

Pardes from Jerusalem - Parshat Lech Lecha

“לך לך – Go To Yourself”

קול דממה דקה – Heeding the Still Small Voice Within

“ויאמר ה' אל אברם: לך לך, מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך,
אל הארץ אשר אראך” (בראשית יב,א).

“And HaShem said to Avram: Go to yourself, away from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

This sharing is based on the verse in Genesis 12:1: “God said to Avram, ‘Go to yourself, away from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.’” This verse introduces to us the spiritual practice of *Lech Lecha* --- **moving away from one sense of self** --- the finite self – the ego-based self – the limited self, **towards another sense of self** --- the infinite self – the beyond ego self – the limitless self.

Encountering this higher and magnificent self only occurs when we heed the internal still small voice, as it guides, directs and reveals to us that place within us that is actually one with the Divine Presence – the *Shechina*. We simply cannot traverse this territory on our own --- we need to be shown. The *Lech Lecha* journey brings us to the very core of our authentic and true being. It is indeed an **encounter** with the Divine Presence, the *Shechina*, that piece of Godliness within each one of us --- our soul and spiritual center. And for this wondrous journey to become possible, God created us in such a way that we are unable to take possession of the mysterious map showing us the way without first becoming aware of the “still small voice” within, beckoning and inviting us to do so. At that point the trajectory will bring us to where we need to go.

But why would a person move away from the familiar to an unfamiliar and unknown destination? I will share various musings that enhance the depth and profundity of what the still small voice is beckoning and inviting not only Avraham Aveenu, but each one of us as well.

1 – Rashi comments, based on a teaching in *Mesechet Rosh HaShana* 15b, that the command *Lech Lecha* is actually for our own benefit and for our own good. However, the *Netivot Shalom* the Slonimer Rebbe, Rav Sholom Noach Berezovsky, who passed in 2000 in Yerushalayim, provides an interesting response to this Rashi commentary. He teaches that notwithstanding that engaging in the *Lech Lecha* journey would be for Avraham’s own benefit and good, from Avraham’s vantage point this was not even a consideration. Out of his strong love for God, Avraham felt compelled to obey whatever God had commanded him to do. In fact, he did not even consider that by responding to God’s command the very next verse would be fulfilled, “And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing.” Avraham did what he did, notwithstanding what was considered to be a major test in his relationship with God, with no expectation of receiving a reward.”

We see here that Avraham is the prototype of how one responds to a deep inner calling. Have you ever felt that a voice within you tugs at you, pulls you, urges you to take the next step along your journey in a way that is nothing less than surprising and unexpected? And we actually heed that inner voice --- without needing to know all the details that lay ahead, the benefits and perhaps even the general purpose. Actually, the calling may very well defy logic and our previously acquired experiences. The compelling reason according to this teaching from the Netivot Shalom stems from love ---love of self, love of God, love of clarity, love of whatever it is that compels us to move ahead.

2 - The Ramban, Nachmanides, 13th century leading medieval Jewish scholar, points out that nonetheless it is difficult for someone to leave one's homeland, even harder to leave one's extended family and hardest of all to leave one's parents for an unknown destination.

3 – The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, asks in a talk on *Shabbat Lech Lecha* in 1989, "What drives a person to leave 'his land, his birthplace and his father's house' for an unknown destination? Yet driven we are, in search of something more than what our parents, teachers – indeed our very nature – have to offer. Our lives are a ceaseless search for identity, having rejected the inborn and acquired identity of our birth and youth."

The Rebbe acknowledges that, "by conventional standards the development of one's natural instincts, the assimilation of learned and observed truths and the remaking of self through the objective arbiter of the mind constitutes the ultimate in human achievement. However, there is a higher self to the human being. This is the 'spark of Godliness' that is the core of one's soul --- the divine essence that God breathes into each one of us, the 'image of God' in which each one of us was, and continues to be, created. THIS is *ha'aretz* - the land – that God promised to show Avraham." (*And by extension, all of us*). The Rebbe refers to this spiritual work as "transcending one's own positive and gainful past in order to reach the higher self, regardless of how perfected and achieved the lower self is." He teaches that "God invites each one of us to experience that which actually transcends all limit and definition: one's own soul."

I believe that what the Rebbe is suggesting here is an answer to the question: What constitutes how we define ourselves? When we gaze into the mirror of our identity what do we see? A body? A soul? Both? Ego? Beyond ego? For the Rebbe, the essence, the essential ingredient, without which the human would not be human defines the real "oneself." For him, this is clearly our soul, our spiritual center, the image of God within each one of us.

4 – As we move from the lower self to the higher self, there is an exquisite *Midrash* that describes what happens as we move along the *Lech Lecha* journey. Actually, its premise is that the journey never really ends. If we so choose, we are always moving, deeper and deeper to our authentic selves. In *Bereshit Rabbah* 39,2 we learn, "Rav Berchiah commenced with a verse from *Shir HaShirim* - Song of Songs, 1:3 'Your ointments have a goodly fragrance. Your name is as ointment poured forth.' What did Avraham resemble? A vial of perfume closed with a tight-fitting lid and lying in a corner, so that its fragrance was not disseminated; however, as soon as it was shaken up and the lid removed, the beautiful fragrance spread out into the world. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Avraham, '*Lech Lecha* – travel from place to place, and your name will become great in the world.'"

