



# Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

## THE ROAD OF FAITH

RABBI RAEI BLUMENTHAL

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TY KAY ('18)

LANA ROSENTHAL ('17)

SYDNEY FREEDMAN ('20)

SHEVI ZAK ('17)

At the beginning of the Chasidic revolution the young movement faced much opposition. Indeed, Chasidic legends and lore are replete with stories of opponents - mitnagdim - and their debates and revelations.

But aside from the uplifting stories of newfound love of God and Judaism, there were, unfortunately and understandably, many families that were torn apart over their stance on the movement, its practices and its ideology.

The story is told of a young man, a mitnaged, who marries into a particularly influential rabbinic family. Slowly but surely, he becomes interested in the world of Chasidut and, much to the chagrin of his new father-in-law, he moves to Kotzk to study under the eccentric and brilliant Rebbe of Kotzk, Rav Menachem Mendel Morgenstern.

One Yom Tov, when he returned home, his father-in-law, a scholar in his own right, decided to challenge his young son-in-law, and asked him: "Alright, so you've been in Kotzk all year. What did you learn there?"

Answers the young student, "I learned that there is a God." His father in law chuckled with amusement and frustration. "Even the servant girl believes in God!" Yes, says the student: "She believes it. I know it."

As practicing Jews, we rarely engage seriously in discussions of belief and faith, both because of our personal challenges and questions as well as the multifaceted complications inherent in attempting to "prove" God's existence. Most often we feel more comfortable with deed, the world of Jewish action, rather than creed, the world of Jewish thought and belief.

Nevertheless, the Rambam at the beginning of Hilchot Avodat Kochavim describes in detail the process undertaken by Avraham Avinu in encountering God, and the midrashim explains with color and detail the kind of life that Avraham lead before God's commandment to leave his life behind and make aliyah. His life was fraught with challenges, including the negative repercussions of disagreeing

with his family on questions of religion and suffering at the hands of his government.

So how did Avraham encounter God? What possessed him to go up against the world with no Jewish education, no family support and a wealth of opposition? The Rambam explains: he grew up as an idol worshipper just like his family, but he was curious about the world.

The midrash (Rabba Lech Lecha 12:1) explains this bold curiosity with a mashal - a parable: Imagine a man walking in a forest, and somewhere in a clearing he sees a בֵּירוֹ דּוֹלְקָת - a house alight. There is only one thing that the man knows with certainty -- that someone built the house. He knows nothing about the ideas, ideology, or opinions of the builder. There is no indicator as to whether the builder is male or female, tall or short, married or single, liberal or conservative. Only that a builder must exist. He cries out "There must be a Master of the House!"; and the Master peeks out from behind the curtain.

Such, says the midrash, was the emotional experience of "lech lecha." That's how Avraham sees the world, and first encounters his Creator. If the world exists with design, so it must have a Designer, and he wishes to understand the builder a little better. It's a powerful observation, but many have peered into the skies and failed to glean the same appreciation. What is it about Avraham's quest that he merits knowledge of God, where so many others fell short?

Let us revisit the words of the midrash carefully, for there is a description of this "house" that might provide us with some practical insight. It's called a בֵּירוֹ דּוֹלְקָת -- a house alight. And even in English, there is an ambiguity to this description: either the lights are on or the house is up in flames. בֵּירוֹ דּוֹלְקָת implies both. Rather than choosing to explain it one way or another, I believe this to be an intentional ambiguity in the text, one that Chazal in their genius chose to convey the profundity of Avraham's understanding. No better description fits our world than simultaneously existing with the lights on and burning down at the same time.

Let us consider the Jewish world currently: We have more yeshivot, schools and Torah learning than ever before. The lights are clearly on. But just as obvious is the shocking rate of assimilation and growing anti-semitism. The State of Israel is booming and thriving as a technological and ethical superpower -- the lights are certainly on! But we also face more criticism, cynicism, and violence than any other developed nation, and it's burning

us down. It's almost a fact of the human condition that greatness comes hand in hand, simultaneously, with disaster. It's this phenomenon of life that makes Avraham want to know the Creator that he understands must exist. He wants to comprehend the power that holds this world in such perfect balance.

