

GOING FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

R. Levi said, "Twice the Torah uses the phrase 'lech-lecha.' We do not [immediately] know which one is more cherished by Hashem - the second or the first. From that which is stated 'el eretz haMoriah,' we can discern that the second is more precious." (Bereishis Rabbah 39:9)

R. Levi here compares two great tests of Avraham Aveinu - leaving his paternal homeland at the beginning of our Parshah, and traveling to the Akeidah in next week's Parshah - both of which incorporate the phrase "lech-lecha," meaning "go," or more literally "go for yourself." The comparison is incomprehensible and astounding. The mind can simply not fathom the difficulty of the test of the Akeidah, more difficult in fact than giving up one's own life. The difficulty is highlighted by the teaching of the seforim hakedoshim that when HKBH called upon Avraham to take "your son, your only son, the one you love," Avraham was seized with a love for Yitzchok that encompassed all the love that is available on earth. How can there be any doubt as to which nisayon was more precious to Hashem?

Yesod Ha-Avodah cites the Ari as stating that no two people who ever lived had quite the same purpose and task. No person can ever accomplish what a second person was meant to contribute to the perfection of the universe, which was the purpose of his descent to this world. Each person is placed in precisely the circumstances he needs to fulfill that mission. This goal determines all the conditions of his life, both physical and spiritual, the happy ones and the unhappy ones. Because no two missions are the same, the life conditions of all people vary as well. It is never appropriate to compare the patterns and trajectories of different lives. Everything - even the hard times - suit the individual mission and task of each person, and is in his best interest.

This is true all the more in regard to the spiritual parameters of one's life, like the nature and tendencies of a person's soul and spirit. Some are born with laudatory midos and leanings, while others suffer from evil tendencies and traits. These differences as well are meant to assist a person in completing his assigned task.

The same holds for all the nisyonos, all the tests that are put in our paths. In some case, these trials and tribulations are so difficult that people even complain about the way Divine Providence directs them. In truth, however, all these tests are "for you good, for your benefit."

This is also the key to understanding the opening of the Parshah: "Go from your land and your birthplace and your father's house." Go - towards your individual promise, towards the betterment of

your soul. Hashem's directive to Avraham repeats itself to every Jew. We are all instructed to distance ourselves from our land, our birthplace, our father's house, in the sense that we must overcome the conditions that we are challenged with individually. Some of these conditions stem from the land, the culture we were born into. Each land has its negative traits and dispositions. Predispositions towards murder or theft may be shared by many of the inhabitants; we are bidden to overcome them. Some characteristics are passed along to us by our birthplaces, meaning that we inherit them from our family groups. Others are vouchsafed to us by the houses of our fathers. The manner in which our parents conduct themselves in the realm of the Holy profoundly affects their children. The command "lech lecha" - go for your own good - instructs us all. If we are to achieve our individual goals, we must escape the limitations of the varied conditions with which we begin our journey.

We are now ready to understand the question posed by R. Levi. We face two very different kinds of nisayon. One kind places us in constant, protracted battle against forces imposed by our inner natures and outer conditions. This is the nisayon of the lech lecha of our Parshah. Another kind is far more difficult - but it presents itself only once, and disappears. The epitome of such a nisayon is the Akeidah, the most difficult of all nisyonos. It includes incidents in which a yetzer hora wells up explosively in a person's consciousness.

Which of the two is appreciated more by HKBH? Is it the ongoing struggle of the long-term battle? Chazal assert that the heroic Chananya, Misha'el and Azarya who offered their lives for Kiddush Hashem would not have withstood the torture of a prolonged beating. They would have capitulated, and bowed to the icon. The constant struggle against one's own nature is certainly part and parcel of this "beating."

Alternatively, is it the special and unusual test that presents itself rarely - but then can ask for complete sacrifice, holding back absolutely nothing at all?

The common denominator of both, however, is that they are both forms of "lech lecha," of a going for one's own good. The choice of verb - to go - is completely deliberate. A Jew must always be going, always on the move, walking the next mile towards his personal destination. At no time in one's life does one escape the need to go, to advance. Thus, we find the verb used three times in regard to Avraham. He is told "lech lecha" before he ever arrived in Israel; at age ninety-nine he is urged "hishalech lifanai" walk, go before me and become perfect; in his later years, he is told once more "lech lecha," this time to the Akeidah.

In our service of Hashem, there is no standing still. We must always be on the move, always going. Unlike the pursuit of material goals, in ruchniyus there is no spinning our wheels. Stasis is synonymous with decline. We must always move forward, whether in the opening chapters of our life's struggle, or in the later search for perfection, or in the once-in-a-lifetime challenges of our own Har Moriah. There are no times in life in which we become free of this process.

The same holds within each and every day of our lives. We must move and advance, whether in the performance of the active mitzvos, or in the growth and maturation of the mitzvos of the inner self, such as loving Hashem, or fearing Him. This is the message of Avraham's life transmitted to us - a life in which every phase is linked to going, moving, advancing, making progress towards the fulfillment of our individual missions that are the reasons for our existence.

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