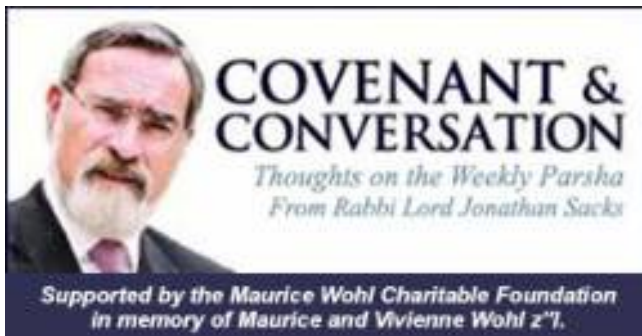


In this Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by *Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by *Rabbi Ari Kahn*
- **Mayanot** by *Rabbi Noson Weisz*
- **Rabbi Frand On the Weekly Torah Portion** by *Rabbi Yissocher Frand*



The Courage Not to Conform

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they do not 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 call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of God to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)"

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 neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents, and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house."

I want you, says God to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion 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" (Gen. 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. They did so in Europe

throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and into what Hobbes called “the war of every man against every man.”¹

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to the ancient times we have long outgrown. The way to think of idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and what missiles and bombs are for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: “The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must.”² Judaism is a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I

have reached after a lifetime of studying our sacred texts. It is about how a nation can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a world based on justice and compassion, in which “They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and 14 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. 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. As the Sages say, he was called *ha-ivri*, “the Hebrew,” because “all the world was on one side (*be-ever echad*) and he was on the other”.³ 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. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

After the Holocaust, some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that was committing one of the great crimes against humanity. One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it, the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the correct answer for the first few cards, and then to answer incorrectly for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform: it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

More frightening still was the Stanford experiment carried out in the early 1970s by Philip Zimbardo. The participants were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within days the students cast as guards were behaving abusively, some of them subjecting the “prisoners” to psychological torture. The students cast as prisoners put up with this passively, even siding with the guards against those who resisted. The experiment was called off after six days, by which time even Zimbardo had found himself drawn into the artificial reality he had created. The pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave “his land, his birthplace and his father’s house,” 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, writes: “By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. 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.”⁴

One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavour, is precisely this willingness to be different. Throughout the centuries, Jews have been the most striking example of a group that refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith.

One other finding of Solomon Asch is worth noting. He noted that when just one other person was willing to support the individual who could see that the others were giving the wrong answer, it gave him the strength to stand up against the consensus. That is why, however small their numbers, Jews created communities. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews, we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised:

*Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I,
I took the one less travelled by,*

*And that has made all the
difference.*⁵

It is what makes a nation of leaders.

Shabbat Shalom

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. When Abraham began his journey, what was he following and how was he leading?
2. When is it a good idea to take the road less travelled by?
3. Does Abraham’s story inspire you to challenge the idols of today? If so, what do you see as today’s idols?

NOTES

1. Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), part 1, ch. 13.
2. Thucydides, 5.89.
3. Genesis Rabbah 42:8
4. Walter Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 49.
5. Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken, Birches, and Other Poems* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1916), 10.



Silence, Speech - and Silence

The text of the Torah tells us little about Avram (later called Avraham) prior to the start of “*Lech Lecha*”.¹ However, with those words – *Lech Lecha* – God speaks, instructs, and promises. And from that moment onward, Avram’s life is changed; in retrospect, we can say that the course of history is changed, the entire world is changed.

(1) God said to Avram, go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a [source of] blessing. I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will damn, and all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed through you. 12:1-3

We do not know if this was God’s first communication with Avram, though it is the first recorded one.² We also don’t know exactly when the communication took place. The text reports that Avram was 75 years old when he left Charan, and we would prefer to assume that Avram carried out God’s instructions soon after he received them.³

Rabbinic tradition⁴ fills in the lacunae in the written text and paints a picture of Avram as an individual who seeks truth and “discovers” God, an individual whose love of God and man inspires him to share his discovery – monotheism – as widely as possible.⁵ In his hometown, his efforts are met with resistance, eventually leading to a showdown with Nimrod that nearly results in Avram’s death. Avram sets off for a safer venue; at his next location, he apparently enjoys much greater success in inspiring people toward a relationship with God: When he eventually leaves Charan, he is accompanied by a large entourage of students, new adherents to the idea of monotheism.

Avram took his wife, Sarai, and his brother's son, Lot, and all their possessions which they had acquired, and the souls [people]

they had made in Charan, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan. 12:5

The “souls that they made in Charan” is understood by Targum Unkolus as the people he (and Sarah) had inspired:

All the souls they made
subservient to the Torah
(Law/teachings)

Rashi cites⁶ this teaching:⁷

[THE SOULS] THAT THEY HAD GOTTEN (literally, made) IN CHARAN – The souls which he had brought beneath the sheltering wings of the Shechinah. Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women and Scripture accounts it unto them as if they had made them.

After all of these events – after his near-death experience, after uprooting his family and re-settling in Charan, after successfully spreading the message of the One God, the God of compassion and mercy – at long last, Avraham receives a confirming communication from the God in whom he believes. More than just a confirmation of his belief, Avraham

receives directions. He knows how he is to proceed. He knows that his future will be in a new land, where he hopes he will find new opportunities, and perhaps most importantly, where he will enjoy Divine protection and assistance: Unlike his earlier trials and tribulations, now those who attack him will pay the price. At last, everyone will know that Avraham’s belief in God has brought blessing to the world. The promise he receives, “all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed through you,” guarantees his success. Avraham starts his journey with the certainty that now things would be different – but would they?

Perhaps the commandment to leave his home – which was bundled together with blessings of success – wasn’t the beginning of the solution, after all; perhaps it was simply one more challenge, one more hurdle, one more of the tests

Avraham endured. The Mishnah⁸ teaches that Avraham was challenged with ten tests – and passed them all. What the Mishnah doesn’t reveal is, what precisely were these tests?⁹ Was the instruction to leave Charan, albeit laden with Divine blessings, considered a test, a challenge to be met? There were certainly difficulties involved. Despite the blessings he had been promised, other than his wife and his

nephew Lot, Avraham left his entire family behind.¹⁰ He disconnected himself from the protection and support of his kin and set out to points unknown.

