Parashat Lech Lecha

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Lech Lecha — Setting Out with Trust in Hashem

Parashat Lech Lecha opens with Hashem's call to Avraham: 'Go from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.' Avraham is told to leave familiar surroundings, the world in which he grew up, and his father's home, and set out on a journey. Where to? At this point Hashem does not yet tell him. He says only: 'To the land that I will show you' (Bereshit 12:1–4).

Notice that before telling Avraham where to arrive, Hashem tells him where to leave. To reach a new destination, we must be willing to set out. We can also hear an inward call in these words: be ready to free yourself from habits and assumptions absorbed from your surroundings if they prevent you from drawing closer to Hashem. Leaving the familiar for the unknown is no simple test. It requires wholehearted trust in Hashem, with faith that He will accompany you at every step.

The command comes with great promises: 'I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.' Hashem promises that a great nation will descend from Avraham and that, through him, blessing will reach all the families of the earth.

But why are these promises needed? Would Avraham not have gone without them? After all, Hashem calls him 'Avraham, who loves Me' (Yeshayahu 41:8).

We may understand it this way: the blessings reveal to Avraham what can grow out of this journey. He can attain still greater closeness to Hashem and, through that closeness, bring blessing to the world. 'You shall be a blessing' — you yourself will become a source of blessing for others. This is precisely what Avraham longs for in the depths of his heart. The promises therefore speak of what he truly wishes to attain (Or HaChaim on Bereshit 12:1).

With what intention does Avraham set out? The Torah emphasizes: 'Avram went as Hashem had spoken to him.' Or HaChaim explains that he went because Hashem had commanded him, not for the sake of the promised blessings. He heard the promises, but his driving purpose was to fulfill his Creator's will. At seventy-five, he leaves Charan and begins his journey (Or HaChaim on Bereshit 12:4).

The Souls They Made — Love That Draws Others Near

Avraham does not set out alone. He takes his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot, the possessions they have acquired, and 'the souls they made in Charan.' They depart for the land of Canaan and arrive there.

What does 'the souls they made' mean? Can people create souls? Rashi cites the Sages' explanation: Avraham brought the men to faith, and Sarah brought the women. They brought people beneath the wings of the Divine Presence, and the Torah credits them as though they had created them. Someone who comes to know his Creator and finds a new direction in life becomes, in a sense, a new person (Bereshit 12:5; Rashi there).

Rav Uri Zohar was one of the most prominent figures in Israeli cinema and entertainment. At about forty-two, already famous and successful, he transformed his life: to the astonishment of many, he returned to Torah observance, left the entertainment world, and devoted himself to Torah study. After returning to Torah, he counted his age from that turning point. For example, when asked how old he was, he would reply: 'I'm still a young man — only eighteen!' For him, returning to Torah was a kind of rebirth, the true beginning of a new life.

But what moved Avraham to bring others closer? He himself already knew Hashem. He could serve Him, draw nearer to Him, and work on his own spiritual growth. Why was it so important to him that others should also know their Creator?

Rambam explains in Sefer HaMitzvot that this is part of loving Hashem. When we love someone, we want to speak about that person's virtues; we want others to know and love that person too. So it is with someone who loves Hashem: that love awakens a desire to draw others near to Him, so that they too may discover the truth he has been privileged to understand (Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, positive commandment 3).

That was Avraham. Precisely because he was 'Avraham, who loves Me,' he called on others to believe in Hashem. He was not content with his own closeness to Him. He wanted others to attain it as well.

Famine in Canaan — Continuing Even When It Is Hard

The Torah next describes a famine in the land of Canaan. The famine is severe, and Avraham goes down to Egypt to stay there. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer states that there had been no famine in the world before Avraham's time, and that this famine struck Canaan specifically in order to test him. According to this midrash, Avraham encountered a difficulty that had never existed before, precisely after reaching the place to which Hashem had commanded him to go (Bereshit 12:10; Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, chapter 26).

Rashi explains that the test was whether Avraham would question Hashem's words. The Creator had told him to come to Canaan and promised great blessings, yet now famine forced him to leave that very land. A person might ask: I did what You commanded, left my country and my father's home — and this is the result? Famine awaits me in the very land to which You sent me? (Rashi on Bereshit 12:10.)

Each of us may face a similar test. We decide to advance in serving Hashem, to strengthen our Torah learning, our observance of a mitzvah, or a good character trait. At first we see help from Heaven and feel Hashem's support — and then an obstacle appears. Sometimes serious difficulties arise that were not there before we began. It is easy to think that we probably have no chance and that continuing is pointless.

Avraham teaches us not to despair because of difficulties. Trials can arise even on the path of fulfilling Hashem's will. We must keep trying, seek ways to overcome obstacles, and preserve our desire to draw near to Him, even when the blessing is not immediately visible.

