

INSIDE LECH-LECHA

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And God said to Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1)

A BIG DEAL becomes less so each time you do it. You know, "familiarity breeds contempt," or at least desensitization. I guess even making a million dollars is no big deal if you've done it a hundred times already. "Just throw it on the top!"

For the 3,332nd time since the giving of Torah at last Avraham has lech-lecha'ed. He's packed up his family thousands of times before, and moved them from Mesopotamia to Canaan. And no we're watching him do it ALL over again because we have an obligation to read each word of the Torah each year.

Too bad, too. It's no longer a big deal because it stopped being a big deal. It's in the Torah because God decided that it is an ETERNAL big deal, and it is our responsibility to keep it that way. Our OWN eternity depends on it.

One way to do that is take the event apart and identify the components that make it special. What ARE those components of "Lech Lecha"?

We don't have to look too far, because Rashi immediately points out which risks Avraham took in following God.

And God said to Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing." (Bereishis 12:1-2)

And I will make you into a great nation. Since traveling causes three things—it diminishes procreation, it diminishes money, and it diminishes fame—he therefore required these three blessings, namely that He blessed him concerning children, concerning money, and concerning fame. (Rashi)

We can understand why procreation would be a concern of Avraham's. First of all, it is an important mitzvah, and, secondly, it is important for him to allow what he began to continue past his own life. No one would be better than his own children to further his spiritual legacy.

But money and fame? Really?

Judaism can be a funny thing sometimes. Sometimes one mitzvah can force a person to do something in a way that seems contrary to another mitzvah. For example, just wanting to be rich is not a Jewish value. Yet it is the people with a lot of money who give the most tzedakah. It is important to have children, but "too many" can be the downfall of a family.

Likewise, it is important to strive for spiritual perfection, but doing so can make people overly critical of others. Fame is not for Torah Jews, yet it is the most famous ones who often are responsible for the biggest sanctification of God's Name. If there are a lot of extremists in Judaism, it is because Judaism CAN and WILL promote extremism.

Striking a balance is the work of a chacham. We like to make choices as few times as possible, and then let life take care of itself. But it doesn't. No two situations are ever exactly the same, as similar as they may seem. Even the smallest difference can prompt a variety of outcomes, and failure may occur where something previously succeeded.

This was Shlomo HaMelech's advice in Koheles when he said that everything has its time and place. Confusion and sometimes destruction occur when we misuse or poorly time things. For example, declaring war when peace is necessary or peace when war is the real answer for a particular situation. You have to truly be a chacham to know the difference.

Avraham was such a chacham. Yes, he wanted money, lots of it, but not for any personal use. He wanted money so he could be the perfect spiritual host to anyone who crossed his path. He personally ran an inn so that he could feed people spiritually while feeding them physically. He wanted to be wealthy for the mitzvah of giving.

Likewise fame played an important role in his plan. Nothing advertised his kiruv operation more than a good reputation. People had to know about him to find him, and they had to find him before he could help them find themselves. Fame was crucial for his plan to reform the world in the direction of God, and he might have been concerned that he would lose it once he hit the road.

This is perhaps one of the most important messages of Lech Lecha that is largely overlooked. It wasn't just about following God to a foreign land. It was about following God to the completion of specific goals. Some of the greatest successes in life have occurred in ways that went against the norm. Go WITHOUT God and you have to be pragmatic. Maybe you'll succeed, but maybe you won't.

Go WITH God and the laws of physics have less to say about your success. Lech Lecha applies to anyone who is willing to go it with God, in spite of the apparent losses of doing so. Bitachon—trust in God—says, "You can't go wrong with God, no matter how much statistics say you will."

Because the truth is that Avraham knew exactly where he was going. God had already taken him there before, and he knew the land was destined to be his. He didn't follow God blindly to a physical location—he followed Him blindly to a spiritual one, and THAT was the greatness of Lech Lecha.

I once asked a Gadol HaDor about returning to Eretz Yisroel, and he told me to do it, but also asked if I had a job lined up. When I asked why that made a difference in a world of bitachon and emunah, he answered that it is not good publicity for Eretz Yisroel when people reverse their aliyah because they can't make a go of it in God's land.

But Avraham Avinu also suffered hardship when he got to Eretz Yisroel, and even went down to Egypt because of famine. And God personally brought him here, not the Jewish Agency. What kind of message did that send to potential future makers of aliyah?

At first, not a great one. But when Avraham returned intact and wealthy from Egypt, it all became clear to everyone. Sending Avraham south to Egypt for fame and wealth was part of God's fulfillment of His promise, part of Avraham's mission, not interference. As Rashi points out in the parsha, everything Avraham did was for the sake of his future descendants, who too would go down to Egypt and emerge wealthy for life in Eretz Yisroel.

The bottom line is that Avraham was a man with a mission, with GOD'S mission. And Lech Lecha was a test to see to what extent he shared that mission with God. It was then, and has remained so for every Jew ever since.