We may well assume that Avram’s stay in Charan was originally intended as a temporary situation, a layover in the journey toward his final destination. When he first set out from Ur Kasdim, Avram’s party included a significant member of his family – his father Terach:

Terach took his son Avram, and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Avram. And they set out with them from Ur Kasdim to go **to the land of Canaan**, and they came to **Charan** and dwelled there.
11:31

We might argue that this strange idea – Terach’s inexplicable trek toward the Land of Canaan – was in fact an idea planted in **his** mind by God.¹¹

In a communication recorded subsequently,¹² God takes the credit for taking Avraham from his birthplace, Ur Kasdim:

He said to him, "I am God who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to

give you this land to inherit.
15:7

There are those who read this verse in a more specific manner: God is reminding Avraham that it was He who saved him from the *Ur* – the fire or furnace – in Kasdim.¹³

And He said to him, I am the Eternal God who brought you out of the fiery furnace of Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit. (Targum Pseudo Yonatan Bereishit 15:7)

“Ur Kasdim” contains within it a reference – perhaps a hint – to the events that are absent in the text but are recounted in the famous Midrash: Avram was thrown into a fiery furnace by Nimrod, but survived due to Divine intervention. Does this episode, which pre-dates God’s promises to Avraham articulated in *Lech Lecha*, nonetheless fall under the same umbrella of Divine protection? Was the as-yet unspoken promise already in effect during the episodes of Avraham’s life detailed in the Midrash, including his miraculous survival of death-by – fire at the hands of Nimrod? Or does that earlier episode merely foreshadow what the future relationship between God and Avraham will be?

The implication of the Divine communication, *lech lecha*, was that Terach's participation in this journey would come to an end: "Go forth from your land and your birthplace¹⁴ and your **father's house** to the land I will show you." Terach, father of Avram, the man who had started the journey to Canaan, would be left behind.¹⁵ Apparently, Terach, the purveyor of idols, had gone as far as he would or could go; he had to be left behind, collateral damage of his own mission.

It is worth noting that in his comments on the verses describing Terach's truncated journey and Avram's new mandate moving forward, Rashi explains that Terach would live many more years after the parting of the ways (Bereishit 11:32). Nonetheless, Rashi argues, it was appropriate for Avram to abandon his father (and his filial responsibilities) because Terach was wicked; he was an idolator.¹⁶ Later in his life (and at a later point in the text) we find hints that Terach eventually¹⁷ abandoned idolatry and ended his life as a penitent (Bereishit 15:15).¹⁸ Perhaps Avram's presence, his heightened spirituality and righteousness, had been holding Terach back; as long as Avraham was around,

Terach felt no need to do the hard spiritual work. He left the "heavy lifting" to his son and simply hung on to his coattails. Only when Avraham leaves him behind does Terach realize that he himself must make his own spiritual journey.¹⁹

Once again, we return to our question: Is this another test? Was the commandment to abandon his father another means of testing Avram's dedication, or did Avram perceive this as being finally freed from the burden of his idolatrous father?

Other aspects of the command of *lech lecha* make matters even worse: Avram did not have any idea where he was headed. Surely the challenge of this journey and the challenge of uprooting his life were amplified by the uncertainty. However, all of these considerations would seem to be outweighed by the promises and blessings bestowed upon Avraham.

Avram and his entourage arrive in the Land of Canaan, and they travel through the landscape to a place called Shechem or *Eylon Moreh*:

(6) Avram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to Eylon [the oak] of Moreh, and the Canaanites were then in the land. (7) God appeared to Avram

and said, “I will give this land to your descendants.” He built an altar there to God who appeared to him. 12:6-7

In what seems like an innocent aside, we are told that the Canaanites inhabited the land at the time. At this juncture, God appears to Avram and blesses him: his descendants will inherit this land. This wonderful news contains two blessings: One, the hitherto barren Avram would have a child who would bear subsequent generations of descendants; and two, the purpose of this trip was to bring him to the land that these descendants would one day call their own. But therein lies the rub: The land was not actually promised to Avraham himself, rather it was promised as a gift to the children and the descendants he did not yet have; for now, the Canaanites inhabit the land, which means that this promise refers to distant future events and realities.

Should this give us pause? Should we perhaps reconsider the other promises he was given, and conclude that these, too, were ‘long-term’ promises that would come to fruition only in some distant future?

I will make you a great nation I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and those who damn you I will curse and all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed through you. **12:2-3**

Were these blessings something Avram could expect immediately? Did they refer to Avraham’s lifetime, or were these promises of protection and blessing, like the promise of the land, something only future generations would see?

Perhaps the very fact that he received these blessings was a test: Would Avram demand immediate gratification? Would he lose faith if he did not see the blessings realized? Would he despair when he understood that he would never personally reap the rewards of his devotion and sacrifice?

To compound the problem, the blessings themselves were clouded by imprecision and a lack of specificity: Which land would he be receiving? What would be the borders and contours of this land? This confusion crescendos in the complex verses that follow. Avraham continues traveling south – perhaps seeking answers to some of these questions.

He left from there to the mountain east of Beit El, and pitched his tent; Beit El to the west, and Ai to the east. There he built an altar to the Eternal God and called out in the name of the Eternal God. **12:8**

Something is missing. God is silent; no further information or clarification is offered. Avraham, for his part, repeats what he had done before. Once again he builds an altar and “calls in the name of God.” Some commentaries imagine Avraham calling out, as he did in Charan, to his neighbors, teaching them to serve the One God. Targum Unkolus understands these verses very differently: Avram calls God by name, searches for Him. Avram is at a loss; he is stymied by the lack of information and he calls to God for answers, for details, for further instructions. But this time, God doesn’t speak.

And then, things get worse. A famine descends upon the land, and still God is silent. Avraham is left to ponder on his own: Was the promise that he would be a source of blessing something he should count on in the here-and-now, or was it, like the promise of offspring and inheriting the land, also a promise for the more

distant future? The combination of God’s continued non-communication and the lack of food leads Avraham to a decision: He continues his trek southward.

