

THE BEGINNING & END OF THE JOURNEY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d said to Avraham, Go (lech-lecha) from your land ... (Bereishis 12:1)

It is an interesting comparison. Here, in this week's parshah, G-d sends Avraham to Eretz Yisroel (2018), and He does so with the command, "Lech-Lecha." However, when the spies "volunteered" to advance-visit Eretz Yisroel 430 years later (2448), they were sent with the words, "Shlach-lecha" ("send").

The results of each are dramatically different. In Avraham's case, his journey ended in Eretz Yisroel, and possession of the land. In the case of the spies, almost half a millennium later, their journey ended in the desert, and the loss of their portion in the land. Aside from the obvious difference in outcomes, what, if any difference, is there between the two commands?

One difference is obvious. The first (lech-lecha) was said to Avraham regarding Avraham, and the latter (shlach-lecha), was said to Moshe regarding the spies he was to send out; it was not a command for Moshe himself to go anywhere.

However, on a deeper level, when taken literally, the first phrase means, "go to yourself," whereas the second means, "send to yourself," which sounds more distant, more removed. The former implies that one is personally ready to take the next step in the journey toward self-fulfillment ("... to yourself"), whereas the latter implies that one is not yet ready, but must instead "extend" himself to go that next step, an inherently dangerous move.

Thus, in phrasing the command as G-d did, He implied that the spies were not ready to experience Eretz Yisroel--a warning that went unheeded with disastrous effects. It's as if the spies were saying to G-d, "We're ready for this ..." to which G-d answered, "No you're not. Beware ..."

On the other hand, "lech-lecha" was encouragement from G-d to Avraham, who might have been concerned about the risk of so perilous a physical and spiritual journey. "Am I ready for this?" Avraham might have asked himself. "Yes," G-d answered him, "And, it will be good for you."

The Jew who is committed to spiritual growth and closeness to G-d walks a "tightrope" between "lech-lecha" and "shlach-lecha." However, there is a general rule: You do not put yourself into a test.

As well as we might feel we know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, the truth is, we often err in this area. Only G-d knows exactly what we can achieve, and where we will fail for sure, and custom-designs each individual person's test for him to match his ability to succeed.

In other words, G-d never, ever puts a person through a test he can't pass, if that test is a "natural" stage of the person's spiritual growth. However, if a person decides to spiritually extend himself, but not in a capacity that is warranted by his present spiritual level, then it can backfire on him, and even bring the person to a lower spiritual plane than from which he began.

In other words, we don't take spiritual risks. This is not to be confused with trust and faith in G-d, which, of course, we must have. The difference is for what you are trusting in G-d. To find one's self in a position where, after one's best effort, he is still short what he needs to survive a situation, then one must trust in G-d to make up the difference. Doing so is called "mesiros nefesh": self-sacrifice for G-d and Torah.

However, to put one's self into a spiritually dangerous situation, that, when it comes right down to it, wasn't necessary to do so, and then rely on G-d to make it work out is a mistake--a tragic mistake. Many great people have learned over this over history, going right back to Adam HaRishon himself.

Hence, in the end, it is really for us to take spiritual journeys to greater heights when we can honestly say it is an issue of "lech-lecha"--the next logical level of growth, even if some risk is involved. But, to go on a "shlach-lecha" kind of mission--premature spiritual exposure--is asking for trouble--trouble that, quite often, is irreversible.

Shabbos Day:

G-d said to Avraham, Go (lech-lecha) from your land ... (Bereishis 12:1)

When The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Avraham, "Go from your land ... I will make you a great nation ..." he said to G-d, "What pleasure is there for me in these blessings, when I go childless?" The Holy One, Blessed is He, answered him, "You already know that you will have no children?" "Master of the Universe," he said, "I see in my 'mazel' that I will not father children." "You fear the stars? By your life! Just as it is impossible for man to count the stars, so will it be impossible for your children to be counted!" (Bamidbar Rabbah 2:12)

This Midrash is interesting, since, according to the Torah, Avraham does not complain about this until much later in the parshah when it says:

After these events occurred (the war with the five kings), the word of G-d came to Avram in a vision, saying, "Don't be afraid Avram, I am your shield; your reward is very great." Avram said, "My Lord, G-d, what will You give to me? I go childless, and the custodian of my household is Eliezer! You have not

given me children, and a member of my household instead is my heir!" (Bereishis 1:3)

One could answer and say that Avraham was simply saying,

"You promised me all kinds of blessings before, and You PREVIOUSLY mentioned that I would have children as well. Now You are making me more promises, but, in the meantime, I still go childless. When will You fulfill your plans to give me a flesh-and-blood heir?"

