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ASBI Congregation
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To a Land That I Will Show You¹

Without question, the best job in all of Jewish folklore was the job of being the wagon driver of the Baal Shem Tov. Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hassidic movement, was a constant traveler and would journey from town to town, sometimes alone, sometimes with one or more disciples, spreading his message of Hassidut, or intervening on behalf of struggling Jews. But, as story after story relates, once the wagon was loaded, the Baal Shem Tov would turn to his wagon driver, he happened to be a non-Jewish fellow named Alexi, and say, “drop the reins, the horses know where to go.”

And somehow, after a journey that never seemed to take as long as expected, the Baal Shem Tov’s wagon would end up precisely where it needed to be. For faithful Hassidim, disciples of the Baal Shem Tov and his students and his students’ students, it is no wonder that the Baal Shem Tov had magic horses who could lead a wagon to the place where it had to be without a wagon driver.

But the true mystery, about story after story of the Baal Shem Tov’s amazing travels - is why, year after year, did the Baal Shem Tov keep Alexi on his payroll?

Lekh Lekha begins with a great mystery as well. God chooses Avraham, sends him from his land, his birthplace, and from his father’s household, and directs him towards an unknown place.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָה׃

“And God said to Avram: Go out from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s household to the land that I shall show you.”

The Torah does not tell us where Avraham was supposed to go. Avraham was told to walk to the land that would be shown to him, but God does not give Avraham any further instructions about where he should go.

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת־שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בֶּן־אָחִיו וְאֶת־כָּל־רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עִשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן׃

“And Avram took Sarai his wife and Lot, the son of his brother, and all their property that they had acquired and the souls they had made in Haran and they went to travel to the land of Canaan. And they arrived in the land of Canaan.”

Avraham goes to Canaan without having been told to do so. How does he know to go there? Why does he go there? Further mysteries: the Torah does not tell us what the difference is between “land,” “birthplace,” and “father’s house.” And the torah does not tell us why Avraham was chosen.

The key to answering these mysteries is found at the end of last week’s parsha. Avraham and his family are introduced at the tail end of the description of the descendants of Noah. After the Torah introduces the family, a journey is described:

וַיִּקַּח תָּרַח אֶת־אֲבָרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בֶּן־הָרָן בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־שָׂרַי כְּלֵתוֹ אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאוּרִכְשִׁים לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיָּשְׁבוּ שָׁם׃

¹ With gratitude to Rabbi Chaim Brovender and Rabbi David Ebner for explaining the significance of the Baal Shem Tov’s journeys, and Avraham’s journey to Canaan.

“And Terach took Avram his son, Lot ben Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter in law, the wife of Avram and they went with him from Ur Chasdim to travel to Canaan. And they reached Charan and settled there.”

Avraham was already on his way to Canaan, on a journey lead by his father. The family was delayed on their way to Canaan.

וַיְהִי יְמֵי תֵרַח חֲמֵשׁ עָשָׂר וּמֵאֵתַיִם שָׁנָה וַיָּמָת תֵּרַח בְּחָרָן:

“And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years; and Terach died in Haran.”

The family is delayed in Charan, Terach dies there, and Avraham, Sarai, and Lot complete the journey to Canaan that Terach had started.

If you work out the arithmetic, and Rashi did it already so you don't have to, it emerges that Terach was still very much alive when God called to Avraham at the beginning of this week's parsha. Terach's death is described out of chronological order so that the moral ambiguity inherent in Avraham leaving an elderly parent alone is shielded from readers of the Torah.

But now we can piece together the significance of God's call to Avraham. Avraham's birthplace was Ur Casdim - and he had already left there, his “land” is the place he had been living, Charan, and he had to leave behind his “father's house” because Terach was very much alive when Avraham completed the journey to Canaan.

And God didn't tell Avraham where to go because Avraham was already on a journey to Eretz Canaan. What, then, was so special about Avraham?

Avraham was on a journey to Eretz Canaan before he received a message from God. And he continued on his journey to Eretz Canaan after he received a message from God. He didn't change his outward behavior. He continued on a journey that his father had begun before him - but he did so in relationship with God. There were others before Avraham, Noah most famously, he received commands from God, and were obedient to those commands. Noah, built an ark and gathered the animals into that ark because God told him to do so. Avraham was able to be obedient to God's commands and to live his life in relationship with God, as a lover of God (Avraham is the only person in Tanakh who is referred to as someone who loved God), even when God did not tell him to do anything he was not already doing.

To be a Jew, to experience the world as a student of Avraham, does not necessarily require acting differently in any specific moment in an outward way. Rather, being a Jew requires living one's life, its poetry and prose, moments of drama and moments of drudgery, in relationship with God and in service of God.

The Baal Shem Tov didn't have magic horses. He didn't have a magic wagon. He kept Alexi on his payroll because the most significant moment of each Baal Shem Tov story occurs when Alexi asks, “Where are we going today master?” And the Baal Shem Tov replies, “No worries. The horses will take us where we need to go.”

Not because the horses were magical, but because the Baal Shem Tov understood - and this was his spiritual genius - that no matter where the horses brought him, he would find someone in need of his help. Wherever the horses took his wagon, that is where the Baal Shem Tov was meant to be and that is where he could accomplish something of cosmic significance.

God is saying to each one of us, every day, “Lekh Lekha” - get up and go. Responding to that call does not always require us to change our direction - even Avraham didn't change his direction. Sometimes we are already headed in the right direction. To live as a Jew is to walk on that path, but to do so with God, and in service of humanity.