The Ramban attacks Avraham for his decision to leave Israel, and for causing his wife to enter a morally precarious situation.²⁰ But is this critique fair?²¹ Did Avram know that the land on which he found himself (Egypt) was outside of the borders of his future inheritance? Based on the communication he had received, how could he have known which land was included in the promise? He feared for his safety; should he have trusted solely in God’s promise to protect him, putting faith before action? When considering the situation, the facts seemed to indicate that the promises – all the promises – were not intended to have any bearing on the present; they were more akin to long-term bonds than to immediate insurance policies. A famine had come; surely the promise of blessing flowing through Avraham to the world had not yet begun. Could he expect Divine protection at this point in history?

The conclusion is inescapable: From the moment God spoke to him, every minute and every aspect of Avram’s life had

become complicated. The blessings, it seems, would not ‘kick in’ until the future; God’s deafening silence seemed to confirm this diagnosis.

This wholly unsatisfying model of communication continues for the rest of Avraham’s life: God speaks when **He** sees fit, and not necessarily when Avraham is in great need of direction, clarification, friendship or mentoring. Only after Avraham separates from Lot does God speak again, although the separation itself might have happened earlier, more seamlessly and peacefully, and with less self-doubt, had God given Avraham some guidance or assured him that parting ways with Lot was the correct course of action.²²

Similarly, only after Avraham becomes embroiled in battle between warring kings, and only after the hostilities come to an end, God assures Avraham that he will protect him. Arguably, those comforting words would have been more helpful BEFORE, and not after, the war. Yet God alone decides when to speak and when to leave the courageous Avraham to his own devices. When details are finally provided, Avraham is told that four hundred years will have to pass before the land is his –

but his descendants will first suffer angst, servitude and abuse.

When Sarah is taken by Avimelech,²³ God speaks to Avimelech,²⁴ not to Avraham. Avraham is left to work the situation out without guidance, without instructions or assurances, only silence. And so it continues: Avraham’s entire life seems to be an ongoing test, an endless series of challenges, some of which are unimaginably difficult. But Avraham marches on with incredible aplomb. His faith is never shaken; he continues his journey armed with promises for the distant future. The tests he faces phase him no more than the hurdles over which a well-trained athlete leaps; Avraham takes them all in his stride. Despite God’s silence, Avraham feels blessed; he knows that he is blessed. He knows it with certainty, because he knows with certainty that the God he loves, the loving God, has blessed him. Even though it will take years, generations, Avraham knows that the day will come when these blessings will be manifest. Sooner or later, it will happen: He will have children and the Land of Israel will be theirs,²⁵ for God had spoken.

1. Though Avram and his family are introduced in the end of Chapter 11, very little is told about Avram. The various midrashim that fill out the narrative tell of Avraham's trials and tribulations; while these details are a significant part of Jewish consciousness, they are absent from the text of the Torah, although some textual hints support the midrashic tradition. See below.
2. According to a midrashic teaching recorded by many medieval sages, the conversation in the 15th chapter of Bereishit chronologically precedes *Lech Lecha* (the 12th chapter). See Seder Olam Rabbah, Chapter 1; this midrash is incorporated in Rashi, Shmot 12:40 and Bereishit 15:13, and can be found in many other commentaries. Tosfot (Talmud Bavli Brachot 7b) opines that the events recorded in Bereishit 15: 1-6 happened at one point in time, while the events recorded in verses 7 – 21 were at an earlier juncture. Either way, this midrashic insight does not change the thrust of the argument. **FOUR HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS** – Altogether from the birth of Isaac until now were 400 years, and we must reckon from that event, for only from the time when Abraham had offspring from Sarah could the prophecy (Genesis 15:13) "Thy offspring shall be a stranger" be fulfilled; and there had been 30 years since that decree made at "the covenant between the parts" until the birth of Isaac. It is impossible to say that this

means that they were 430 years in the land of Egypt alone, for Kohath was one of those who came into Egypt with Jacob (Genesis 46:11); go and reckon all his years and all the years of Amram his son and the whole eighty years of Moses, the latter's son, until the Exodus and you will not find that they total to so many; and you must admit that Kohath had already lived many years before he went down to Egypt, and that many of Amram's years are included in the years of his father Kohath, and that many of the 80 years of Moses are included in the years of his father Amram, so that you see that you will not find 400 years from the time of Israel's coming into Egypt until the Exodus. You are compelled to admit, even though unwillingly, that the other settlements which the patriarchs made in lands other than Egypt come also under the name of "sojourning as a stranger" (גרות), including also that at Hebron, even though it was in Canaan itself, because it is said, (Genesis 35:27) "[Hebron] where Abraham and Isaac sojourned", and it says, (Exodus 6:4) "[the land Canaan], the land of their sojournings wherein they sojourned". Consequently, you must necessarily say that the prophecy, "thy offspring shall be strangers... [four hundred years]" began only from the time when he had offspring. And only if you reckon the 400 years from the birth of Isaac will you find that from the time they came into Egypt until the time they left it, was 210 years (as alluded to in Genesis

15:13). This was one of the passages which they altered for king Ptolemy (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:40; Megillah 9a).

3. The text (12:4) only states that Avraham was 75 when he left Charan but doesn't state his age when God spoke to him. See previous note.: **בְּרֵאשִׁית פִּרְשֵׁת לך לך פִּרְק יב.**
ד

... וְאַבְרָם בֶּן-חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה
בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן

4. It is worth noting that these Midrashic teachings of Avraham's life are not considered as simple stories or folk tales, but as the Rambam (Laws of Idolatry 1:3) codifies these episodes when he tells the early history of monotheism. As soon as this giant was weaned he commenced to busy his mind, in his infancy he commenced to think by day and by night, and would encounter this enigma: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no leader—and who, indeed, causes it to revolve, it being impossible that it should revolve itself? Moreover, he neither had a teacher nor one to impart aught to him, for he was sunk in Ur of the Chaldeans among the foolish worshipers of stars, and his father, and his mother, like all the people, worshiped stars, and he, although following them in their worship, busied his heart and reflects until he attains the path of truth, and, by his correct thinking, he understood when he finally saw the line of righteousness. He knew that there is One God; He leads the planet; He created

