

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Parashat Lech Lecha
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I want to speak this morning about Israel. Let me say right away, I don't have anything new to say. But there are certain drashot, certain teachings, that I need to hear more than once, indeed, that I need to hear at particular moments. They say rabbis give the sermons they need to hear, so this is the reminder that I need this Shabbat.

First, I need to put myself in the shoes of those in Israel now. So join me.

Imagine every time you saw a car, you worried that perhaps it might intentionally hit you, and the people standing or walking with you. Imagine every time you saw a bulldozer, it crossed your mind that its driver might try to bulldoze you. Imagine every time you saw someone who looked vaguely "Arab," you considered what you would do if he or she—or she—began stabbing people with a knife hidden in a pocket or a bag.

That's what our friends, our relatives, our brothers and sisters in Israel, are imagining every day now. I don't envy their constant vigilance, the concern for their children and their loved ones that begin every time someone leaves the house, and only lets up when everyone is home safely for the night.

I can't imagine living like this. And I also cannot imagine living with the rage, despair and impotence that so many Palestinians feel. As I once heard a Palestinian woman say, "You can't treat us like animals and expect us to act like people."

We could talk and argue and maybe agree after a while about the various causes and responsibilities for the current wave of attacks. But I'll leave that to the historians and commentators and political and security analysts.

Rather, as a rabbi and teacher of Torah, I want to remind myself and all of us about where our connection to Israel comes from. I need to hear that and remind myself of it now because there are so many voices questioning our master story, our foundational narrative. One of the most frustrating mistruths propagated in the Arab world is that the Jewish people has no historical connection to the land of Israel.

So let me say it simply: the Jewish people has a three-thousand year old connection to the land of Israel, and Israel has and always must be the destination of the Jewish people.

And it starts in the Torah we just read this morning, in the story of God speaking to Avram saying, *לך לך*, Go, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you (Gen. 12:1). So Avram, together with his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, and all their household, set out for the land of Canaan, which will become known as the land of Israel. And they came to the land of Canaan. The leaving and the arriving and the details about who came are all in one verse (12:5). God then says, I'll give this land to your offspring (12:7). Avram travels around the land, to the west and the east, to the Negev. That's the beginning of our people's connection to Israel.

And of course, it only deepens. God promises Avram the land again, later, at the end of chapter 13. Then, in chapter 15, God and Avram make a covenant in which God assigns the land to Avram's descendants.

But it's not just the story of Abraham that constitutes our connection. God also reaffirms the covenant and the promise to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses, and to the people Israel over and over and over again.

Who prefers the stories of Genesis and the great narrative of Exodus to the laws and details that make up much of the rest of the Torah? Well, Rashi's very first comment on the Torah asks why the Torah doesn't begin with Exodus chapter 12, which contains the first mitzvah commanded to the

Israelites, about Rosh Hodesh. He's essentially suggesting that all these stories, about our patriarchs and matriarchs, about the Exodus, are superfluous, since obviously, only the legal stuff matters.

But Rashi's explanation, and he's quoting rabbis of the Talmudic era—he's not making this up himself—Rashi says that if the nations of the world ever say, "You are robbers—for you have taken by force the lands of the seven nations," Israel will say to them, "All the earth belongs to God, who created it and gave it away as God saw fit. It was God's will to give to the nations of the world, and God's will to take from them and give it to us." And that story, that narrative of God giving the land of Israel to the Jewish people is the entire purpose of the probably a third of the Torah, and most of the good parts.

As we tell the story, Israel is ours, it's been ours for as long as there's been an "us," and it always will be ours. That's our story, and we're sticking to it.

Now I know as well as anybody here about the problems of reading Torah as real, true, factual history. I'm not saying it's not history, but it's not historically verifiable. To me though, it's not the historicity or the factuality that matter. Rather, it's the story itself. Whether or not God gave Abraham the land of Israel, or whether God gave us the land of Israel... Whether or not there is any God, or ever was, and whether or not there ever were the personages we know as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Moses... Regardless of any of that—as far back as we can go in the story of ourselves that we tell ourselves—as far back as we can go in our self-understanding and in our collective memory, Israel has been the be-all and end-all. Israel has been our destination. Maybe you've heard, "Wherever I stand, I stand with Israel." What I like much better is, "Wherever I'm going, I'm going to Israel." Our destination, whether now, or someday that we can't imagine, has always been Israel.

I need to remind myself of that when the times get tough, when our connection to Israel is called into question. And I'm reminding all of you.

This is not about settlements, or security fences, or appropriate force, or rage, or fear, or mistrust. This is just a reminder about why—about why Israel for the Jewish people. And there are many, many more answers. But it was those words—to a land that I will show you—that started it all.

Shabbat shalom.