

Lech Lecha, Rabbi David Mahler

There's always something comforting about returning to *Parshas Lech Lecha*. The familiarity with *Avraham* and his stories. His military prowess in the war of kings, devotion to *Hashem* at the *Akeida*, dynamic personality which allows him to teach monotheism to the masses, his unwavering commitment to family saving *Lot* from destruction in *Sodom* and the crafty diplomacy he exhibits in negotiating with *Paroh* and *Avimelech*.

As we approach Election Day, it feels right to mention the most oft-quoted line in the Declaration of Independence. Our wonderful country is founded on the principle that we are all endowed with unalienable rights, such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Life, and its sanctity, is something we've grown to cherish more than ever over the last seven months. The gift of liberty, of living with many freedoms is something to constantly thank *Hashem* for. And to be able to pursue happiness is a gift we ought not to underestimate.

Yet I believe there is a pursuit that most definitely trumps (please believe me that there is absolutely zero pun intended here ☺) one's pursuit of happiness. In David Brook's "The Road to Character", he writes that we do not live for happiness. We live for holiness.

And for a Jew, that search is innate.

Rav Soloveitchik addresses this idea three times in his commentary on the life of *Avraham*.

The *Rav* notes that when *Avraham* is initially charged to leave his home and head to Israel, he is not told the location of his destination. He is given no coordinates to type into his GPS. The *Ramban* teaches that *Avraham* wandered from land to land until he found *Eretz Yisrael*. The *Rav* explains that *Am Yisrael* should be equipped with a sixth sense enabling it to spontaneously be attracted to the holy. *Avraham* was tested to see whether or not he possessed this capability. *Hashem* has implanted in each of us this sensitively, this pull, to *kedusha*.

A few *pesukim* later (12:7), *Avraham* builds an alter in the place where *Hashem* appeared to him. This alter was in appreciation of passing one of *Hashem's* tests. His intuitive choice was correct. *Avraham* realized he possessed this innate sense to discriminate between the holy and the mundane. He was sensitive to that which was G-dly.

Finally, at the end of next week's *parsha*, as *Avraham* and *Yitzchak* walk together to the *Akeida*, *Avraham* is once again not told upon which mountain to sacrifice his child. After traveling for three days, both men (*Yitzchak* was 37) see the mountain from afar. Here, once again, Rav Soloveitchik notes they perceived the sanctity of the mountain – that

which *Yishmael* and *Elazar* could not. The ethereal beauty of the mountain was clear as day to them, even from a distance.

As *Avraham* was tested, so are we. Do we have an instinct and an intuition towards *kedusha*? Are we drawn towards the sublime? Do we know what nourishes and nurtures our souls? Are we attracted to *kedusha*?

The distinguishing mark of a Jew must be that we are drawn not to happiness, but to holiness. And holiness, a life embracing that which transcends, is the roadmap to happiness.

We must also measure our individual, familial and communal happiness by its holiness. That is success. That will lead to happiness. The pursuit of happiness is really just a cover for pursuing holiness.

The inverse is also true. We must find profanity and immorality repulsive.

We begin each week by declaring this mission. A Jew strives to be *mavdil bein kodesh l'chol* – to differentiate between the holy and the mundane. That is the job of the Jew.

Exactly two years ago, *Parshas Lech Lecha*, Rabbi Shay Schachter visited YICC as a scholar-in-residence. At a *tisch* on Friday night, he quoted a *midrash* found at the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*. The *midrash* discusses the greatest feat *Moshe Rabbeinu* ever accomplished. Was it standing up to *Paroh*, executing the plagues or splitting the sea? Perhaps it was dealing with *Bnei Yisrael* day in and day out? There are so many choices yet the *midrash* states that Moshe teaching the Jewish people the difference between *Tumah* and *Tahara* was his greatest accomplishment. Moshe saved the nation from destruction after the sins of the golden calf and the spies yet teaching them what is pure and what is impure placed the gold medal around his neck. Understanding that some things are pure, holy and sublime and others are profane, mundane and ordinary is the work of a lifetime. It is life's work.

Am I searching after *kedusha*? Am I sensitive to sanctity? Am I seeking holiness or simply happiness.

Invest in holiness! It will grant you real meaningful life, emotional and intellectual liberty and authentic happiness.

Shabbat Shalom