However, such an answer only serves to make the question stronger. For, it would have been unlike Avraham to assume that G-d would not come through with His promise of children, or for Him to grow impatient with G-d while waiting for children. Is this midrash, then, simply a contradiction of the Torah, or is there a difference in the requests?

Perhaps, the answer comes from being exact in the wording of the Torah and the Midrash. In the Midrash, Avraham complains that it will be hard for him to ENJOY the blessings that G-d was promising him if he were to be denied the biggest blessing of all: children. It would be like receiving desert without having the main course (which children don't mind doing, but us adults like a healthy meal first!).

However, later, after Avraham came to understand that the point of blessings was not simply to enrich his physical life, but, to provide him with the spiritual "vessels" to advance the spiritual cause of mankind, children came to mean something else to him. It was as if he was saying:

"What good will all my spiritual accomplishments be if the only one to inherit them is Eliezer, my trusted servant, but a Canaanite just the same? Can he take what I have struggled to accomplish, and foster its growth, and pass it on to the next generation spiritually intact? Only one born from me can be a fitting "vessel" to receive the light I have drawn down, and You have allowed to be drawn down ..."

This, in the end, is what IT is all about. We tend to look at our lives as our own, in the sense that what happens in our small area of influence has little to do with the rest of creation, and all of history. As one person put it, "I didn't ask to be born, but now that I'm here, I'm going to make a point of enjoying myself! The rest of the world doesn't need me, and can take care of itself without me."

Fine. But then such a person loses out on being a WILLING link in the chain, that is, a spiritual vessel from which to pour the light of G-d into the next generation, for which we are rewarded in the World-to-Come. That's not just your child/student over there--that's the next link in the chain, and your chance to fulfill your reason for being created.

This is also part of why Noach was saved, for, he understood this concept. Hence, it was also part of the reason why he found "chayn" in the eyes of G-d, and was saved from the Flood. Don't read "chayn," but "chain," for there is no greater tzaddik than one who assures that the chain of Torah transmission remains unbroken and secure.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

We'd like to believe that the world is perfect, as if everything would be 100% fine if man didn't interfere. Well, the truth is, the world IS perfect--perfectly IMPERFECT, and nothing symbolizes that reality, and our expected response to it, than Bris Milah.

The average baby boy is born relatively physically complete, except for, according to Torah, the foreskin (orlah). On the eighth day from birth, if the baby is healthy enough, we ritually remove the "extra" skin, and the father of the child says:

"Blessed are You, G-d, our G-d, King of the world, Who has sanctified us through His commandments, and Who has commanded us to enter him into the Covenant of Avraham Avinu."

Is the "Covenant of Avraham Avinu" only the act of self-sacrifice, or rather, the sacrifice of one's own baby to undergo surgery right after birth? After all, what choice does he have in the matter? That is what a growing number of so-called "concerned" individuals--non-Jewish AND Jewish--are asking, and even demanding. In fact, they are presently employing every legal avenue they can to force legislation in the United States to make it illegal to perform "circumcision" on a child before the age of 18 years. They say they are doing a community service.

They call circumcision, "elective surgery," deeming it unnecessary from a health standpoint; some even call the religious aspect of it "barbarous"! "If an 18-year old boy chooses to be circumcized," they argue, "well, that's his own personal choice, which is protected by the American Constitution. However, that same constitution," they maintain, "should also protect that child against such a barbarous act until the age of 18."

They think they are only attacking a minor surgical procedure, for the betterment of mankind. They don't realize that they are attacking the very reason mankind is allowed to live on this planet, and why this planet is allowed to exist in this universe.

