

HAVE MISSION -- WILL TRAVEL, BUT ONLY RELUCTANTLY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1005 – Inviting People to a Bris – Good Idea or Bad? Good Shabbos!

Have Mission -- Will Travel, But Only Reluctantly

A famous Medrash in Parshas Lech Lecha teaches: Rabbi Levi says that the term "*lech lecha*" [go forth] appears twice -- once in this week's parsha [Bereishis 12:1] and once in next week's parsha [Bereishis 22:2]. Here, the context is Hashem telling Avraham to leave his homeland and to go to the land that he will be shown. In Parshas Vayera, the context is Hashem telling Avraham to go sacrifice his son on Mt. Moriah. The Medrash states that we would not know which "*lech lecha*" is more important, which is dearer ("*yoser chaviv*"). However, since the Torah specifies the destination of the second *lech lecha* (to Mt. Moriah) and does not specify the destination in this week's parsha (where it merely says "to the land that I will show you"), we see that the second *lech lecha* is more *chaviv*.

In truth, it is very hard to understand the question of the Medrash. How could the Medrash contemplate that the *lech lecha* in our parsha was "dearer" than the *lech lecha* of *Akeidas Yitzchak*? The latter command was clearly a greater *nisayon* [test] of Avraham's faith in the Almighty! Indeed the *Akeida* is the pinnacle of a series of tests that Avraham had already successfully passed. It would not make sense to test him with a "lesser test" after he already successfully passed greater *nisyonos*. Of course, as the Medrash concludes, the second *lech lecha* was greater. However, our question is how the Medrash could have ever raised the question in the first place. (What is the *hava amina* of the Medrash?)

The sefer Shemen HaTov addresses this question, and I would like to elaborate a bit on what he says.

There is a very famous Rambam which chronicles the history of *Avodah Zarah* in the world. How did it happen that humanity became corrupt, abandoning the One Creator in favor of idols? The Rambam explains that initially people felt it was appropriate to pay homage to the heavenly bodies because they are the emissaries of the Creator of the World. Eventually, people got further off the track and attributed independent power to the stars, the sun and the moon. The Rambam traces the

whole history of humanity, explaining how Avodah Zarah began. [Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 1:1-2]

In Halacha 3 there, the Rambam introduces Avraham Avinu into the picture. As a young boy, Avraham started wondering. How could it be that there is no one controlling this entire universe? The numerous and wondrous natural phenomenon could not all be occurring by themselves. The Rambam emphasizes that Avraham had no teacher or mentor to instruct him in these matters. He was immersed amongst the foolish population of Ur Kasdim, where everyone -- including his parents -- were idol worshippers. As a young boy, he went along with society and worshipped *Avodah Zarah* himself, but he was troubled by all this. Eventually, Avraham came to the understanding that there must be a G-d, and that the entire world was in error. According to the Rambam, Avraham was 40 years old when he "recognized his Creator."

The Rambam continues that once Avraham came to this conclusion, he entered into polemics with the people of Ur Kasdim. He got into discussions, and tried to convince members of the society in which he grew up that they were in error by worshipping idols. He broke idols, and insisted that it was unworthy to worship anything other than the Creator of the World. The Rambam then says that when Avraham bested the people with his arguments, the king attempted to kill him. The king threw Avraham into a fiery pit, from which he emerged miraculously, and he left Ur Kasdim for Charan. In Charan too, he continued his mission and proclaimed to the entire population that there was One G-d, and to Him alone it is fitting to pray. He gathered a following, going from city to city and from country to country, until he reached the Land of Canaan. In short, this individual who began wondering when yet a child about the nature of the universe, brought belief in monotheism to the peoples and countries, wherever he travelled.

Think of a modern day scenario. Imagine a rabbi in some little town, away from the Torah centers of America, who is successful in bringing Yiddishkeit to the people in his town. Perhaps he has influenced hundreds and hundreds of people to become *Baalei Teshuva*. He is the address for Yiddishkeit, not only in his own little town, but also in his entire state, and perhaps even in the whole region, where he travels widely. Then he receives an offer from someone who tells him "I want you to move back east. I want to offer you a job in New York or Baltimore or Lakewood." His initial response will be "But what will be with all the people I have brought close to Judaism? If I leave here, it is all going to fall apart!" This would be a terrible dilemma for him.

Multiply this scenario to compare it to Avraham's situation. His whole life's work was spreading the Word. Then the *Ribono shel Olam* tells him, "Leave your land, your birthplace, the house of your father, and go to the land I will show you." Hashem wants him to leave his territory. Avraham Avinu needs to be worried about what is going to be with all those people whom he has successfully influenced. His life's work will go down the drain. What will become of those people -- "the souls he made in Charan"?

This is a tremendous *nisayon* for anyone, and certainly for an Avraham Avinu. It is enough of a

nisayon to cause the Medrash to contemplate for a moment which of the two "*lech lecha*" commands was more difficult. True, at the end of the day, the Medrash concludes that the *Akeida* was the greater challenge, but at least in light of what we have explained, we can understand that there was a legitimate reason for the Medrash to have posed the question. (We can appreciate the *hava amina*.)

