

This Blessing Is For You
Shabbat Lekh L'kha
October 19, 2018 / 11 Cheshvan 5779

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a cousin who had taken a DNA ancestry test. She was excited to share the results gleaned by comparing her personal data with others'. From her efforts, I learned a bit of family trivia, nothing ground breaking or earthshattering. No, I am not part Native American. Mostly, I was amused by a question in her email: she wanted to know if the surname Ghebreselassie rang a bell. Who could forget a name like Ghebreselassie? I had no clue who she was talking about.

What I know about my family ancestry I learned from sources other than DNA testing. My sources were narratives and stories, faded photos and notes scribbled on the inside covers of family bibles and prayerbooks. There are gaping holes in what I know about my ancestors, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of the family stories are *bubbemeisas*, but that's okay. It's part of my narrative. What I'm certain of is that I bear the names of two great-great-great... grandmothers: Sarah and Leah (my Hebrew name is Sarah Leah). I'm also certain that my family can trace its origin to present day Iraq and that my ancestors didn't stay there long. My ancestors were wandering Jews. They spent time in Israel and in Egypt and in the Iberian Peninsula and in Central and Eastern Europe. In the late 1800s or very early 1900s, all my grandparents immigrated to the US and settled in New Jersey. My relatives have lived in many countries, and still do, but our roots are in the ancient Near East, in the Fertile Crescent, somewhere in the ancient land of Mesopotamia.

It was there, millennia ago, that my great-great-great...grandfather Avram began our family's wandering when he was instructed by God:

לֶךְ-לָךְ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה:

Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)

As Jews, we share this family narrative, whether we were part of the original tribe or whether we joined Avram and Sarai's clan later in history. Genetic ancestry doesn't constitute a people; individuals do. When God summoned Avram to be a partner in this special covenant, God made this covenant with us as well. God promised:

וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (Genesis 12:2)

So Avram and Sarai, whose names God later changed to Avraham and Sarah, packed up their lives. They left their native land, they left their birthplace, they left their immediate families and their friends and all that was familiar in Mesopotamia and migrated to a foreign land. The Torah informs us that Avram and Sarai didn't stay long in Canaan. A famine there caused them to journey farther south, to Egypt. Eventually Avram and Sarai returned to the Promised Land, but they never settled in one place. They were sojourners, nomads, who schlepped from Shechem to Elon Moreh and from Beit Eil to Ai, from Be'er Sheva to Hebron and from Mamre to Gerar, from Sodom and Gemorah to Moriah and eventually to Kiryat Arba.

Like Avraham and Sarah, the Jewish people have wandered, sometimes by choice and sometimes unwillingly. This colorful drawing illustrates our dispersion to every continent. Scattered around the globe, we impacted society, as much as society impacted us as we struggled to make a life for ourselves or, too often, as we struggled merely to survive. Despite our perpetual unsettlement, Jews always have maintained a natural connection to one another. Most important, Jews worldwide always have maintained a natural connection to the people and the land of Israel.



This past Tuesday, the 7th of Cheshvan, Jews around the world observed a new holiday; it's only two years old. The holiday is *Yom T'futzot Yisrael*, Diaspora-Israel Day. Diaspora-Israel Day is an initiative of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism and the Israeli Government. It celebrates the diversity of Jewish life throughout the world and our mutual connection to Israel. Why was the 7th of Cheshvan chosen for this celebration? Aside from Shabbat, there are no Jewish holidays in Cheshvan, which is why Cheshvan often is referred to as Mar-Cheshvan, the bitter month. To make Cheshvan less bitter, it was decided to celebrate this special day in this month. But there's a more cogent reason, based on a passage in Mishna Tractate Ta'anit 1:3:

On the third day of the month of Mar-Cheshvan, prayers for the rain are to be said. According to Rabban Gamliel: The prayers begin on the seventh day of the month; namely, fifteen days after the Festival of Sukkot, so that the last Israelites may have reached the river Euphrates.

The Sages of the Mishnah set two different days for beginning to recite prayers for rain in the drought-prone Land of Israel. The “mentioning of rain” begins on Shemini Atzeret at the end of Sukkot. The “plea for rain” -- *mashiv haru'ach u'moreed ha-gashem* -- is said from the 7th day of Mar-Cheshvan. As the passage from Ta'anit explains, the purpose of this two-stage process was to ensure that the *olei regel*, the Jewish pilgrims from Babylon who went up to the Land of Israel for Sukkot, would be able to return home without getting drenched on their journey.

This ancient passage from the Mishnah is an example of the healthy, on-going dialogue between Jews living in the land of Israel and Jews living in the Diaspora. When we look at all our sacred texts, ancient and modern, we see that the discussions both acknowledge our differences and celebrate our peoplehood. And the common thread that weaves everything holistically together is Israel, the people and the land and the customs and the values and the morals and the historic covenant God made with Avraham.

The Jewish Diaspora cannot exist without Israel and Israel cannot exist without the Jewish Diaspora. We are partners with one another. We strengthen one another. We support one another. We enrich one another. Sometimes we quarrel with one another or disappoint one another, but we are mutually responsible for each other.

לְךָ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה:

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The place to which God instructed Avram to journey, what was it like? What did Avram see? What did he experience? We'll never know, but we know what Israel is today. We know that the promise God made to Avram at the beginning of his journey has come true. Israel is a great nation. Israel abounds in beauty. From the west and to the east, from to the north and to the south, Israel is unlike any other place on earth. How fortunate we are that Israel is our history. Israel is our inheritance. We have good reason to celebrate, not just on Diaspora Israel Day but every day. Israel is the heart and soul that connects the Jewish people worldwide. Israel is a blessing and through our connection to our ancient Jewish homeland, we are blessed.

The verses and photos below trace part of Avram and Sarai's journey in the Promised Land.

**Adonai said to Avram:
"Raise your eyes and
look out from where you
are, to the north and
south, to the east and
west, for I give all the
land that you see to you
and your offspring
forever.... Up, walk
about the land, through
its length and its
breadth, for I give it to
YOU." Genesis 13:14-17**





**From Egypt,
Avram went
up into the
Negev, with
his wife and
all that he
possessed...**
Genesis 13:1

**Avraham
looked up
and saw
the place
from afar.**
Genesis 22:4



Israel is
 "...a land of wheat
 and barley, and vines
 and fig trees and
 pomegranates; a land
 of olive trees and
 honey..."

Deuteronomy 8:8



We invite you to join us on our journey to the Land of Israel!

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on an adventure to
ISRAEL
Led by Rabbis Rick & Susan Rheins
 February 24 - March 6, 2019



On our adventure together we will...

- ▶ Explore the many faces that make up multicultural Israel
- ▶ Enrich our knowledge of Jewish and ancient history
- ▶ Enjoy outdoor adventures and the beauty of the land itself
- ▶ Encounter firsthand the modern miracle of the State of Israel
- ▶ Tour Tel Aviv with visits to Independence Hall & Old Jaffa
- ▶ Plant trees at Neot Kedumim, connecting us physically and spiritually to the land of Israel
- ▶ Discover the neighborhoods of Jerusalem's Old City and tour the amazing Western Wall tunnels below
- ▶ Taste the fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, olives and delicious halva creations at the bustling Machane Yehuda market
- ▶ Visit Qumran National Park, ascend Masada and float in the healing waters of the Dead Sea
- ▶ Set out on a jeep tour into the Ramon Crater and visit the Israeli Air Force Museum in the Negev

...and so much more!






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