everything; and in all that is there is no god save He. He knew that the whole world was in error, and that the thing which caused them to err was, that their worshiping the stars and the images brought about the loss of the truth from their consciousness. And, when Abraham was forty years old he recognized his Creator. After he came to this comprehension and knowledge he started to confute the sons of Ur of the Chaldeans, and to organize disputations with them, cautioning them, saying: "This is not the true path that you are following", and he destroyed the images, and commenced preaching to the people warning them that it is not right to worship any save the God of the universe, and unto Him alone it is right to bow down, to offer sacrifices, and compound offerings, so that the creatures of the future shall recognize Him. Moreover, it is right to destroy and break in pieces all of the images, so that the whole population of the future be not led to an error like unto these who imagine that there is no God save these images. When he had them subdued by his well supported contentions, the king tried to put him to death, but he was saved by a miracle, and went hence to Haran. There he stood up anew and called out in a great voice to the whole world, to let them know that there is One God for the whole universe, and unto Him it is proper to render service. And thus he went onward with his proclamations from city to city, and from government to government, until

he attained the land of Canaan amidst his outcry, even as it is said: "And called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Gen. 21:33). When the people who congregated about him asked him concerning his preachments, he replied by imparting knowledge to each and every one according to his mentality, to the end that he was able to turn him to the path of truth, until there congregated about him thousands, even tens of thousands, and they became the people of Abraham's household, in whose heart he implanted this great cause, concerning which he compiled books, and which he imparted to his son Isaac. Isaac, from his seat of learning, gave instructions and admonitions. And Isaac, in turn, imparted it to Jacob and appointed him head master, who, at his seat of learning, gave instructions and supported all who flocked to him. And Jacob our father instructed all his sons, but separated Levi and appointed him head master, and established him in a seat of learning where to instruct in the path of the Name and in the observance of the charges of Abraham. He, moreover, commanded his sons not to interrupt the succession of the sons of Levi to the presidency of the school so that the learning be not forgotten. So did the movement advance intensely among the sons of Jacob and their followers that the world saw a God-knowing nation called into existence, until Israel spent a long time in Egypt, when they turned to be instructed in their practice and to worship

the stars as they did, save only the tribe of Levi, which remained faithful to their ancestral charge; for the tribe of Levi at no time worshiped stars. Verily, in but a short space of time, the root which Abraham had planted would have been uprooted, and the sons of Jacob would have turned to the universal error and wandering; save because of the Lord's love for us, and because He observes the oath of covenant with Abraham our father, He appointed Moses our Master lord of all prophets, and made him His messenger. After Moses our Master was endowed with prophecy and the Lord chose Israel as an inheritance, He crowned them with commandments, and made known to them the way to serve Him, and what will be the judgment rendered against idolatry and all its erring devotees.

5. See Midrash Rabbah 30:4
6. However, Rashi continues and explains that the "psbat" is that these are people who were acquired **וּפְּשִׁיטוּ שֶׁל מִקְרָא עֲבָדִים** וּשְׂפָחוֹת שֶׁקָּנוּ לָהֶם, כְּמוֹ עֲשָׂה אֶת כָּל הַכָּבֵד הַזֶּה (שם ל"א), וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל עֲשָׂה חֵיל (במדבר כד However, the real sense of the text is that it refers to the men-servants and to the maidservants whom they had acquired for themselves. The word "עשה" is used here as (in Genesis 31:1), "he has acquired (עשה) all this wealth", and (Numbers 24:8), "And Israel acquires (עושה) wealth" – an expression for acquiring and amassing.
7. Which also found in Bereishit Rabbah 39:14

8. Mishna Avot 5:3. With ten trials was our Forefather Abraham (may he rest in peace) tried, and he withstood them all; to make known how great was the love of Abraham, our father (peace be upon him).
9. The only episode in Avraham's life which is called a "test" in the text of the Torah, is the instruction to offer his son Yitzchak. Various Midrashim and commentators enumerate the tests, and their lists differ significantly. For a sample of the differences, see Avot d'Rebbe Natan Chapter 33; Pirki d'Rebbe Eliezer chapter 26 and the commentary of Rabbi David Luria (RADAL); Rambam – Commentary to the Mishna; Rabbenu Yona – Commentary to the Mishna.
10. According to one tradition Lot was also Avraham's brother-in-law, see Rashi, 11:29, who identifies Yiscah, the daughter of Haran, as Sarah. Lot was the son of Haran.
11. See Rabbenu Meyuchas 11:31 and 15:7, who says that God gave the idea to Terach to take his son Avram to the Land of Canaan. Also, see Ha'amek Davar Bereishit 11:31 and 15:7 : God took Terach on this journey in order to facilitate Avraham's journey; God did not yet communicate with Avram, but he (Avram) was already spiritually enlightened. He perceived the holiness of the Land of Israel from afar. Also see Hizkuni 11:31, who opines that God commanded Terach to leave Ur Kasdim. See Sfat Emet, Bereishit 5632, based on the Zohar (Bereishit 165b) that God spoke to everyone – but Avram was the only one who listened. Also see Kuzari 4:27: God's instruction was a response to Avram's religious yearning and his righteous behavior.
12. We noted above that according to the Seder Olam Rabbah, this conversation took place when Avram was seventy years old.
13. See Midrash Rabbah 44:13.
14. Avraham's precise birthplace is the subject of some debate, and beyond the scope of this essay. See Ramban 11:28, and 12:1.
15. The acknowledgement that Terach had left Or Kasdim with Avraham helps explain what some see as an awkwardness of the sequence of the instructions in text, and the claim that leaving his father's home should have been first, now we realize, that his "father's home" had left his birthplace. And therefore, after leaving his birthplace, Avraham needs to leave his father's home.
16. Rashi Bereishit 11:32. AND TERAH DIED IN CHARAN after Abram had left Charan (as related in the next chapter) and had come to the land of Canaan and had been there more than sixty years. For it is written, (Genesis 12:4) "And Abram was seventy five years old when he left Charan", and Terah was seventy years old when Abram was born (Genesis 11:26), making Terah 145 years old when Abram left Charan, so that there were then many years of his life left (i.e. he lived many years after that – as a matter of fact, 60 years, as he was 205 years old when he

died). Why, then, does Scripture mention the death of Terah before the departure of Avram? In order that this matter (his leaving home during his father's lifetime) might not become known to all, lest people should say that Avram did not show a son's respect to his father, for he left him in his old age and went his way. That is why Scripture speaks of him as dead (Bereishit Rabbah 39:7). For indeed the wicked even while alive are called dead and the righteous even when dead are called living, as it is said, (2 Samuel 23:20) "And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada the son of a living man."