This is the kind of determination Naomi saw in Ruth. Naomi tries to persuade her to return home, but Ruth is firmly resolved to go with her and join the people of Israel. The verse then says: 'When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.' Naomi sees that Ruth's desire remains unshaken in the face of difficulty and stops trying to dissuade her. Malbim explains that this persistence showed that Ruth was embracing Judaism wholeheartedly (Ruth 1:8–18; Malbim on Ruth 1:18).

Keter Rosh relates that a student asked the Vilna Gaon about abstaining from worldly indulgences. The Gaon replied: 'The persistent person will succeed.' There is a good kind of stubbornness in serving Hashem: to keep learning, to keep improving ourselves, and, even when we must begin again, to abandon neither our good aspirations nor our efforts (Keter Rosh, section 51).

Sarah's Beauty — An Inner Light

As Avraham and Sarah approach Egypt, Avram says to his wife: 'Behold, now I know that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.' He fears that the Egyptians will see her beauty, want to take her, and kill him because he is her husband. He therefore asks her to say that she is his sister (Bereshit 12:11–13).

First, however, we must understand the words 'now I know.' Did Avraham discover only now that Sarah was beautiful? They had been married for many years!

Rashi offers an explanation: the hardships of travel affect a person's appearance, yet Sarah had retained her beauty. Even after a long journey, wandering, and difficulty, her beauty remained unchanged. This is what Avraham now sees (Rashi on Bereshit 12:11).

I believe a deeper explanation may also be suggested. Kohelet says: 'A person's wisdom lights up his face.' Our inner qualities affect our outward appearance as well. We know people whose kindness and nobility are reflected in their faces. There is a special light in their expression. Sometimes beauty is merely external; sometimes it expresses something deeper within the soul (Kohelet 8:1).

Of outward beauty alone it is said: 'Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting.' The Hebrew word hevel means vapor, something transient. Years pass, fatigue and hardship leave their mark, and appearance changes. Yet the verse continues: 'A woman who fears Hashem — she shall be praised.' The Vilna Gaon explains that a woman who fears Hashem deserves praise for her charm and beauty as well. The Torah itself praises the beauty of the Matriarchs. When beauty is joined to fear of Heaven, it too becomes a virtue (Mishlei 31:30; Kol Eliyahu, Parashat Vayetze, section 30).

This helps us understand the idea we have suggested about Sarah: her beauty was connected to her inner world, her holiness and virtues. That the journey did not diminish it may point to its inward source — the light of the soul shining outward. Such beauty can be cultivated throughout life. We can acquire wisdom, develop good character and fear of Heaven, and deepen that inner light both amid difficulties and as the years pass.

They Forgot to Show the Ending

Parashat Lech Lecha describes a war that, at first glance, seems hopeless. Four kings defeat the five kings of the Jordan Valley, plunder Sedom, and take Lot, the nephew of our forefather Avraham, captive.

Hearing what has happened, Avraham sets out to rescue him. The Torah tells us that he gathers the trained men born in his household — three hundred and eighteen. This alone is astonishing: a small band confronts an army that has defeated five kings.

The words of the Sages reveal something even more remarkable: according to one interpretation, only Eliezer went out with Avraham. The number three hundred and eighteen refers to the gematria, the numerical value, of his name (Bereshit Rabbah 43:2; Nedarim 32a).

How did Avraham come to be left with Eliezer alone? Da'at Zekenim, the commentary of the Tosafists, explains that Avraham announced to his men that they were going to war and that anyone who feared because of his sins should return home. The others returned, and Eliezer remained with him (on Bereshit 14:14).

They went to war — and won. Two men overcame world powers!

A story is told that supporters of the Haskalah movement once staged a play in Brisk to ridicule the Torah and observant Jews. Its theme was: what would an army governed by Torah law look like?

At the beginning, a large company of soldiers stands onstage, ready for battle. An announcement is made: anyone who has built a new house and has not yet begun living in it should return home. A group of soldiers leaves the stage.

Then comes another announcement: anyone who has planted a vineyard and has not yet enjoyed its fruit should also return home. Several more soldiers leave.

An announcement follows concerning someone who has betrothed a woman but has not yet married her: he too should return home. Another group leaves the stage.

Finally, anyone who is afraid because of his sins is told to leave. The remaining soldiers depart as well.

Only two characters remain onstage: the Vilna Gaon and the author of Sha'agat Aryeh. They begin discussing which of them has precedence in fulfilling the mitzvah and who should enter battle first.

That is where the play ends. Its creators' message is clear: here is your army. Everyone has gone home, and only two elderly men remain, arguing with each other. How could such an army possibly win?

