.

This is implied by the command, "Go out." Avraham was commanded to travel beyond his limited frame of reference and establish an unlimited connection with G-d.⁸ By doing so, he defined the constantly flowering

nature of the link between G-d and the Jewish people for all time. Our connection to G-d is not dependent on our love, understanding or belief, but comes as a response to G-d's initiative.

Our Rabbis⁹ underscore this concept, stating that Avraham's service anticipated the bond with G-d made possible for everyone by the giving of the Torah.

New Vistas

Lech also means "proceed," referring to the beginning of a journey. This concept is alluded to in the Torah's description of Avraham "continuing on his way, steadily progressing southward,"¹⁰ i.e., in the direction of Jerusalem,¹¹ the place where G-d's presence is most manifest.

Real spiritual progress requires that one leaves one's current state behind. Yet as long as an individual's growth depends entirely on his own power, his progress will be limited;¹² nobody can exceed the bounds of his own understanding. When, by contrast, one's progress is guided by G-d, there are no limits to the potential for growth. The Torah and its *mitzvos* can take a person far beyond his natural horizons. To accentuate this point, G-d tells Avraham to proceed "to the land which I will show you," without specifying a destination.

Self-discovery

The expression "I will show you," *arecka* in Hebrew, can also be rendered "I will reveal you," i.e., through the journey to *Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham's true self was revealed to him. This is also indicated by the expression *Lech Lecha*, which literally means "go to yourself," i.e., "to your essence."¹³

Avraham's willingness to put his individual will on the side and respond to G-d's command allowed a more direct connection between the Creator and the created. And in the process, a boundless potential was unleashed, for every Jew's soul is "an actual part of G-d."¹⁴ This is the essence of every man's spiritual journey: to transcend his ordinary way of thinking, and to tap this G-dly core.¹⁵

As we proceed through life, each of us is given the chance to discover who he is, what G-d is, and that the two are one.

Passing Through Shadows

In the course of one's spiritual travels, a person encounters situations which can only be overcome with a struggle, and which may even cause one to fall. Nevertheless, since all phases of life's journey are guided by Divine Providence, we must realize that the purpose of every experience is positive. Even when we fall, we are being given an opportunity to borrow an expression from our Sages¹⁶ to descend in order to ascend.

Why must a person face such challenges? Two reasons are given:

a) To bring out the power of one's soul. As long as a person remains untested, he can "get by" without having to tap his core. When, by contrast, one faces a fundamental challenge, it becomes necessary to call upon one's

spiritual resources in order to succeed.

b) In the process of overcoming a challenge, a person recognizes and thus elevates the sparks of G-dliness contained therein. For all existence is maintained by G-d's creative energy; that energy is hidden within the world's material substance. As a result of this "hiddenness," challenges arise. By overcoming these challenges, a human reveals the true G-dly nature of existence.

Avraham's spiritual journey contained such challenges. Shortly after he entered *Eretz Yisrael*, he was forced to descend to Egypt, described as "the nakedness of the land."¹⁷ The very name of the land, *mitzrayim*, is related to the word *meitzarim*, meaning "boundaries" or "limitations."¹⁸

And yet even Avraham's descent brought him blessing. He left Egypt "very rich in cattle, in silver, and gold."¹⁹ Moreover, this wealth came from spiritual effort; Avraham had elevated some of the sparks of G-dliness invested in that country.²⁰

To Journey With Others

A person's spiritual quest should not be a lonely journey. On the contrary, one of the hallmarks of personal development is an increasing capacity to inspire others. Avraham surely gained such an ability, as our Sages comment²¹ with regard to the verse,²² "And he called in the name of the G-d of the universe": "Do not read ויקרא ('And he called'), read ויקריא ('And he had others call')."

This concept is also reflected in the changing of his name from Avram to Avraham.²³ *Rashi*²⁴ explains that Avram implies merely "father of Aram," while Avraham alludes to the Hebrew words meaning "father of many nations." The change implies that Avraham had been given the potential to inspire and influence all the nations of the world to begin striving toward spiritual goals.

A Sign in Our Flesh

Significantly, Avraham was given this name in connection with the *mitzvah* of circumcision. Circumcision an act which affects the most basic physical aspect of our being, demonstrates that our spiritual quest is not an attempt to escape worldly reality, but is rather an attempt to refine it. Circumcision represents a "covenant in the flesh,"²⁵ and endows even our physical bodies with sanctity.²⁶

The Promise of Eretz Yisrael

The above concepts enable us to appreciate why the promise of *Eretz Yisrael* to Avraham's descendants is mentioned in connection with circumcision. Circumcision reflects the unification of the spiritual and the physical in one's person, while the relationship between the Jews and *Eretz Yisrael* reflects a unification of spirituality and physicality in the world at large.

