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For Your Benefit

God tells Abraham, “Go for yourself (*lech lecha*) from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1). The Torah portion commences with a curious phrase, “*lech lecha*” which translates as “to or for yourself”, which Rashi says is for his benefit. How is leaving behind everything that Abraham knew good for

him? Additionally, the meaning of the sentence does not require this extra word. Since nothing in the Torah is arbitrary, why did God use this seemingly superfluous word, ‘*lecha*’ ‘for you’ when telling Abraham to go?

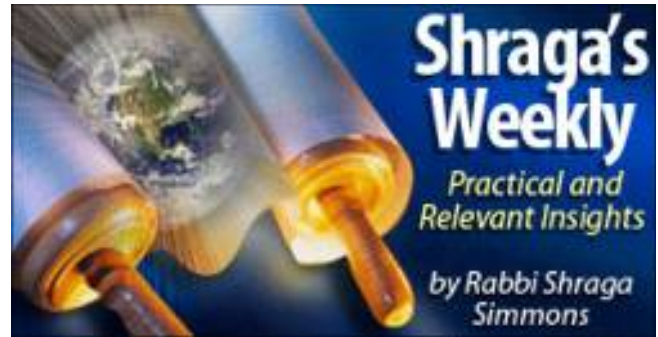
Lesson:

If you were told to go do something for yourself, perhaps you’d go on a vacation or shopping spree, have a decadent piece of cake or getting a manicure. Most likely it would not entail leaving your home and family to go to a place completely unknown to you. Yet, God uses this extra but beautiful word, *lecha*, for you, to tell us that his leaving behind his birthplace is indeed *for* Abraham.

Modern marketing deceives us into thinking that acts of indulgence and luxury are really ‘for us’. We need a break, we deserve it, we worked hard for it, etc. *Lech lecha* illustrates a beautiful idea that that which is truly for us, our highest selves, is often times not easy and requires hard work. This instance is one of Abraham’s ten trials, each one drawing out his highest potential, culminating in becoming Abraham, forefather of all Jews.

We know that everything God does is for the good, but during challenging situations it is hard to focus on and understand how it is for our benefit. Often times, we may not see why we needed this particular challenge. However, God is loving and compassionate Who loves us more than our hearts have the capacity to love. As such, when we let go and acknowledge that everything is ‘*lecha*’, directly given to me for my benefit because there is nothing that would be better for my purpose and mission in this world, we are able to unleash the blessing sometimes wrapped in ugly packaging. We can strengthen our faith and complete trust in God, know that He is in charge, and only does what is the best for me, and with that outlook we will pass all of our tests, just like Abraham.

Exercise: Think of a particular situation that was difficult for you to go through. Now think of one positive thing that came from that experience; it could be recognizing your own strength, refining a particular character trait, a shift in perspective, or meeting someone new through that experience.



Go to Yourself

A fisherman was sitting by the river fishing. Along came a wealthy man and watched with amazement as every few minutes he would reel in another fairly large fish. After only an hour, the fisherman began to pack up and leave. The wealthy man ran over to him asked, "Why are you leaving so soon?"

"Well," said the fisherman, I've caught enough fish to last me for the week and I don't need any more. Now I'm going home to study Torah and spend time with my family."

"But think of what you could do with more fish," the wealthy man implored. "You could sell the extra fish, use the money to invest in more fishing rods, then you could buy a boat and hire other people to do the fishing –

while you supervise the operation."

"And what is the goal of all this?" asked the fisherman.

"Well," replied the wealthy man, "you could then hire someone to manage your business and retire to do what you really want in life."

With that, the fisherman bid the wealthy man goodbye and said, "Thank you very much, but I'm doing that already!"

Idols 'R Us

The point of this story is that sometimes we get so caught up in producing, achieving and becoming successful, that we may never stop to ask, "What is life all about? What am I really living for?"

This week's parsha tells the story of Abraham. When he was three years old, Abraham observed the world of nature with all its perfection, beauty, symmetry, precision, timing, balance, integration, coordination, unity – and he concluded that for a world so perfectly designed, there must be an intelligent designer. Abraham had discovered God.

On the surface, this conclusion is not so amazing. Take any three-year-old to a toy factory and show him the process of design, manufacture and assembly. Would he mistakenly think these toys are produced by accident?!

What is so unique about Abraham's discovery, however, is that he lived in a world steeped in idolatry. Idolatry is a counterfeit attempt to satisfy the basic human need to connect to a dimension beyond ourselves. For some, this means carving a statue of Buddha; for others, it's owning a new Mercedes. During Abraham's time, everyone had an idol.

Abraham's discovery is all the more remarkable given that his family owned and operated a successful idol store. One day, when Abraham was asked to watch the store, he took a hammer and smashed all the idols – except for the largest. His father came home aghast. "What happened?!" he shouted. "It was amazing, Dad," replied Abraham. "The idols all got into a fight and the biggest idol won!" There was no way for his father to respond; deep down he knew that Abraham had tuned into a deeper truth.

Abraham continued his effort to convince others. He brought guests into his tent,

which was open on all four sides and pitched right in the middle of an inter-city highway. Abraham also authored a 400-chapter book refuting idolatry. And he endured all types of mockery and persecution for holding beliefs that were, to say the least, politically incorrect. Nimrod, as the most powerful world leader of the time, was the one most threatened by Abraham's ideas of a supreme God. So Nimrod threw Abraham into a fiery furnace, saying "Let's see your God save you now." Abraham emerged unscathed.

