

Parashat Lech Lecha : Abraham's Journey.

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth (Lech Lecha) from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. 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.'

This is the story. God appears to Avraham instructing him to leave his home, his father, his entire community. He is to take his close family and possessions and travel to an unknown place: "to the land that I will show you". It seems a strange first command; it seems to lead somewhere but then it stops. We don't know why Avraham travels! He gets there and then what? What is the possible meaning of this journey? Why is this God's first command to Avraham?

1. TEN TESTS

In the eyes of Chazal, Avraham's life is perceived as a series of tests :

"Avraham was tested with ten trials and he withstood them all. This demonstrates the extent of Avraham's love (for God)." (Avot 5:4)

Avraham is put to the test ten times in his life. This then is the first of these trials. But in what way is this journey a test? What is it coming to measure or examine?

THE DIFFICULTY OF LEAVING

God's command is worded in a rather strange manner. God specifies that he must go: "From your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house". RAMBAN comments on the ordering of this verse. It seems wrong. When one is departing from one's home, first one leaves home itself, then one's birthplace and later, at the border crossing, one leaves one's country. Why is the order reversed in our text?

The Ramban explains that verse is written in this way to stress the difficulty and pain of leaving one's home. The order is not ordered geographically. Rather, it is an ascending scale of heart wrenching departure :

" Because it is difficult for a person to leave the country in which one has lived, one's social group, the familiar environment. But it is even harder to leave the place where one was born. The hardest thing is to leave parents"

Indeed, leaving is a painful process. Anyone who has made Aliya and left family and familiar surroundings behind knows that there is some pain, some hardship involved - And this is with telephones, Email and cheap international travel. Avraham leaves an ageing father and his entire life behind him in Charan. He will never return. And he himself is not so young. He embarks upon this endeavour at the age of 75! And for what?

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT.

You might point us to the generous promises that God has made. Who would not want influence, power, land, a great nation? But as we shall show, it might be that these promises ring somewhat hollow from Avraham's vantage point.

Let us look at the promises realistically. First, Avraham is promised a multitudinous offspring; that he will become a "nation". Let's be

somewhat practical. Sarah is 65. We have already been informed that "Sarai was barren, she had no child" (11:20). The Torah text feels need to state it twice! "Sarai was barren" – we understand that. But if it wasn't clear, the impossibility of children is driven home with the phrase: "she had no child." It is almost a cruel joke! Avraham and Sarah are 75 and 65 years old respectively and God begins to make promises that "To your offspring I will give this land". What offspring?

Even Avraham and Sarah have difficulty seeing the prospect of parenthood as a realistic option. Later on, we see how Sarah herself cannot quite believe that she will truly bear children. She laughs at the prospect of her elderly body pulsing with new life : "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment?" (18:12). So this promise might well have sounded a little exaggerated to the ears of Avraham. Indeed Avraham and Sarah did not have a child for another 25 years! It is not as if he could have found the fulfillment of his journey in his offspring.

Then there is the promise of the land. At the moment in which Avraham is promised the land, the Torah text immediately stresses the improbability of the materialization of this promise. The verse specifically tells us that the land is otherwise occupied : "And the Canaanites in the land". So, now, for the promise of the land, we should also ask; how might this promise be fulfilled?

To add insult to injury, Rashi reminds us that "Continual travel: lowers the chances of having children, drains one's financial resources and means that one will not be well known". Travel makes one poor, childless and anonymous. What is Avraham to think when God tells him: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing"?

All the common sense in the world would have persuaded Avraham not to embark on this journey but remarkably Avraham follows God devotedly. Why would Avraham do it? It is so painful! The promises seem fantastic and simply fictional! So why? Our answer points to the sole motivating factor. Avraham has no ulterior motive. The truth is that there is only one good reason to go, and that is, because God told him to. He was commanded to go. However absurd, however strange, Avraham is the loyal servant of God. Avraham demonstrates his trust, his faith, his love for God. He believes in Him even when events seem to indicate the opposite of what God has told him. He will follow God even when he has no idea where he is headed.