We see here that as we move, as we travel inwardly and discover our internal being, the soul within us, as we open up that hitherto closed part of ourselves, we “release a beautiful fragrance into the world.” Each one of us has our own particular unique fragrance, but unless we are willing to shake ourselves up and open the vial containing it, we are limited in how much beauty we can bring to the world. Hence the spiritual practice of moving towards our true selves embodies the potential to beautify the world, to enhance the world and because this work is difficult at times, it brings as well compassion to the world.

5 – Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, 20 BCE - 50 CE, wrote in *On Abraham 71*, “Avraham was from *Ur Kasdim* – a Chaldean - living in ancient Mesopotamia, until, opening the soul’s eye from the depth of sleep, he came to behold the pure ray in place of the deep darkness, and he followed that light and perceived what he had not seen before: the One who guides and steers the world, presiding over it and managing its affairs.”

What we see here is the true meaning of the Hebrew word hitore’rut – arousal and awakening in English. This may be a physical and/or spiritual awakening. Have you ever felt that for a time you may be living in a dark space, a space of slumber lacking movement --- and then, at an unexpected moment, there is a rustling within, even an agitation, and this rustling wakes you up to an insight, to a perspective, to a feeling that is fresh and new --- and this significantly affects your decisions and your behavior - your very life. Indeed, this is a waking up of sorts, as the dawn of new light begins to cast its rays on your life journey.

6 – Emmanuel Levinas, French philosopher, 1906 -1995, who is known for his work related to Jewish philosophy, in “The Trace of the Other,” when addressing this movement from one self to another self, writes, “...whose movement unto the other is not recuperated in identification, as it does not return to its point of departure. A work conceived radically is a movement of the same radical nature, whereby one never returns to the same; for example, the story of Avraham, who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land.”

I would like to suggest that perhaps what Levinas is posturing here is that once we move from the familiar to the unknown, not only is that movement radical, but the consequence is equally radical.... that we never really return to the point of origination. In this sense while we may never want to return to where we began, we actually are unable to do so. This in of itself is radical. The Lech Lecha practice cannot be underestimated or relegated to that of a simple move that is different or new. Indeed, this is profound and life changing, resulting in all sorts of inner shifts.

7 – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about what happens when one claims a piece of oneself that now characterizes the person as being different from the status quo, causing one to be considered a non-conformist. He begins in his article “*The Courage Not to Conform*” by stating that, “Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they don’t follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don’t conform for the sake of conforming. They don’t do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an **inner voice, a calling.**”

He continues, “Never was this more dramatically signaled than in the first words of God to Avraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion – *Lech Lecha*. Why? Because people do conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live --- “your land.” At a deeper level, they are influenced by friends and neighbors --- “your birthplace.” More deeply still, they are shaped by their parents and family in which they grew up --- “your father’s house.”

“I want you, says God to Avraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a people that will not worship power and the symbols of power --- for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said God, to ‘teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just’ (Genesis 18:19). To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. Judaism is a sustained critique of power. It is about how to construct a society that honors the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision of a world based on justice and compassion.”

“Avraham is one of the most influential people who ever lived. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of **influence without power**. Why? Because he was prepared to be different. Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do, because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Avraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.”

“However, the pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong. (*Even when it means compromising one’s very inner core values, even when it means compromising one’s integrity, even when it means not being faithful to one’s inner self*). This is why Avraham, at the start of his mission was told, in essence, to free himself from the pressure to conform. “

“Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis, 20th century American scholar, writes in “*On Becoming a Leader*,” ‘By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realize. Our family, friends and society in general **have told us** --- by word and example --- **how to be**. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when **they decide for themselves how to be.**”

“One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavor is precisely **this willingness to be different**. Judaism is the counter voice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews, we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. It is what makes a nation of leaders.”

May we bless each other to find that piece within us that defines each of us as a leader of our own particular magnificent life journey... by hearing the Lech Lecha call within, remaining faithful to it and heeding it. And may we as well encourage each other to heed their individual Lech Lecha call and not be gripped by fear when moving along the path of the non-conformist.

6 – Reb Shlomo Carlebach gives us the spiritual tool that prevents us from confusing the self-absorbed voice we all possess with the call to arms of *Lech Lecha*. He teaches in *Even Shlomo*, “God says to Avraham, ‘*Lech Lecha*.’ Avraham, keep on moving. While many people may be moving though, how do you know if they are moving in God’s direction? I’ll tell you something. If you are moving in the direction of God, the more you move up, **the closer you move to people**. We all need so much to move closer to God, to move closer to people. But above all, *Lech Lecha*, keep on moving. Don’t stop, don’t ever, ever stand still. **Get closer to yourself, to the deepest depths of your inner being, and get closer to every human being that you can.**”