When Rabbi Chaim of Brisk heard about the play, he replied that its producers had forgotten to show the ending: those two elderly men won the war!

The play ended at precisely the point where the story of our forefather Avraham begins. To someone who looks only at the number of soldiers, it is difficult to understand how anyone could even enter such a war. Yet our parashah tells of a victory that cannot be explained by numbers alone.

There is, however, a sequel to this story that reveals another thought.

When Rav Chaim Kanievsky was told about the play and the Brisker Rav's response, he objected: why assume that everyone who has sinned must leave? He can repent and remain in the ranks!

There is great hope in this thought. A person hears about the gravity of sin, examines his deeds, and becomes frightened. He feels that there is no longer a place for him among the righteous. He must get up and leave.

But there is another possibility: to do teshuvah — to return to Hashem.

‘That’s Just How I Am’ — Can We Really Change?

In Parashat Lech Lecha, after our forefather Avraham’s victory over the four kings, Hashem appears to him and promises: ‘Do not fear, Avram. I am your shield; your reward is very great.’

But Avraham responds with a question: ‘What will You give me? I remain childless, and the steward of my household is Eliezer of Damesek’ (Bereshit 15:1–2).

Avraham receives a promise of great reward, yet something is still missing. He has no son.

We can understand the depth of his pain by considering what truly mattered to him. Avraham devoted his life to faith, kindness, and spreading goodness in the world. He taught people to know their Creator and established an entire way of life. When someone lives for this, he wants to know: who will continue along this path? To whom will I pass on what I have built?

On this understanding, Avraham is expressing a profound concern: however great my reward may be, I await someone to whom I can pass it on as an inheritance.

But a question arises: what about Eliezer? He was a man of extraordinary qualities. According to one interpretation of the Sages, he alone went with Avraham to fight the four kings. Eliezer stayed beside his teacher in a battle that seemed hopeless and shared in the astonishing victory (Bereshit Rabbah 43:2; Nedarim 32a). His achievements in Torah learning were also great. Eliezer learned from Avraham and taught his teachings to others.

He would seem to be precisely the successor Avraham seeks: a faithful, devoted disciple who also teaches others. Why is that not enough?

Another question arises. The Sages explain that the word ‘Damesek,’ which Avraham used of Eliezer, alludes to his drawing from his teacher’s Torah and giving others to drink. Why does Avraham choose this very moment, when telling Hashem of his painful situation and that Eliezer will be his heir, to mention Eliezer’s merit?

To consider this question, let us turn to a later event, described in Parashat Chayei Sarah.

Avraham sends his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak. The Sages tell us that Eliezer had a daughter and hoped that she would marry Yitzchak. But Avraham told him: ‘You are cursed, and my son is blessed; one who is cursed cannot unite with one who is blessed’ (Bereshit Rabbah 59:9). These words refer to Eliezer’s descent from Canaan, upon whom Noach’s curse had been pronounced.

These are difficult words. To understand the idea they contain, let us reflect on the meaning of blessing.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin explains in Nefesh HaChaim that the word baruch — ‘blessed’ — expresses increase and abundance. Blessing brings growth, expansion, and an increase in vitality (Gate 2, chapter 2).

On this basis, we can suggest an explanation of Avraham’s concern. He seeks a successor in whom Torah will increase: someone who will receive it, delve into it, and uncover ever deeper insights. In contrast to blessing, the curse here may be understood as an expression of contraction and diminution.

This is how the Sages describe words of Torah: they ‘are fruitful and multiply’ (Chagigah 3b). In Eruvin, Torah study is compared to a nursing infant: just as every time the child nurses it finds

milk, so every time a person delves into Torah, he finds flavor in it (54b). We return to the same words and suddenly understand something we had not understood before. We ask questions, explore more deeply, and discover new meaning.

In this light, the description ‘draws and gives others to drink’ may also suggest a limitation.

Someone who draws water from a well and gives it to others performs a very important task. Yet he passes on the water he has drawn; he does not increase it. At best, all the water he carries reaches its destination. Sometimes some is lost along the way.

This illustrates the difference between transmitting what one has received and developing a deeper understanding on that foundation. The Sages do not explicitly speak here of limitations in Eliezer’s abilities. This is our proposed way of understanding the question: Avraham wants a son in whom Torah will be fruitful and multiply, and through whom it will continue to develop in future generations as well.

But Eliezer’s story does not end with the words ‘you are cursed.’

Later, when he arrives at the home of Rivkah’s family, Lavan greets him with the words: ‘Come in, blessed of Hashem.’ The Zohar sees here an allusion to Eliezer’s eventual passage from curse to blessing.

