

A HOUSE OR A HOME?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Lech-Lecha Me'Artzecha: Go, get out of your land, from your birthplace, and the house of your fathers, to the land which I will show you." [12:1]

If we look back at the end of the previous Parsha, we see that Avram's father Terach **also** left for Canaan: "And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Avram his son, and he went out with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to Charan and they settled there. And Terach lived for 205 years, and Terach died in Charan." [11:31-32]

Clearly Terach, like Avram, recognized a need to separate himself, to dedicate himself to G-d in some way. But unlike Avram, he did not complete the task. He left Ur Kasdim, the land where they were surrounded by idol worship, but never reached the Holy Land which the Jewish people were destined to inherit. Terach, father of Avraham, never became the father of the Jewish people.

Several weeks ago, one of our teachers issued his regular weekly class, in which he discussed the need for love between Jews and the breaking down of barriers. He told a story from his sister's childhood which showed how even language barriers must be overcome - and for background, he referred to his home community, a current "haven" of Jewish life, as having been a "spiritual wasteland" at the time.

One of our readers, a great friend of Project Genesis, took serious offense. Having himself lived in that community, he referred to it as a vibrant one - with literally tens of thousands of Jews.

Who was right?

As our parsha tells us, it takes more than Jews to build a Jewish community. Avram only became Avraham, father of the Jewish people, when he demonstrated his willingness to follow G-d, reached Canaan, and set out to build a new nation.

The Rabbi did not say there were no **Jews**; he questioned whether there was **Judaism**. And in his own defense, he offered the following observations:

- There was not one Talmud shiur.
- There was only one supervised bakery. No supervised eatery.

- No Shabbos groups for kids.
- No Torah study groups.
- No Torah oriented Summer Day Camps.
- No Jewish Book Libraries.
- No Jewish Tape Libraries.
- People did not know what a Sukkah was.
- There were Yom Kippur gala dances rather than self-improvement lectures.

Can it be? Unfortunately, we have seen this in many Jewish communities in this country. Did American Jews build Jewish life, or did they merely find places for Jews to settle together - for a generation or so, until the Jews became completely assimilated into American society?

Is a "Yom Kippur dance" representative of "vibrant Jewish life," or "Judaism dying a slow death?" Thanks to the Council of Jewish Federations, we have statistics about American Jewish communities, and they are shattering to anyone who cares about a Jewish future.

Today, Jewish education keeps the Jewish people alive. We know that from Torah, Talmud, and (l'havdil) the CJF statistics. The Talmud says that every House of Torah Study is like a piece of Israel. Even a single person who studies Torah brings the Divine Presence near. No matter where we are, we have the capacity to turn our little daled amos, our "personal space," into a little piece of Israel. Even our little corner of CyberSpace (I couldn't resist). And if you can actually go to Israel, all the better!

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