For, to forbid circumcision is to capitulate to the belief that the world is perfect enough as it is, and that should man do nothing spiritually at all to make it a better place, everything will still be just fine. It is the Greek point of view all over again, that promotes the idea that nature is beautiful as is, and if "Mother Nature" saw fit to have baby boys born with a little extra skin, then who are we to argue?

However, it is not "we" who argue. It is we who argue on behalf of the Torah in this week's parshah, and on behalf of the purpose of creation. If we don't remove the "orlah" from creation, then guess Who will? And, when HE does it, it is not a pleasant passage of history to live through. Bris Milah is a reminder: Either we perfect ourselves and the world around us, or G-d will do the perfecting Himself in the form of "tziruf v'libun"--"refinement" and "whitening."

It is interesting to note that, our present period of one-thousand years corresponds to the sefirah

called "Yesod," which means "Foundation," but also alludes to the entire process of Bris Milah. As history winds down, one would expect, according to Kabbalah, that some of the biggest challenges and tests for the Jewish people would have to do with the issue of Bris Milah, and the holy concepts associated with it, like faithfulness in marriage and modesty, for example.

Now, with the help of those who are dead-set against the whole procedure, it is a prophecy in the midst of fulfillment--and another sign along the road that Moshiach is not too far away, b"H.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Because this is a weekly Parashas HaShavuah sheet, I have decided to change the format of the Melave Malkah session. Instead of highlighting a few verses each time from a specific tehillah, I am going to present the overall theme of the entire tehillah each week, to cover more conceptual ground faster. In some cases (as in this week's case), I may jump to one that directly relates to the parshah itself.

For the conductor; on the Sheminis. A song of David. (12)

The "Sheminis" was an eight-stringed (hence, "sheminis," which means "eighth") instrument played in the Bais Hamikdash as accompaniment to the tehillim recited there. Since the number "eight" symbolizes the supernatural, the Sheminis was considered to be an instrument for the time of Moshiach as well, and reminiscent of the concepts associated with Bris Milah.

Hence, the Talmud writes:

The rabbis taught: Israel is dear, for, The Holy One, Blessed is He, surrounded them with mitzvos: Tefillin on their heads and on their arms, tzitzis on their clothing, and mezuzos on their openings. Regarding them, Dovid said: Seven times a day I have praised You for Your righteous ordinances. (Tehillim 119:164). However, when he went to the bath house and realized he was unclothed, he said, "Woe to me who stands here without any mitzvos!" When he remembered Bris Milah, he felt better, and after he left, he sang, "For the conductor; on the Sheminis. A song of David." (Menachos 43b)

If you think about this for a moment, it is very true. The only mitzvah one can't "remove" (at least, not without surgery), is Bris Milah. Every other mitzvah we perform we do so either with our bodies, or around our bodies. Any mitzvah that we might fulfill through our bodies (e.g., mikvah), its effect is not nearly as direct to the physical body, or as permanent as is Bris Milah.

This is symbolic of an expression I heard years ago: All the waters in the world can't "baptize" a Jew. The origin of this statement may be unknown, but its intention is quite clear: a Jew can say to himself, "I don't want to be religious anymore ... I don't even want to be Jewish anymore!" and take whatever steps he may to turn his back on his Jewish heritage, G-d forbid. That's a free-will choice. However, nevertheless, in the end, it won't work. A bris is a bris--a covenant is a covenant: once

you're in, you're in forever.

Even a non-Jew who converts according to halachah cannot turn back. He or she is a Jew through-and-through. And, even though Dovid HaMelech was actually in a physical bath house when he came to this joyous revelation, it is one that must occur to every Jew, including, no, especially all those who stand spiritually "unclothed," that is, void of mitzvos.

"All the waters in the world" ... All the false ideologies and superficial lifestyles in the world can try to "drown" the Jew and strip him or her of any connection to his or her Jewish heritage, but it won't work. There is a "bris" between all of us and G-d, an joyous, eternal bris, a spiritual shield against all outside and temporal realities. The sooner the Jew realizes this and lives up to its challenge, the sooner one can sing its praises--in This World, and the Next. For the Jew, the "Bris of Avraham Avinu" is both the starting point and ending point of the journey to perfection, and oneness with G-d.

Have a Great Shabbos and "Lech-Lecha,"
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