17. As previously noted, Rashi follows the Seder Olam in the understanding that the *Brit bein habitarim* transpired prior to "Lech Lecha", making it much more complicated to contend that Terach subsequently repented.
18. Rashi Bereishit 15:15, Based on midrash Rabbah 38:12. For various changes in Terach's belief system see Panim Yafot, Bereishit 11:31. **UNTO THY FATHERS** – His father was an idolator and yet it (the text) announced to him that he (Abraham) would go to him! But this teaches you that Terah repented of his evil ways
19. Similar to the ruffians who lived in the neighborhood of Rav Zeira, See Sanhedrin 37, for more on this see the Crowns on The Letters page 431,432.
20. Ramban 12:10
21. In a comment on Bereishit 12:1, Ramban himself allows for the possibility that Avraham does not know the destination

which God has in store for him. It is possible that even after arriving in the Land which will be known as Israel, that Avraham doesn't know the precise borders.

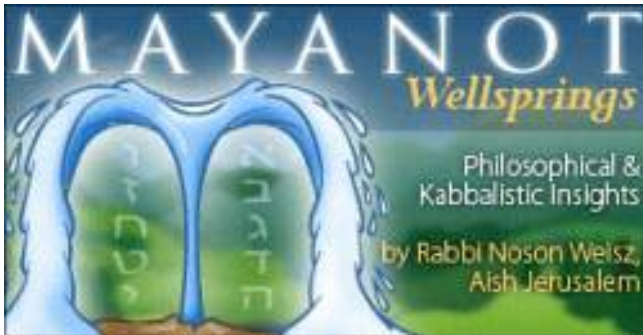
22. It is possible that the separation from Lot was the completion of the Divine instruction to leave his father's home. Lot's accompanying of Avraham is complex, for at first it seems that Lot "tags along" and only subsequently is he taken. Compare the description in verses 19:4 and 19:5. See Comments of Rashi 12:2, and Ramban where he cites Rashi and ibn Ezra (yet the Ramban disagrees). Avram went forth as God had commanded him, **and Lot went with him**. Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan. **Avram took his wife, Sarai, and his brother's son, Lot**, and all their acquisitions which they had acquired, and the souls/people they had made/purchased in Charan, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan. **FROM THY LAND** – But had he not already departed from there together with his father and had reached as far as Haran (Genesis 11:31)? But thus God in effect said to him: Go still further away – leave now thy father's house also.
23. Bereishit Chapter 20.
24. Bereishit Chapter 20:3-7.
25. Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller in his commentary to the Mishnah, Tosfot Yom Tov, notes that in the Mishnah in Avot which spoke of the ten tests (5:3), the *tanna* uses the term "Avraham **Avinu**" –

“Our forefather Avraham”, while in the previous Mishnah he was only described as “Avraham.” The implication of the addition of “*avinu*” in this context is that we, as Avraham’s descendants, inherit reward from our forefather based on those same actions. This idea is expanded by Rav Chaim of Volozhin in his *Ruach Hachaim*, where he points to the self-sacrifice exhibited by even “simple,” unlearned Jews – even to the point of death. Rav Chaim explains that this was imprinted on the collective Jewish soul by our Forefather Avrah

It is the first agreement recorded in the Torah between God and man that is arrived at by a process of dialogue/negotiation: it constitutes a legal contract between God and a human being where each takes on obligations and burdens.

We still announce today at the ceremony of circumcision that we are entering yet another Jewish child into the Covenant of Abraham. This covenant is an eternal part of the Jewish birthright.

As can be seen from the text, the subject of the agreement was the grant of the land of Israel to the children of Abraham. There are several conceptual difficulties surrounding this supremely vital treaty we have with God.



Guarantees of Faith

On that day God made a covenant with Abraham saying, "To your descendants have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates river. (Genesis 15:18)

This covenant is one of the cornerstones upon which the Jewish nation stands till the present day.

1. Why is Israel different than other nations? Why do they all have a country as a matter of course, whereas Israel requires a covenantal grant to have its own piece of the earth?
2. In this covenant God promised Abraham two things. Firstly, He promised him offspring; this promise Abraham accepted immediately, although the delivery on this promise seems like no simple matter as evidenced by God's

manifest appreciation: *And he trusted in God, and He reckoned it to his (Abraham's) credit as righteousness.* (Ibid 6). Secondly, He promised Abraham the land of Israel; this promise Abraham seems to have had trouble accepting as he responded: *My Lord God: whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?* (Ibid 7). This idea seemed so remote to Abraham that he asked God for a guarantee. Why did Abraham have more trouble accepting the promise of land than the promise of children?

3. At the time of the signing of this covenant God told Abraham: *Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own — and they will serve them, and they will oppress them — four hundred years.* (Ibid,13) According to the Talmud (Nedorim, 32a) this 400-year exile and oppression were in retribution for Abraham's lack of faith, i.e. Abraham's failure to accept God's promise of the land of Israel at face value and his request for a guarantee. Doesn't this seem like a punishment out of all proportion to the crime? A 400-year exile for

simply requesting a guarantee? Moreover, if Abraham deserves to be censured for his lack of faith, how does it make sense to impose the punishment on his great-great grandchildren long after his death?

In answering all these questions, let us begin by trying to understand why it took a covenant with God to allow Abraham to have children.

We are not only seeking an explanation for the workings of the Divine Providence that determined that Abraham and Sarah should be naturally childless. We also have to explain why a couple bearing a child in their middle years [Abraham lived to 175 and Sarah to 127; they were only a 100 and 90 respectively when they had Isaac; that is to say middle aged] takes on the proportions of such an immense miracle. After all, Abraham was willing to enter a fiery furnace out of loyalty to God, so why did the mere belief in the promise of having children earn him so much praise from God? What is so immense here?

The Miracle Of A New Line

The Midrash (Bereishis raba, 39,7) relates that when God told Abraham to leave Ur, Abraham was nervous that people would criticize him for abandoning his parents

just as they were getting old. God told Abraham that he is absolved from the obligation of honoring his parents. He added that he was the only person in all of human history who would ever receive such absolution. But why was Abraham absolved?

