



Lech Lecha: Life Over Death

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“And the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth (Lech Lecha) from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1).”

Avraham’s journey began with two words, “*Lech Lecha, go forth.*” You must leave what you know and venture into the great unknown. Avraham’s journey is our journey – the journey of the Jew throughout the ages, the journey of the Jew into the vast unknown. But this great test was but one of ten. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:3) states: “*Avraham was given ten tests and he passed them all ...*” We often assume that *Lech Lecha* was the first. However, the Bartenura (Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura, 1445-1515) explains that the first test was “*Ur Kasdim.*” What happened in *Ur Kasdim*? Rashi (11:28) quotes the Midrash that tells the story of Avraham being handed over to Nimrod for judgement. Avraham had smashed idols and repudiated idolatry and was given an ultimatum – give up your monotheistic beliefs or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Avraham chose death over renouncing his faith, and as a result was thrown into the fiery furnace. Miraculously, Avraham was saved. This, explains the Bartenura, was Avraham’s first test. But this begs an obvious question - why isn’t this test mentioned in the text? The episode of *Ur Kasdim* is only mentioned in the Midrash; it is never once mentioned in the Genesis narrative. The test of *Lech Lecha* is told to us in great detail, yet there is no scriptural coverage of the test of *Ur Kasdim*. How are we to understand this glaring omission?

Rav Yisrael Meir Lau (current Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, former Chief Rabbi of Israel) advances a beautiful explanation. Throughout the ages we have given our lives “*Al Kiddush Hashem, to sanctify the name of God.*” Throughout the generations brave Jewish men, women, and children have made the ultimate sacrifice rather than renounce their faith or Torah. This ability to make the ultimate sacrifice for God is part of our religious and spiritual DNA. But there is something greater than *dying Al Kiddush Hashem* and that is *living Al Kiddush Hashem*. The greatest accomplishment for the Jew is to live each and every day in a way that is a credit to my Creator, my Torah, and my people. Living *Al Kiddush Hashem* means denying myself certain things so that I can advance in my personal journey. It means pushing myself to be more and do more because I know I can. Dying for God is an incredible act of heroism – but you only have to summon the courage once. Living for God is a greater accomplishment as it requires me to summon the courage, optimism, and strength each and every day.

Avraham’s willingness to give his life at *Ur Kasdim* was an incredible display of spiritual heroism, but this is not the lesson God wants us to take from the life of Avraham. The Torah does not mention the story of *Ur Kasdim* because it is not to be memorialized as the Abrahamitic paradigm. Our first exposure to Avraham is *Lech Lecha*. *Lech Lecha* was the test of *living Al Kiddush Hashem*. *Lech Lecha* was not a one-time command. *Lech Lecha* was God telling Avraham, “*If you want to be great, you have to be willing to separate yourself from those things that hold you back. If you want to self-actualize, you need to be willing to stand alone. If you want to be holy, you must be ready to venture into the unknown.*” *Lech Lecha* was the greatest test – the challenge of *living Al Kiddush Hashem*.

Tragically, we have seen over 1,400 of our precious brothers and sisters murdered *Al Kiddush Hashem*. We wonder what do to and how to respond. Perhaps, our avoda is simple. If we see so many precious neshamos who have been killed *Al Kiddush Hashem*, we must commit ourselves to *living Al Kiddush Hashem*. We must look at the way we live, speak, and conduct ourselves and ensure that we are living in accordance with the will of God in each of these areas. And if we are not yet fully there, what are we doing to improve?

We stand in awe of those who have died *Al Kiddush Hashem*. We pay homage to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve our faith, ideals, and way of life. But we are called upon to do something of even *greater* significance. We must fight the good fight each and every day. We must make sure that what we do, how we behave, the interactions we have, the aspirations we possess, the goals we set, the dreams we dream are a source of *nachas* for Hakadosh Boruch Hu and for ourselves. We must strive to *live Al Kiddush Hashem*.

May we each be privileged to find the strength to embark on our *Lech Lecha* journey, and may we find the resolve to make it to our promised land.