Tradition expresses this idea in the language of the 'test' or 'trial'. Avraham is given a command which tests his logic, his loyalty and commitment. It demands upheaval, trust and immense effort. Avraham passes with flying colours.

2. SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION.

But this is not the only way that we can view a test. Do we have to conceive of this journey as an absurd illogical trial? God does not put people on test without a higher purpose. A more positive view of the testing of Avraham would say this: A test strains the person who is tested, but a test also lets one grow through the challenge which one overcomes. Avraham is given tests but they are not simply to make his life difficult. They are not merely a test of obedience and dedication. The trials that Avraham faces are designed to refine and hone Avraham's personality. They develop and advance his religious passion, his commitment to God, his generosity, his ethical sensitivity.

Bible Scholars throughout the ages have grappled with the strange language of the command issued here to Avraham. "Lech Lecha" translated literally means, "Go for yourself". RASHI comments :

" Lech Lecha - Go for yourself : for your benefit and for your good ...there will I make you into a nation, here you cannot have any children."

This journey is not simply hardship. It is there to provide benefit and good for Avraham. A comment by Rabbi Simcha Hachohen of Dvinsk in his commentary the MESHECH CHOCHMA is most enlightening.

"To the land which I will show you: We might suggest that Avraham was commanded to go to the place earmarked for divine service... there he was to publicise the idea of God and sanctify His name... and demonstrate the potential which lay latent in his heart and his commitment to God. This is the meaning of the phrase "which I will show you". It means that God will exhibit publicly that which hitherto lay hidden in Avraham's heart.... thus

Avraham will be 'shown' to himself and will become visible to others."

The Meshech Chochma reads the first verse of our parsha in the following way

"Go forth from your land....to the place where I will show YOU to yourself".

According to this understanding, this journey is not simply a geographical relocation, it is a personal transformation. In the promised land Avraham will find himself. He will realise his true potential. This will not be to Avraham's benefit alone. God will also 'show' him to the world, indicating to others the dedication to God that is a possibility for all individuals.

Indeed, on his arrival in the land of Israel, Avraham builds an altar to God and "calls in the name of the Lord" (12:8). He moves around the country repeating this practice, spreading the word of ethical monotheism until he is famous as a man of faith. He is recognised by fellow monotheists (14:18,19) and local dignitaries refer to him as "the elect of God amongst us" (23:6). He has made a name for God and for himself. His travels are not simple self affliction. Rather he travels with a mission. Avraham travels and spreads the concept of ethical monotheism, God's word.

LIFELONG JOURNEY

The Sefat Emet (5656) develops this line of thought a little further :

" Lech Lecha - Go forth : Man is defined by his walking, and indeed man must always move up, level by level. One must always aim to extract oneself from habit, from the state of the normal. Even if one has reached a certain standard of Avodat Hashem (religious intensity and practise), that too becomes second nature after a time and becomes the norm. Therefore at all times one must renew one's soul and one's religious direction.

Avraham was tested with ten trials and EACH TEST RE-CREATED HIM AS A NEW BEING until he did not know the meaning of a complacent state of normalcy."

According to the Sefat Emet, "Lech Lecha" is a metaphor. The journey spoken of here is a physical one, but it has a correlation in many other spheres. The "Journey" is a symbol of movement and development. Avraham and Sarah are to develop, to move. And this movement is to be a lifelong journey. It will not come to a close when they reach the border of Eretz Canaan.

Lech Lecha then, is the beginning of a journey in many senses. It is a geographical journey to a holy land. It is a spiritual quest of searching for and finding God but it is also a personal journey , a transformation, of changing oneself. In this Parsha, Avraham and Sarah are always changing. They alter their country, they also change their names. In this journey Abram becomes Avraham (17:5), Sarai becomes Sarah (17:15). The Parsha even ends with a transformation of the physical body; Avraham performs Brit Mila and Sarah begins a life of motherhood. They are new people, a new identity, a fresh spiritual reality opens up to them at every step.