Put another way, Avraham understands that our knowledge of and relationship with God is, at its core, born out of conflict. We find God at the intersection of harmony and chaos, and in the cracks between competing ideologies. Ultimately, we touch Godliness not through simplifying the world, but by reveling in its complexities. If we resist the urge to reduce the world to one version or another and instead truly appreciate the conflicts we encounter, we will find in ourselves the strength to engage with God.

So if we ask our Chassid of Kotzk, how is it that you know God, while the rest of us merely believe, perhaps he would tell us that knowledge of God comes from the struggle. It comes from grappling with faith rather than ignoring it. It comes from conversing, reflecting, and persevering despite our confusion. Or perhaps it comes from within our confusion itself. Either way, we might argue, the challenges are not designed to break us - they're there to entice us, tempt us, and encourage our creativity and ingenuity in encountering God.

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## LOT'S EXTRA BAGGAGE

TY KAY ('18)

IN THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, HASHEM COMMANDS AVRAHAM to get up from his current dwelling place and migrate to Canaan, where he will achieve great success. However, Avraham was not alone on this journey. Accompanying him were his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot. After they enter the land and settle, Avraham is triumphant in his endeavors and is able to become a role model for future generations. However, Lot eventually fades away and is essentially forgotten. Why is this so? What caused Avraham's path to diverge so greatly from Lot's path? The answer can be seen in the pasuk which describes Avraham and Lot's departure. The pasuk says:

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-לוֹט וְאֶת-רְכָשׁוֹ בֶן-אָחִי אַבְרָם,  
וַיֵּלְכוּ; וְהוּא יָשָׁב, בְּסֹדֹם

*"And they took Lot and his property the son of the brother of Avram, and they left and he was dwelling in Sodom."*

(Bereishit 14:12)

The grammatical phrasing of this pasuk seems to refer to both Lot and his property as joining Avraham on his journey, not just Lot himself.

When Hashem told Avraham to leave everything he had behind and start a new life, Avraham had to have complete trust in Hashem to do such. He had to leave behind the great life and all the possessions he had accumulated and travel to the unknown. The fact that he did so is one of the reasons Avraham is so greatly praised. However, Lot did not parallel Avraham's actions. Despite switching locations just like Avraham, Lot kept his physical belongings, which he had grown attached to. The whole purpose of this journey was to cause spiritual growth, but Lot's love of his physical possessions prevented him from truly making the transition. Hopefully, like Avraham, we can all realize that everything comes from Hashem, and not grow too attached to our personal belongings.

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## CONTINUING OUR PARENTS' WORK

LANA ROSENTHAL ('17)

SINCE EARLY CHILDHOOD WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT Avraham pondering the workings of the sun, deducing the existence of a God greater than nature, and becoming the first monotheist. We are familiar with the midrash detailing Avraham's destruction of his father's idols. This is the Avraham of "me'ever hanahar" – the Avraham who is not afraid to break with society, tradition, and his family in pursuit of truth.

But in this week's parsha, Lech Lecha, the Torah states, "These are the generations of Terach. Terach fathered Avram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot . . . Terach took Avram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Avram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Charan, they settled there. The days of Terach were 205 years, and Terach died in Charan" (Bereishit 11:27-32).

In this description, Avraham seems not to have split from his family, but to be very much rooted in his family. Otherwise, why start by mentioning Terach? If Avraham were the start of a completely new movement,

why associate him with his past? Was Avraham truly a nonconformist who broke with tradition and family or did he, in fact, continue the legacy of Terach?