The Maharal explains in his work *Gvuros Hashem* (Ch.5) that Abraham received this absolution because he was a new beginning. Usually, children inherit their potential, whether physical or spiritual, entirely from their parents. As such, they owe their parents honor and respect as the ultimate source of their beings.

But Abraham did not inherit his spiritual potential from anyone. On his own he climbed to a new pinnacle of spirituality whose potential was innate in all human beings but that no one else had ever actualized since the fall of Adam.

The ability to form the powerful spiritual bond with God which prompted God to finally command Abraham to depart from Ur to go to live in the Holy Land was a heretofore unexploited human resource that Abraham obtained directly from Adam himself, as no human being had ever tapped into it before.

Abraham is described by the Midrash as the very first convert to Judaism:

The nobles of the peoples gathered, the nation of the God of Abraham (Psalms 47). The God of Abraham and not the God of Isaac and Jacob? The God of Abraham who was the very first convert to Judaism. [He is the noble of spirit among the peoples, as it was only Abraham's nobility of spirit that brought him to God. He was not raised to be a Jew by his parents. Isaac and Jacob already had Jewish parents.] (Yalkut, Tehilim, 754)

The ruling that applies to all new converts to Judaism, stated many times in the Talmud (Yevomat 48b among others) is that the convert is like a new born child. In the eyes of Jewish Law, he is no longer related to his previous family. On the other hand, all converts are considered the children of Abraham, their predecessor and the very first convert.

But there is a necessary downside to this. The ability to have children is also a potential one inherits from his parents. Indeed, it could be argued that the human genome is the most basic human factor that is transmitted from generation to

generation. Each and every human being who is born represents yet another link in the endless chain of DNA that stretches all the way back to the first man. If Abraham is not a continuation of this chain, but represents an entirely new human departure, then it follows that he cannot serve as a connecting link along the existing chain of generations, but has to originate a brand new chain of his own. To transform oneself is one thing. To be able to transmit this transformation to all future generations of one's descendants is quite another. This is the background to the covenant described in Genesis 15.

Outside The Control Of Nature

Rabbi Yehuda taught in the name of Rav: "How do we know that the fate of Jews is not under the control of natural law? It is written: *And He took him outside, and said, 'Gaze, now, toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them.'* (Genesis 15:5) Abraham said to God, 'Master of the Universe, the steward of my house Eliezer is my heir.' God told him, 'You are wrong! *Only him that shall come forth from within you shall inherit you.'* (Ibid 4) Abraham said: 'I have consulted the stars, and I know

that I am unable to have a son.' God replied, 'Abandon this science. It does not apply to you as the laws of nature do not determine the fate of Israel.'

According to Jewish thought, all physical potential is mapped out in the stars, which serve as both reservoir and conduit of the spiritual force required to bring about all physical changes in the world. Abraham was an expert in the science of reading the stars. Thus he concluded, that his lack of offspring did not result from a mere physical defect which could theoretically be repaired by some sort of operation or its miraculous equivalent, but was due to the fact that the natural universe contained no spiritual energy that could be translated into providing him with offspring. God was informing Abraham that he was correct in this assessment but it was irrelevant, as He, God, was moving him out of this entire system controlled by the stars.

However, there is a major difficulty in the way of going above nature and drawing energy straight from this ultimate source. God may be perfectly willing to supply the necessary inputs, but the recipient has to be able to reach up all the way to the ultimate source to be able to receive this

input. In order to be able to accomplish this, Abraham had to somehow increase his own stature so that he could reach above nature, and such length of reach was not yet programmed into human beings.

The Power Of Faith

Here is where *emuna* or the power of belief comes in to the picture. Suppose that a person who is naturally potent genuinely believes himself or herself to be sterile. As they inherited the capacity to conceive from their parents, and such capacity is already part of their phenotypes, their lack of belief is unlikely to interfere with their ability to actually bring children into the world. They may find themselves (and frequently do) shocked to be pregnant. But the contrary is certainly not so. For someone who did not inherit any such capacity, belief is very much an issue. Abraham, who was not born with a capacity to reproduce and had to acquire it in midlife, could only accomplish such acquisition through the power of *emuna* or belief.

We can understand this by drawing a simple analogy from the world of sports. The Australian Olympic games were just recently concluded. Among the many featured articles dealing with all aspects of

the games and their participants, there was a fascinating recurring theme. It seems that the successful contenders all devoted a considerable portion of their training to meditation instead of exercise. The meditation consisted of visualizing themselves as winners and reinforcing their belief in their capacity to win.

Thus, even people who obviously already possess the physical potential to surpass all other contenders in their field, have to resort to the spiritual power of *emuna* in order to actualize their potential and bring it to light in the real world. Despite their prowess, without *emuna* they cannot win. How much more must this principle apply to a capacity one doesn't actually have?

Splitting The Sea

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this principle at work is in the story of Nachshon ben Aminodov. In Exodus 14, the Torah relates the story of the splitting of the sea. The pursuing Egyptians found the Jewish people encamped on the shores of the Red Sea and began their attack. Faced by the sea on one side, and the hostile Egyptians on the other, the Jewish people had nowhere to run. Moses assured them that God would save them and then immersed himself in prayer.

*The Lord said to Moses:
"Moses, Why do you cry out to
me? Speak to the Children of
Israel and let them journey
forth." (Exodus 14:15)*

But what else was Moses supposed to do? The sea was raging before them. There was nothing else to do except pray.

Explains Rabbi Chaim of Voloz'hen, the student of the Gaon of Vilna:

God told Moses that from His part, He had done everything He could possibly do to split the sea. But the miracle could not happen unless the Jewish people believed it could happen. They had to start moving in to the sea as though it would get out of their way.

Nachshon ben Aminodov walked straight into the water. First it covered his knees, soon he was immersed in the water up to his neck, and finally it was over his nose and he began to drown. But Nachshon believed that the water could not drown him, as God had told the children of Israel to start traveling. Following God's orders could not lead him into danger. Just before he reached the point of drowning this power of *emuna* finally parted the waters

and others who were not on this level of *emuna* were also able to follow.

The connection between *emuna* and Abraham's children and the need for a covenant with God to bring this about is now clear.

Faith In Inheriting The Land

Let us now move on to the land of Israel.