The Zohar explains that Eliezer merited this because he was a faithful emissary. Through his faithfulness he emerged from the curse and became blessed. The Zohar even emphasizes that these words are recorded in the Torah because they express a real change in his standing, and adds that an angel placed them in Lavan’s mouth. Although Lavan spoke them, they contained a profound truth (Zohar, Parashat Shelach). The Midrash states explicitly: ‘Because he served that righteous man faithfully, he left the category of the cursed and entered the category of the blessed’ (Bereshit Rabbah 60:7).

Here we discover the magnitude of Eliezer’s test. He had a personal wish: that his daughter marry Yitzchak. Successfully finding another wife for Yitzchak meant relinquishing that hope. Yet he devoted all his strength to carrying out his mission. He prayed, searched, investigated, and acted faithfully to fulfill Avraham’s will.

The Midrash describes his personal interest with the words of Hoshea: ‘Canaan — deceitful scales are in his hand’ (12:8). When someone strongly desires a particular outcome, even his reasoning may tilt in the direction he wants. Eliezer had to overcome that tendency and act correctly, even when doing so did not serve his own wishes.

An important conclusion emerges: Eliezer succeeded in changing. The man who had been called ‘cursed’ merited being called ‘blessed of Hashem.’

How often do we tell ourselves: ‘I know I lose my temper quickly, but that’s just how I am’; ‘It’s hard for me to be happy about other people’s success — that’s my nature’; ‘That’s how I was brought up. What can I do?’

Eliezer’s story teaches us that there is much we can do.

Rambam explains that no one is predestined from birth to be righteous or wicked. The choice is in our hands, and it extends to character as well: to be compassionate or cruel, miserly or generous (Hilchot Teshuvah 5:2).

We have natural inclinations, habits, and the upbringing we received. Some are deeply rooted, and change requires effort and consistency. But even a trait that has accompanied us for many years need not determine our behavior forever.

When we work on our character, overcome selfish desires, and repeatedly choose honesty and goodness, we create a new path within ourselves.

Eliezer did this precisely where it was difficult: where his loyalty collided with his personal hope. And it was from that very place that his blessing grew.

The words ‘that’s just how I am’ may describe who I am today. They do not determine who I can become tomorrow.

‘If Only Yishmael Might Live Before You’ — When Spiritual Merit Does Not Ensure the Right Path

When Hashem tells our forefather Avraham that Sarah will bear him a son, Avraham asks: ‘If only Yishmael might live before You’ (Bereshit 17:18).

This is the plea of a father who cares for his son. But Rashi reveals a further depth: ‘live before You’ means ‘live in fear of You.’ Avraham asks that Yishmael live a life filled with fear of Heaven, a life connected to Hashem.

Yet in the Zohar we find troubling words that invite reflection.

In Parashat Va’era, the Zohar also speaks critically of Avraham’s prayer: although Hashem had told him of Yitzchak’s birth, Avraham still ‘held on to Yishmael’ and asked, ‘If only Yishmael might live before You,’ until he received the answer, ‘And regarding Yishmael, I have heard you.’ The Zohar then says, ‘Woe to the time when Yishmael was born into the world,’ and adds that his descendants would one day obstruct the children of Israel’s return to their land and bring great suffering upon them. This raises a question: Avraham asked not simply that Yishmael live, but that he live ‘before You’ — as Rashi explains, ‘in fear of You.’ What could be lacking in a prayer whose entire purpose is that his son should live in fear of Heaven?

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer also offers a severe interpretation of the name Yishmael: it points to Hashem’s hearing Israel’s cries in the future because of the suffering that Yishmael’s descendants will cause them at the end of days (chapter 32). Within this painful description lies a promise as well: Hashem will hear their cry.

Again, the question arises: Avraham asked that Yishmael live in fear of Heaven. How can so good a prayer be reconciled with the grievous consequences described in the Zohar?

To reflect on this, let us turn to a principle explained in the teachings of the Arizal.

Rabbi Chaim Vital explains in Sha’ar HaGilgulim that the forces of evil, called kelipot in the language of Kabbalah, draw sustenance from holiness. They have no independent source of life. They therefore seek to attach themselves to holiness and use its vitality to sustain their own existence.

He also explains why they seek to draw a person into sin: when a holy soul falls into their power, they receive nourishment through it. This describes a situation in which a force originating in holiness actually serves its opposite (Sha’ar HaGilgulim, introduction 15).

On the basis of these words, we may suggest the following understanding.

Avraham did indeed ask that his son live before Hashem. Yet this very connection gave Yishmael the strength to oppress the children of Israel. For when someone whose underlying nature is spiritually impure has some connection to holiness, that connection gives him strength and reinforces him, as we explained above.