This is similar to a concept we mentioned in previous years. In next week's *parsha*, we read that Hashem appeared to Avraham in the "plains of Mamre." Chazal say that Mamre was the one who gave Avraham counsel that he should go ahead and circumcise himself, when Avraham had a doubt as to whether he should go through with it or not. We also raised a similar issue there. Avraham was willing to do anything the Almighty commanded him. However, here when Hashem told Avraham to circumcise himself, Chazal imply that Avraham suddenly needed to ask his friend for advice about whether to carry out this command. Strange, to say the least!

We suggested that certainly Avraham intended to follow Hashem's command to circumcise himself. His only question was whether to do this publicly or privately. Mamre advised him to do it publicly.

What was the basis of Avraham's question? His question was that once he performed the *milah* on himself, he would be different from everyone else. He was afraid that he would lose his ability to relate to people. His whole *raison d'être* was for people to get close to him so that he could influence them towards monotheism. Avraham was very hesitant to do anything that might jeopardize his ability to influence people. Until then, people would say, "he is one of us." That allowed him to be effective in his "kiruv work." He knew that becoming circumcised would make him "different," so he considered carrying out the command of G-d privately, so that people would be unaware of his "difference."

This is basically the same concept. Avraham's life was bringing the concept of the True G-d to the masses, and anything which might inhibit his ability to influence people was a major *nisayon* for him.

With this background, we can understand another idea. The Gemara states [Avoda Zara, 9a] that the world will exist for 6,000 years, after which we will enter a period called "the World to Come." (The clock is ticking, and we are relatively near the end of these six millenia.) The Gemara partitions this six-thousand-year period of world history into three segments: two thousand years of Nothingness (Tohu); two thousand years of Torah; and two thousand years of Messianic Time.

Most people would guess that the two-thousand-year period of "Torah" began with the revelation at Sinai. However, the Gemara there pegs the start of the period of two thousand years of Torah with the era when Avraham gathered souls in Charan, while preaching the truth of monotheism.

Rav Asher Weiss, in his sefer on Chumash, asks the following: There was Torah before Avraham Avinu. Noach learned Torah. There was even a functioning yeshiva -- the Yeshiva of Shem v'Ever. So what does the Gemara mean when it says that the two-thousand-year era of Torah began with "the souls Avraham established in Charan?" Rav Weiss answers by quoting a statement of the Kesef

Mishna on the aforementioned Rambam. The Kesef Mishna acknowledges that there was Torah before Avraham, but Avraham introduced a new dimension to Torah with his activities.

The roles of Shem and Ever as mentors were limited to those people who showed up and learned in their yeshiva. It was not an institution meant for the masses. The period of Torah began when Avraham Avinu came and publicly proclaimed to the masses belief in monotheism. This means that the definition of Torah is not only the Torah that is learned in the confines of the *Beis HaMedrash*, but it is Torah that is made accessible to the masses as well. Thus, Avraham, who made the Torah accessible to the masses, initiated the period of Torah.

This life mission was so important to Avraham Avinu, that the *nisayon* of *lech lecha* and giving up the community of followers he had assembled in Charan was extremely challenging, to the extent that the Medrash had to tell us that despite the difficulty of this test, the test of the *Akeida* was even greater.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Lech Lecha is provided below:

- # 028 - Conversion (Geirus)
- # 070 - Bris Milah: The Metzizah Controversy
- # 119 - Conversion for Ulterior Motives
- # 166 - The Childless Couple in Halacha
- # 212 - Non-Jews and the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av
- # 256 - Mohel and Baby: Who Goes to Whom
- # 302 - The Mitzvah of Yishuv Eretz Yisroel
- # 346 - Trading Terrorists for Hostages
- # 390 - Geirus -- Mitzvah, Reshus, or Issur?
- # 434 - Anesthesia During Milah
- # 478 - Sandik -- Can You Change Your Mind?
- # 522 - Calling Avraham, Avrum
- # 566 - Learning Vs. Saving A Life
- # 610 - The Widow & the Divorcee: How Long Must they wait to remarry
- # 654 - Sonei Matonos Yichye - Refusing Gifts

- # 698 - Did the Avos Keep the Torah?
- # 742 - Can You Change Your Mazel?
- # 786 - The On-Time vs. the Delayed Bris
- # 830 - Standing for A Chosen and Kallah At The Chupah
- # 874 - Saving Some-One's Soul- How Far Must You Go?
- # 918 - Hidur Mitzvah - How Important?
- # 961 - Tying Shoes - Not As Simple As You Think
- #1005 - Inviting People to a Bris - Good Idea or Bad?
- #1049 - Honoring Your Wife
- #1092 - The Baal Teshuva Who Wants To Convert His Non-Jewish Girlfriend
- #1135 - "Schar Pe'sios" - Should You Walk Or Drive To Shul (on weekdays)
- #1178 - Shabbos Milah of A Child Whose Parents Are Not Shomrei Shabbos
- #1222 - Milah For The Son of a Jewish Father and a Non Jewish Mother
- #1266 - The Syrian Sefardic Community's Ban on Conversion

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