If Abraham had the necessary strength of *emuna* to reach above nature, connect directly to God, and bring the power of reproduction down to the world, why did this *emuna* fail him about receiving the land of Israel? Why did he ask for a guarantee on this promise?

The answer to this question also emerges from these same ideas that we have been exploring. First of all, we must understand what is so special about this land of Israel that God promised Abraham. Why did God want Abraham to leave a place where he had a large following and was a major force for good and travel to the land of Canaan? After all isn't God everywhere?

In the world as God arranged it, the human habitat is always perfectly adjusted to sustain the people it must support. The same spiritual forces that were implanted by God into nature which produce human

children also must be able to produce the energy required to sustain them. It would be futile to place human beings into the world without providing them with the necessities of survival. This connection between man and his world is clearly enunciated in the following passage of the Talmud.

And He blotted out all existence that was on the face of the ground — from man to animals to creeping things and to the bird of the heavens. (Genesis 7:23) If man sinned why were the animals at fault? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcho answered with a parable: "A man built a wedding canopy for his son and stocked it with all kinds of delicious foods. But his son died and thereupon he demolished the wedding canopy and scattered all that he had placed inside... [saying] 'Didn't I prepare all this for my son? Now that he is dead what do I need with any of it?' Similarly God said, 'Didn't I create all this for the sake of man? Now that man has sinned and is no longer, why do I need the animals?'" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 108a)

But if this is so, then Abraham's offspring must face another serious problem. For just as nature contained no spiritual energy that Abraham could draw on to reproduce, it also contained no energy for the habitat to sustain any potential offspring that he might have. The promise of offspring and the promise of the land of Israel are thus intertwined.

Just as Abraham had to surmount nature to access his children, he had to reach above the natural world to provide them with a habitat. This habitat is the land of Israel. To bring this down to earth, Abraham had to leave Ur and travel to Canaan. But to bring it to earth also required *emuna*. Oddly enough however, the reach for the habitat takes more *emuna* than the reach for offspring.

The Remedy

To understand this point let us consider the remedy for Abraham's lack of *emuna*, the 400-year long exile, a large part of which was the 210-years spent in Egypt in a state of oppression. The final step of the Exodus was the splitting of the sea referred to above about which is written:

*And the people revered God,
and they had faith in God and in*

Moses, His servant. (Exodus 14:31)

The type of *emuna* required to calmly walk into the waves of the sea, or to follow God into the barren desert, is the type of faith that is ready to accept the possibility of existing in the physical world without the aid of any natural inputs. Thus man can breathe in the absence of air, can relieve his thirst in the absence of water, and can satisfy his hunger in the absence of food if that is the will of God.

It is obviously this type of belief in God that is required to be able to reach up to heaven and bring the land of Israel down to earth. Abraham was not certain that he could pass this type of faith down the chain of generations along with his genes. He knew that in the absence of such *emuna* it was impossible to hold on to the land of Israel. And so, he asked God for a guarantee.

Thus, the 400-year exile was not a punishment but a means by which the nation of Israel could acquire the necessary *emuna* to be able to settle and hold onto the land of Israel.

Holding Onto The Land

In the natural world there is no room or provision for the children of Abraham. But if they can survive intact for 400 years and grow into a great nation without their own land or country or army, they will internalize the *emuna* that their prosperity and survival comes from God Himself, bypassing the conduit of the world of nature. This *emuna* will also give them a long enough reach to stretch their arm all the way up to heaven and bring down for themselves their country, Israel.

If an exile of 400-years was sufficient to bequeath the Jewish people such great *emuna*, how much more potent should an exile of 2,000 years have proven to be. One would think that the Jewish people can certainly not be far away from the *emuna* necessary to bring the final Redemption. Yet we are experiencing great difficulties in merely hanging on to a portion of the land of Israel. Why is this so? How can we explain such a total lack of *emuna* after such a long period of survival against great odds?

The truth is that the power of *emuna* hidden in the Jewish people is immense. The trouble with *emuna* is that we only push the switch that turns it on when we

are convinced that there is no way to achieve our objectives according to natural law.

If we look at the history of modern Israel, it is clearly divisible into two parts. Before 1967 everything we touched turned to gold. Since then things haven't gone so smoothly to put it mildly.

This difference in our success in the outer world is entirely matched by the rise and fall of the power of *emuna* within us.

Before 1967, the power of our *emuna* was at full strength. Back then, we looked at ourselves as a people who had to survive against great odds through the strength of our faith and determination. The world has regarded us this way as well. Since then we've come to regard ourselves as a local superpower who is able to manage on its own. The world also treats us this way.

As our *emuna* has waned and so has our worldly success. The lessons of history are obvious. We have only to read the book.



Small Deeds, Great Rewards

When the kings of Mesopotamia overran Sodom and Amorrhah, the Torah tells us (*Bereishit* 14:13) that "the refugee came and reported to Avram" that his nephew Lot and his family had been taken captive. Avram quickly marshaled his forces, gave chase and liberated the captives.

Who was this mysterious escapee? Our Sages identify him as Og, king of the Bashan, who escaped death during the Flood by holding on to Noach's ark. His timely report from the battlefield enabled Avram to rescue his captive nephew.

Many years later, when the Jewish people prepared to launch the conquest of Canaan, Og's kingdom stood in the way. The Torah tells us (*Bereishit* 21:34), "And God said to Moshe, 'Do not fear him, for I have delivered him into your hands.'"

From this, we can infer that Moshe was afraid. Why was he afraid?

The Talmud explains (*Nidah* 61a) that Moshe was afraid that the merit of saving Lot's life would protect Og against the invading Jewish people.

But let us dig a little deeper. Why indeed did Og bring the battlefield report to Avram? What were his motives? Was he concerned for Lot's safety and welfare? Hardly. Rashi explains that he was hoping Avram would rush into battle with the Mesopotamia kings, as he actually did, and that he would perish on the battlefield. This would leave Sarah a widow, and he, Og, would marry her.

Not very noble motives. Og was certainly not thinking of *chessed*, of performing an act of kindness. And yet, despite the glaring lack of altruism, the act itself was considered such a powerful merit for Og that Moshe was afraid to engage him in battle so many years later without specific Divine reassurance. Rav Leib Chasman points out that this shows us the incredible power and reward of a mitzvah, no matter how small and imperfect.