Furthermore, Hashem's commandment of "lech lecha" comes after Terach has taken his entire family, including Avraham, and left Aram Naharayim, arriving in Charan where he dies. How then do we understand "lech lecha," which tells Avraham (who ostensibly is living in Charan) to leave Aram Naharayim and his father's house?

Rabbi Sacks suggests that perhaps Terach, whether in action or ideology, had already recognized monotheism, and Avraham furthered this recognition – that Avraham finished what Terach started. And in fact, though noted as an idolater, Terach, too, is described as "me'ever hanahar." Yehoshua states, "...Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the river (Euphrates), Terach, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Yehoshua 24: 2).

Our parsha hints to this same idea. The entire family of Avraham, including Terach, goes to Charan, but Terach dies there. Avraham, both literally and figuratively, completes the journey Terach started in continuing on to Canaan. According to this interpretation, "lech lecha" could mean "go -- continue in the ways of your father."

The idea of children finishing the work of parents is one that applies to our relationship with Hashem, as well. We call Hashem "avinu"-- "our father". In contrast to Noach, who "walked with Hashem," Hashem says to Avraham, "Walk ahead of Me and be perfect" (Bereishit 17: 1). We are expected to walk ahead and finish His work. This is evident in the Kabbalistic idea of tzimtzum: Hashem retracts Himself to make room for Man's creation in the world. We emulate Avraham in this responsibility and build on the work of our parents.

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## EMUNAH AS AN INVESTMENT

SYDNEY FREEDMAN ('20)

IN PARSHAT LECH LECHA WE FIND A SEEMINGLY STRANGE phrase. The Torah says, "And he (Avraham) trusted in God, and God considered it to him as righteousness" (15:6). It seems an unfair credit to Avraham that his faith would be considered righteousness; if God spoke direct-

ly to any of us, we too would probably have the same unshakable faith! The answer is given by Rabbi Mordechai of Lechovitz, who cites the Gemara Shabbat (31a), which says that after each of us passes away, we will be asked: “did you transact faithfully?” This is typically considered to be asking whether someone was honest and fair in business transactions.

However, Rabbi Mordechai has a different translation. When you transact in business, you do everything in your power to to maximize your profit. Perhaps this question is instead asking whether one viewed their faith in the same sense; did we do everything we could to get the most out of our emunah or did we just take what we were given without putting forth any effort?

Avraham transacted in faith. He constantly tried to strengthen his connection to Hashem by coming to even more knowledge about Him and believing even that which he couldn't see about Hashem. We should all strive to be like Avraham and view our faith as an investment that can grow and prosper, rather than as a flat sum.

## DIVINE PROTECTION

SHEVI ZAK ('17)

THIS WEEK'S PARSHA IS PARSHAT LECH LECHA. IN THIS PARSHA, God makes a covenant with Avraham, promising Avraham that He will make him a great nation, guide him, protect him, and give him the land of Israel. In return, God commands Avraham to obey Him and to make sure that he and his descendants all become circumcised as a symbol of this agreement.

Rashi comments on this covenant that it is, “the covenant of love and the covenant of the land” (Bereishit 17:2), and it is a covenant that is meant to be passed down from generation to generation .

We learn from this comment that God made his agreement with Avraham out of love for Avraham and for his descendants, the Jewish people. He made it as a promise that He will always love us and care for us, no matter what happens. He wants this to be a lasting commitment for the Jewish people. Through the covenant, God creates a permanent bond between Himself and Bnei Yisrael. He shows that He will always be there, guiding us through our highs and our lows. All He asks in return is that we believe in Him and follow His Torah, which is His guide that is meant to help us live the best life we can.

We know that God has followed through on His part of the deal. He has protected us countless times. When the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Nazis, as well as others, rose up to destroy the Jews, against all odds we survived. Despite being only about 0.2% of the world, Jews have managed to survive for thousands of years because we have God protecting us. Now it is up to us to keep our part of the deal, and make sure we keep Hashem's mitzvot and follow His Torah.

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