In this sense, the attainment of physical *Eretz Yisrael* represents the culmination of Avraham's spiritual journey. For the most complete departure from any cultural environment is reflected in the transformation of that

environment. Thus the fulfillment of G-d's command for Avraham to break the chains of material existence (*Lech Lecha*) comes about as his descendants struggle to transform *Eretz Yisrael* into a dwelling fit for G-d.

The promise of *Eretz Yisrael* will not truly be fulfilled until the Era of the Redemption. In that sense, the journey that began with the command *Lech Lecha* remains an ongoing mission for all of Avraham's descendants. Until the coming of *Mashiach*, we must be constantly exceeding our spiritual limitations, striving to bring ourselves and our environment to fulfillment.

FOOTNOTES

1. See *Bereishis Rabbah* 38:13, *Tana d'bei Eliyahu Zuta*, ch. 25.
2. Referring to him with his initial name Avram.
3. *Genesis* 11:26-31.
4. *Genesis* 12:1.
5. *Nedarim* 32a; *Bereishis Rabbah* 30:8.
6. *Kiddushin* 31a.
7. See *Likkutei Torah, Parshas Bechukosai* 45c.
8. There is also another dimension to this point of transition. Previously, Avraham's service was primarily inner-directed, focused on his own spiritual discovery and growth. His journey to *Eretz Yisrael* began a phase in which he worked with others. These two concepts are interrelated, for the infinite power of a *mitzvah* allows a person to go beyond his own individual limits.
9. *Torah Or, Parshas Lech Lecha* 11c. *Sefer HaArachim Chabad, erech Avraham*, sec. 4.
10. *Genesis* 9:12.
11. *Bereishis Rabbah* and *Rashi* on this verse.
12. In this vein, chassidic thought interprets the command, "Go out of your land, your native country, and your father's house," as a charge to abandon one's ordinary way of thinking. In this context, it is significant that this charge was addressed to Avraham. Avraham's habits and way of thinking were already on a high plane. Nevertheless, he was instructed to proceed to a higher level, one which transcends the limits of mortal potential.
13. *Alshich* on this verse, *Or HaTorah, Lech Lecha*, Vol. IV, p. 680b *et al.*
14. *Tanya*, ch. 2.
15. This also relates to *teshuvah*, which chassidic thought interprets, not as "repentance," but as a "return" to one's G-dly core. See the essay entitled "Teshuvah Return, not Repentance" in *Timeless Patterns In Time*, Vol. I, (Kehot, N.Y., 1993).
16. Cf. *Makkos* 8a.
17. Cf. *Genesis* 42:9, 12.
18. *Torah Or, Va'eira*, p. 57b ff.
19. *Genesis* 13:2.

20. In this vein, our Sages (*Bereishis Rabbah* 40:6) explain that Avraham's journeys to and from Egypt served as a forerunner for the subsequent descent and ascent of his offspring. Like him, they suffered difficulty in that land, but ultimately left (as G-d promised to Avraham, *Genesis* 15:14) with "great wealth." And as explained with regard to Avraham, this wealth symbolized the elevation of the G-dly sparks contained within the land.
21. *Sotah* 10a.
22. *Genesis* 21:33.
23. *Ibid.* 17:5.
24. In his commentary to that verse.
25. *Genesis* 17:13.
26. Our Sages (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:3; see also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. 8, p. 58 and sources cited there) contrast the *mitzvos* performed by the forefathers with those performed after the giving of the Torah, explaining that the *mitzvos* performed by the forefathers were "ethereal," i.e., they did not affect this material world. In contrast, the *mitzvos* we perform infuse material existence with holiness, to the extent that the articles with which *mitzvos* are performed become consecrated. [See the essay entitled "What Happened at Sinai? What the Giving of the Torah Means to Us" (*Timeless Patterns In Time*, Vol. II, Kehot, N.Y., 1994). Note also the connection developed in that essay with the concept of performing *mitzvos* in response to G-d's command.] Circumcision is, however, unique. Even when performed by the forefathers, it affected physical reality, achieving as it did a unity between the physical and the spiritual. Evidence of this can be seen from Avraham's instructions to Eliezer in the method of taking an oath (*Genesis* 24:2), which had to be taken while holding an object of holiness. Lacking any other such object, Avraham told Eliezer: "Place your hand beneath my thigh."

By Eli Touger