

THE LECH LECHA TEST RATES HIGHER THAN THE UR KASDIM TEST

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: # 742 Can You Change Your Mazal? Good Shabbos!

The Mishna tells us [Avos 5:3] that Avraham Avinu was tested 10 times and that he passed all 10 tests. There are varying opinions as to exactly what the 10 tests were. However virtually all commentaries enumerate the command to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's home to go off to the Land he would be shown by G-d ("Lech lecha m'artzecha...") as one of the ten tests. According to many commentaries, however, this was not the first test.

According to this approach, the first test Avraham faced was the test of "Ur Kasdim". Rashi points out that the name Ur Kasdim alludes to the miraculous salvation of Avram when thrown into a fiery pit for refusal to pay homage to the prevailing idols of his society. The pasuk alludes to this when it says, "And He said to him: I am the L-rd who took you out from Ur Kasdim..." [Bereishis 15:7]

Avram was an iconoclast. Despite the deep-seated beliefs of the civilization in which he grew up, he broke their idols and even broke his father's idols. The entire society of Ur Kasdim shunted him to the extent that they gave him the choice of worshipping their idols or being thrown into a fire together with his monotheistic beliefs. He chose the latter and miraculously emerged unharmed. The Torah alludes to this story when it mentions that "G-d took Avram out from Ur Kasdim".

The commentaries are troubled by the fact that the miracle of Ur Kasdim is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The test of "Lech Lecha m'artzecha..." -- which on the face of it does not seem as great as the test to leave his childhood home with the promise that things will work out for his benefit -- is spelled out in detail. Why does the Torah omit the miracle of Ur Kasdim?

Over the years, we have discussed this question many times. We once quoted an answer from Rav Weinberg, zt"l, who said that Ur Kasdim was something Avram did out of his own convictions; it was not a response to a Divine Command. Lech Lecha -- leaving his home -- was a Divine Command and hence the fact that Avram obeyed this Command was of greater significance than the fact that he was prepared to act under his own convictions. In the eyes of the Torah, obeying the Master of the Universe is really the greatest test. This is articulated by our Rabbis in the comment "Greater is one who is commanded and does, more so than one who is not commanded and does" [Kidushin 31a]. Doing something that you are supposed to do is greater than doing something that you want to do.

Therefore, the test of Ur Kasdim is not as great as the test of Lech Lecha.

On this occasion, I would like to present a different answer to this question from Rav Simcha Zissel Brody, in his volume Sam Derech. Rav Brody says that people face two types of tests in their lifetimes. One type is those things that may be categorized as "glamorous tests" -- defining moments in a person's lifetime. At such times, when a person is well aware that he is at a junction in his lifetime when he must make a crucial decision -- even one involving great self-sacrifice -- he may be able to muster the courage and determination to make the proper decision.

However, there are other tests in life -- the daily type of challenges that come our way, day in, day out -- that each and every one of us face. These tests are not glamorous. They are not exciting. They are very run of the mill, but they are challenges nonetheless.

The test of "Ur Kasdim" was one of those glamorous defining-moment types of tests. The test of "Lech Lecha" is typical of the "daily grind" type of test. People sometimes have a capacity to rise above what they really are and to achieve spiritual levels above their normal capacities, but that is not who they really are.

There was recently [this shiur was given several years ago] an incident in Eretz Yisrael where a terrorist attempted to board a bus filled with soldiers and other Israeli citizens. Somehow, the terrorist tripped while getting onto the bus, fell over backwards and banged his head on the sidewalk, temporarily dazing himself. The bus driver and a medic who happened to be on board ran out to help him, thinking he was an innocent passenger trying to board the bus. In order to resuscitate him they ripped open his shirt and they saw he had a bomb strapped to his body.

This terrorist was literally a ticking time bomb. The bomb could be detonated at any minute and the two fellows trying to save him would have been blown to pieces. The bus driver and the medic held the fellow down to the ground and yelled to everyone to get out of the bus and run for their lives. Everyone except an elderly lady who could not move fast enough and another person trying to help her escaped injury. The elderly lady was killed and her aid was injured when the bomb went off a few moments later, however, miraculously the other passengers were saved.

There was an interview with the bus driver. The journalist asked how he had the bravery to do what he did. The interviewer told the bus driver, "You are a hero!" The bus driver responded, "I am a cowardly type of person. If I would have been asked ahead of time whether I would do such a thing, I definitely would have responded in the negative. I do not know what it was, but something overcame me at the moment and I held the guy down to save the other people."

This is a test of the "Ur Kasdim variety". I don't know whether this is adrenalin or whether it is some latent power in people that makes them rise to the occasion. We all can have such moments of heroism and self-sacrifice, moments where we escape our natural emotions of fear or cowardice or selfishness. For a moment, we may become selfless heroes.

Ur Kasdim moments are fleeting. They do not necessarily represent the real person who emerges heroically from such situations. Lech Lecha is the ordinary test of "do I get up tomorrow for minyan?" Lech Lecha is do I come home from work at night and learn with my child and help him do his homework or do I say "do it yourself and let me read the paper." Nobody thinks about the challenge of "should I learn with my child right now or not?" as being a defining moment in life! No one considers such actions to be the essence of heroism. Lech Lecha moments are moments when we face financial difficulties and we do not question G-d's Providence. Lech Lecha moments are facing all the trials and tribulations that life sends us -- health issues, financial issues, children issues. They are daily grind issues: same old, same old. This is "Lech Lecha".

This is what Avram did. He went to Eretz Yisrael. G-d promised him things would be great, but they were tough. There was a famine in the land. Where is the greatness? This is life. Avram Avinu did not question, did not challenge, and did not lose faith. There is nothing glamorous or exciting here, just the day in day out routine of life.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that the Torah only alludes to Ur Kasdim. Such heroism is great. It is admirable. However, in the eyes of the Torah, the day in, day out, tests, represented by "Lech Lecha," are what really count. Everyone can rise to the occasion occasionally. However, to do what you are supposed to do every day -- day in, and day out -- without questioning, this is a real test.

Books are not written about such tests and people are not honored at banquets for being such heros, but this is life and in the eyes of the Torah, this is where heroism really emerges. That is why the test of Lech Lecha "rates" as the greater of the two tests.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Lech Lecha are provided below:

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