A similar story took place during the Holocaust, where a relatively minor good

deed was, according to the Bluzhever Rebbe, repaid with immense reward.

A Jewish family by the name of Hiller - a husband, wife and a 6-year-old boy named Shachne - were living in the Krakow ghetto in 1942. Prospects for survival were extremely dim. People were being deported to Auschwitz almost daily. Only those capable of working for the German war effort had any hope of survival. A little boy didn't stand a chance.

As time passed, the situation grew ever more desperate. The Hillers despaired of keeping little Shachne alive in the ghetto. There was only one chance. The Hillers were friends with a Polish couple named Jakovicz, who had no children of their own. They felt that these people were trustworthy and that they would take good care of little Shachne until the war was over.

On the night of November 15, 1942, Mrs. Hiller and little Shachne, at the risk of being shot on sight, slipped past the guardposts of the ghetto and into the city. Hearts pounding, they ran through the streets under cover of darkness, two shadows in the misty night, until they reached the Jakovicz house.

"Who knows if we will ever survive this horrible war?" Mrs. Hiller told her Polish friend. "If my husband and I survive, or even one of us, we will come back for our precious Shachne. But if we do not survive, Heaven forbid, I am relying on you to deliver him to our relatives." She slipped her hand into her pocket and brought out two envelopes addressed in a spidery handwriting. The ink was smudged as if by falling tears. "Here are two letters. One is to our relatives in Montreal, the other to our relatives in Washington. Either of them will take him and raise him as a Jew. Even if we die, at least Shachne will carry on as a Jew. I am relying on you, my dear friend, to see this through. God bless you, my friend."

Unfortunately, the Hillers' trust in the Jakovicz family was misplaced. The Hillers perished in the Holocaust, but they had not left their precious Shachne in good hands. Mrs. Jakovicz, a devout Catholic, loved the boy, and he loved her in return. She took him to mass regularly and taught him all the Catholic hymns and prayers. Within a few years, he was just like a Christian child.

In 1946, when it became clear that Shachne's parents were not coming back for him, Mrs. Jakovicz approached the

young parish priest to discuss having the boy baptized as a Christian. During their discussion, the priest discerned that the boy in question was already 10 years old so he asked Mrs. Jakovicz why he had not been brought for baptism in all the preceding years. Mrs. Jakovicz was evasive, and the priest grew more curious. Finally, she told him the entire story.

The young priest urged Mrs. Jakovicz to fulfill her promise to the boy's dead parents and honor their wishes for their son. Mrs. Jakovicz relented and sent off the letters to the relatives in America. In June 1949, through the efforts of the Canadian Jewish Congress, fourteen Jewish orphans from Poland, Shachne among them, were allowed into Canada. In February 1951, by a special act of Congress signed by President Truman, Shachne was allowed into the United States, and he went to live with his family in Washington.

Shachne grew up as a religious Jew in the United States unaware of his close call with baptism. He was successful in the business world, rising to the level of vice president of an important corporation. Throughout the years, he retained close bonds of love and gratitude with Mrs. Jakovicz. He kept in touch with her and

sent her letters, gifts and money. She never mentioned that she had almost had him baptized.

Finally, in 1978, Mrs. Jakovicz felt she had to clear her conscience. She wrote a letter to Shachne in which she admitted the entire story to him. She wrote about the parish priest who had urged her to do the right thing. His name was Karol Wojtyla, better known to the world as Pope John Paul II.

"Who can know why God does what He does?" observed the Bluzhever Rebbe. "But it seems reasonable to me that for that one word of good advice the young priest gave this Polish woman he was rewarded with the greatest award possible for a priest. He became the pope."

COUNT THE STARS

What are you supposed to do when you are asked to do the impossible? Most people would simply shrug their shoulders and forget about it. After all, doing the impossible is impossible, isn't it? Not necessarily.

The Torah tells us that Hashem promised Avram that he would have children (*Bereishit* 15:3-5). "And Avram said, 'O my Master, Lord, what can you give me if

I am childless?' ... And He brought him outside, and He said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars, can you count them?' And he said to him, 'So shall your children be.'"

Rav Meir Shapiro asks what a person would do if he were told to count the stars. One look at the myriad stars in the heavens would tell what an impossible task this was, and he would not even bother to attempt it. But that is not what Avram did. When Hashem told him to "look up at the sky and count the stars," that is exactly what he did. He began to count the stars even though doing so appeared to be impossible.

"*Koh yihyeh zarecha*," Hashem responded. "So shall your children be." Avram's extraordinary trait of eternal optimism, his refusal to acknowledge the impossibility of any task, will characterize his descendants. This will be the hallmark of the Jewish people. No matter how difficult a task may seem, the Jew will not despair. He will try and try and try again.

And when we try, amazing things often happen. Even if we think something is entirely beyond our meager abilities, when we try persistently we discover strengths and abilities that we never knew we

possessed. We find in ourselves new reservoirs of capability, new potential that we never knew existed. We learn we can go beyond all the limits and restrictions that we had considered impenetrable boundaries.

A blind Jew once brought a volume of his Torah insights to Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. He asked Rav Isser Zalman to take a look at one particular piece. "That piece," he remarked, "was the last piece I wrote, and then I went blind."

"What happened?"

"I worked on my *sefer* for many years," the man explained. "I toiled over the Gemara and Rishonim and Poskim with every fiber of my being, and my labors were blessed with some success. Some of the pieces are really very good. But they took so much effort, and I was getting older. One day, after finishing work on a *chiddush*, I decided that I had had enough. I just didn't have the strength to keep this up. From now on, I decided, I would continue to learn, but I would not put in the effort necessary to come up with *chiddushei Torah*, novel Torah insights. I wrote down my *chiddush*, and there and then," he paused and took a deep breath, "I became blind!"

"Did you go to doctors?" asked Rav Isser Zalman.

"Of course I went to doctors," the man replied. "And you know what they told me? They said that based on the condition of my eyes I should have been blind ten years earlier. They simply could not understand why I hadn't gone blind before."

For ten years, this man had done the impossible. He had studied and written *chiddushei Torah*, using eyes that should not have been functioning. But "so shall your children be." Jewish people, the descendants of Avraham, can accomplish the impossible.

Get more great parsha
content:
[aish.com/weekly-
torah-portion](http://aish.com/weekly-torah-portion)