Their geographical journey continues long after their arrival in Israel. Avraham continues to wander. He moves; Shechem , Bet El, Egypt, Bet El, Hebron. And likewise Avraham experiences a concomitant spiritual odyssey. He continues to develop, to grow, to realise his potential. Lech Lecha is a command to keep moving, keep growing, keep "journeying" on the "life journey".

Rashi (above) tells us that only in Israel can Avraham and Sarah have children. In another comment later in the parsha, he links this renewed ability to have children not to the land but to their new identities. "Abram will not have a child but Avraham will. Sarai will not give birth but Sarah will" (15:5). Their new identities, formed by their transformation, bring new vistas of opportunity. Avraham and Sarah travel a journey of self-development and growth. Before "the journey" they were barren. Now, they are renewed. They have changed. They can bear child.

Maybe that is why according to tradition, the ten tests get progressively more challenging. The final test is the greatest of all; the Akeda. Lech Lecha, then, represents the idea of the test at its most creative. It is commencement of a lifelong journey.

3. GALUT: WANDERINGS OF EXILE.

Some thinkers have pointed not to the journey but rather to the fact that Avraham leaves his home and remains homeless, wandering. He never buys land to live on. He never settles down. Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits (modern Jewish Philosopher 1908-1992) sees Avraham as a archetype of the Jew in exile:

"Usually, exile is understood as a sequence, an abnormal phase following upon a normal one. Galut, the specifically Jewish form of exile, is rather different: it does not follow; it is at the beginning.

Jewish History begins with God's words to Avraham: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father's house to the land that I will show thee. The history of Judaism commences with Galut. If exile is at the very start then there must be something in the nature of Judaism, in God's plan for the Jewish people, which is inseparable from it. Avraham, in order to become the patriarch of Israel, had to leave his father's house and the land of his birth. He embraced his destiny in a world which was alien to him, to his faith, to his values, to his truth. He went into exile, because in the world as it existed then, Avraham could not find a home. He had the choice: either to be true to himself and become a wanderer, or to become one with his surroundings and remain at home. He chose himself, his personal destiny; but in order to do that he had to go into exile.

... What is the significance of Galut as a starting point? One might generalize and say : There are certain ideals that are not easily absorbed by the order of the world; there are certain values that are repulsed by the laws of power history; ideas and values that are strangers among man and are of tragic necessity forced into exile. Such a stranger in history is the idea represented by the Jewish people in the history of mankind..As Avraham did not fit into the local world of his birthplace , so do his children not fit into the universal world of the nations to the extent that it is dominated by materialistic self interest and ambitions of power."

(Faith after the Holocaust. pg 122-123)

Avraham cannot grow spiritually while he remains in a power seeking, hedonistic class-society of idolaters. He must move. And if he can never find a place to fit in, he will continue to be on the move, endlessly. Better to remain true to one's values and sacrifice comfort than to allow oneself to settle down and thereby lose one's conscience.

SUMMARY

We have seen three different explanations of this journey. The first sees this journey as a test of obedience, a trial for Avraham's faith in God. The second explanation sees this journey as a metaphor for a spiritual quest. A spiritual development accompanies the physical journey. Our third interpretation sees the focus on Avraham's independence of spirit and morality. Settling somewhere indicates a certain acquiescence to the local value system. In a world of immorality, Avraham can settle nowhere. In reality, these are three complimentary perspectives of this important voyage.

Each explanation can be seen to stress a different phrase in the first passuk of our parsha. The first explanation focuses on the "from your land, your birthplace, from your father's house". The second explanation emphasises "to the land where I will show you to yourself" and the third interpretation wants to stress the words of the command "Lech - Get out".

The Children of Israel are seen to be living in the same pattern as their patriarchs. We have their DNA and we seem to follow their path. We also traveled a journey to the promised land, following God on a hard and demanding journey. We still wander around the globe, not precisely fitting in anywhere, somewhere along a path towards the Promised Land. May the word of God give us direction, and help us to continually create ourselves anew.

Shabbat Shalom.