

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rheins
Shabbat Lekh Lekha 5781

Going Forward By Discovering the Past

If you do not recognize the name Mike Nichols, you probably will recognize some of his greatest works. Nichols, who died in 2014, made a profound impact on American culture. As a comedian, he won Grammys with his partner Elaine May. As a Broadway director, he guided such Tony award winning hits as Neil Simon's Barefoot in the Park and The Odd Couple. In film, among the hits he directed are Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf, The Graduate, Carnal Knowledge, The Birdcage, and Charlie Wilson's War. He is one of the few people to have won Academy, Emmy, Grammy and Tony awards.

Born in Berlin in 1931 as Mikhail Igor Peschkowsky, his father changed the family name when they escaped the Nazis and began a new life in the United States in 1939. The new family name, Nichols, still retained a connection to the original patronymic, "Nikolaevich." A new biography on Mike Nichols reveals a fascinating and complex man who rediscovered the significance of his Jewish heritage late in life. He was interviewed by Henry Louis Gates Jr for the excellent PBS series Finding Your Roots. Typical of the series, what Nichols discovered about his past profoundly moved him.

He learned about his family's history in Europe, both their suffering under antisemitic persecution and their successes. The more he learned about his family's Jewish history and heritage, the more he was drawn to celebrate his faith going forward. He admitted, "I pushed it so far away, and once I discovered this, I had a very hard time for a long time." But it wasn't too late. What he discovered about the past helped him move forward in the final chapters of his life.

As Simon Callow shares in his terrific review of the Nichols biography, Mike chose the following quotation from Gustav Landauer, his maternal grandfather, for his epigraph:

"Our complete ancestry is within us. The individual is a result of a long chain of ancestors who are still present within us and exert power over us. Men must go inside themselves, to be connected with what they originally are" ([The New York Review of Books, Sept. 24, 2020](#)).

This vignette about Mike Nichols keeps coming back to me as we read the opening verses of this week's Torah portion, *Lekh Lekha* (Genesis 12:1-17:27). It opens with Avram and Sarai who are called to move forward toward their destiny. Eventually they adopt the new names Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah. The Torah begins with this extraordinary charge:

Genesis 12:1 Adonai said to Avram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you and curse those that curse you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

Avram is instructed to go forth - - - not to a specific destiny. Rather, *to the land I will show you*, אֶלְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה, an unidentified place that will become apparent only in the future.

Our future, our destinies are always undefined. And yet, we go forward. At times we can feel lost, or as Dylan put it, "with no direction known, a complete unknown, like rolling stone." But we need only to look inward and to the past to learn about our Jewish family's remarkable journey. By discovering life affirming and challenging truths about who we are and how we came to be, that the road ahead comes into focus.

These COVID days of isolation and separation may distract and obscure our visions. But as God said to Avram and Sarai, לֵךְ לֶכְחָ לֶכְחָ *Lekh Lekha, Go! Go forth! Go to yourself!* (*Lekha* means "to you"). Now is the time for us to rediscover the inspiring story of our Jewish roots, faith and heritage. Take the time to ask elders and relatives about your Jewish story. Read books on Jewish history. Join us for a Zoom session as we study the Torah

portion of the week on Tuesdays (at noon) and/or Lunch and Learn on Thursdays (at noon). As we learn about our past our next chapters come into clearer focus. God-willing, together we will go forth with blessings.

After the *Erev Shabbat* service this Friday, please join us for a special Zoom session as we express tributes farewell blessings to Greg and Ali Kellner. Greg's courage and wisdom has blessed us during his tenure as our Executive Director. He overcame the most daunting of health challenges to bring calm leadership and a nurturing heart. As he and Ali head back East to be closer to family, we will sing for them a blessing from this week's Torah portion that Debbie Friedman and Savina Teuba wrote:

Lekhi lakh to a land that I will show you
Lekh li-kha to a place you do not know
Lechi lach on your journey I will bless you
And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing
You shall be a blessing lekhi lakh

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins