

Parshat Lech Lecha 5779

“That’s one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind”

How do we ever really know who we are? Why do we do the things we do? Why do we make the decisions we make? As children, we are raised in an environment where choices are made for us, and our specific circumstances and surroundings often determine how our lives are lived. As we grow older, we gain more independence and freedom. We are given more responsibility; we have more say in different matters. And at a certain age we leave our homes, where we are finally on our own and we determine how we will live. Yet there is always a question as to how we come to these decisions.

If we follow in the way that we were raised, then we have to wonder if we really chose this for ourselves, or if we are doing this because it is what we know and what we are comfortable with. On the other hand, if we rebel against our upbringing and do the opposite, then the question still remains. Are we doing what we feel is right, or are we just *not* doing things the way we were taught?

The lifelong process of figuring out who we are and who we want to be, is what this week’s parasha *Lech Lecha* is all about.

In the opening verse, G-d gives his first command to Avram, *Lech “go”*. G-d tells him to go out, leave his native land and his father’s household, to emerge from the cocoon of protected existence and set out on his own path in the world.

Our Rabbis interpret the second word *lecha* as meaning “for yourself.” *Rashi* explains that setting out on such a journey would have been fraught with danger, and there was a possibility that Avram would lose everything he had. Therefore G-d promised him that the journey would be to his benefit. His wealth, his family, and his reputation would increase.

Rabbi Moshe Alshich offers a deeper interpretation. *Lecha* means “to yourself”. Avram was setting out on a path of self-discovery. The purpose of his journey to Canaan, his descent to Egypt, his return to the land, and all his wanderings was intended to enable him to understand his own identity and express his positive qualities in his surrounding environment. *

Rabbi Simon Jacobson continues this theme. When one is given travel directions, you are not usually given the exact point of departure – you know where you are coming from – and so only need the address of the destination. But in the opening verse of *Lech Lecha*, G-d does the opposite. The destination is very vague “*go to the land that I will show you*”. But, life is a journey from the moment we are born. In order to really know ourselves, we must

temporarily distance ourselves from the forces and influences of our past. “*Leave your land*” – influences and pressures of society: “*your birthplace*” – influence of peers and personal biases: “*your father’s home*” – to choose one’s path for oneself.

It is then, when the new land is shown to us—our potential, our possibilities, and the world that awaits us that we can progress. We cannot move forward until we truly know who we are. This is how we *lech lecha*, go from ourselves, back to ourselves.

Lord Jonathan Sacks has a different take on the same theme. “Three of the most famous denials of freedom were made by individuals from Jewish backgrounds who rejected Judaism. The first was Spinoza who argued that all human behaviour is explicable by causal laws. Nowadays we would call this genetic determinism. The second was Karl Marx who claimed that history was made by material, specifically economic, factors. The third was Sigmund Freud who contended that actions are the result of unconscious and irrational drives, the chief of which relate to the early years of childhood, especially the Oedipus complex, the conflict between fathers and sons.

Unwittingly, they provided the best commentary on the opening verse of *Lech Lecha*. Marx said that human behaviour is determined by economic factors such as the ownership of land. Therefore G-d said to Avram: Leave your land. Spinoza said that conduct is driven by instincts given at birth. Therefore G-d said to Avram: Leave your place of birth. Freud said that we are influenced by our relationship with our father. Therefore G-d said to Avram: Leave your father’s house.”

No one questions the unprecedented landing on the moon, or Columbus’ voyage to the New World, or other great steps taken by men throughout history. But, greater than them all – the one that had by far the most powerful impact on history was Avram’s journey. Avram’s journey was far more than a geographical excursion. It was a transition from the comfort zones of self-absorption to the greatest heights of transcendence; a journey from the mortal to the immortal.

So, with Avram’s first small step towards Canaan, came a giant leap for mankind as Avram’s journey changed the world forever. Had Avram not embarked on his odyssey to “*the land that I will show you*”, we would not have a promised land, a Jewish people, we would not have Sinai, we would not have Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and other Far Eastern disciplines and we would not have the principles stated in the Ten Commandments, which define the basic human rights that have become the bedrock of our modern democracies.**

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