In fact, the Torah calls him *Avraham Ha-Ivri* – Abraham the Hebrew. *Ha-Ivri* translates literally as "the one who stands on the other side." The entire world stood on one side, with Abraham standing firm on the other.

Break Away

What was the secret of Abraham's incredible strength, and how can we integrate this lesson into our lives today?

The answer is found in the first verse of the parsha. God appears to Abraham and says: "Go to yourself ("*Lech Lecha*") – away from your country, your relatives, and your father's house." God is telling Abraham that in order to become truly great, he must "cut the umbilical chord,"

and embark on a journey of growth and self-discovery – away from the familiar routine.

We get stuck in a rut of peer pressure. Old friends. Old habits. Overbearing parents. When I was growing up, a certain friend always wanted to be a lawyer. But his parents wanted him to be a doctor, so they could say, "My son the doctor." He insisted on becoming a lawyer, they insisted he become a doctor. The pressure became so great that he went through 10 years of medical school just to satisfy his parents. (Upon completion, he went to law school, then combined the two fields and became a malpractice attorney.) But the point is that he didn't have the strength to break away and live his own life.

The first question we each must ask is: Where does my "life philosophy" stem from? Is it essentially a Greek approach to life? Roman? Eastern? Jewish? Try asking yourself the following question: "If I had been born into a family of Muslim fundamentalists in Iran, what would I be doing with my life today?" Because if you don't grapple with this question, then chances are quite good you'd be a Muslim fundamentalist!

As God told Abraham: "Go to yourself – away from your country, your relatives, and your father's house." Not to automatically reject society's values. But to intelligently examine their merit.

Self Exploration

Everyone – without exception – has to go through this process.

A famous rabbi once revealed to me the secret of his greatness. He said: "My grandfather founded one of the biggest yeshivas of modern time. And my father succeeded him as head of the yeshiva. Growing up, I was surrounded by the very best that Judaism could offer. I studied with top scholars, I had access to immense libraries of Torah books, and I grew up in a home that was the center of Jewish communal life. I had it all. But at the same time, I felt like it wasn't mine. I had been given it, but I hadn't acquired it."

He continued: "So when I was 18, I made a decision to undergo a thorough process of self-examination. I took all of Jewish thought and practice, and emptied myself of it – metaphorically. I did not stop observing the mitzvahs. But intellectually, I put everything on the table so I could look at it. I looked at Shabbos, for example, and asked myself: What is this?

How do I relate to it? What aspects do I appreciate, and which aspects don't I understand?"

A complete relationship with God requires both an intellectual and emotional connection. "Knowledge of God without feeling" leaves a person disconnected and cold. On the other hand, "feeling without knowledge" has been the basis for every historical cult, false religion and demagoguery.

Given the multitude of "spiritual paths" clamoring for our attention (combined with the human tendency to settle for half-truths and comfortable compromises to tough questions), Judaism instructs us to approach spirituality also as an intellectual inquiry. In the "Aleynu" prayer, we recite: "Know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord is God..." "Know this day" is the first, intellectual step. But it must be joined by the emotional realization of "consider it in your heart."

This rabbi continued: "I needed to grow up and become my own person. I repeated this process with all realms of Torah. It took years. But now my convictions are strong and unshakeable. I know who I am, and more importantly, why."

To Life!

A key to maturity is going through this process. Perhaps this is how the tradition began in America of going away for four years to university. It gives young people the flexibility to experiment with different ideas and lifestyles, without having to be under the constant scrutiny of family and friends. It is an opportunity to discover who we really are. (Tragically, however, those four years are often spent more on partying than on serious self-examination.)

In our parsha, God suggests to Abraham where, as a Jew, he can experience this best: Israel. As well for Jews today, one visit to Israel is often transformational. There is a historical, spiritual weightiness about the land that puts life into perspective.

Maybe you'll say, "I don't have the time," or "I'm too old." The rabbis point out that the Hebrew word for "life" – *chaim* – always appears in the plural form. This is because life is a continuous process of self-discovery. It is never too late. And now is the perfect time.

The Sfas Emes (19th century Europe) says that God tells each one of us "*Lech Lecha*" – go to yourself. Abraham heard the call. Hopefully, we will, too.



Abraham's Tests

In this week's Torah portion, the history of the Jewish people commences. Until now, in the portions of Genesis and Noah, we studied about the creation of the world and the development of mankind, but now we meet the first Jewish couple: our grandparents, Abraham and Sarah.

The Torah goes into great detail regarding the fine nuances of their lives, for it is written, "*Ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim* – Whatever happened to our Forefathers is a portent for their children." Therefore, by studying the lives of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, we can better appreciate the meaning of our own lives.

Our forefather Abraham was challenged with *ten tests*, all of which he passed with great distinction. All the trials and tribulations of future generations are traceable to those tests. If, through our long painful history we remained faithful to God and never lost sight of our calling,

it is because Abraham created the character traits that enabled us to prevail.

The very first test with which he was confronted is to be found in the opening verse of the *parashah*: “*Lech lecha* – Go for yourself,”¹ meaning, “Divorce yourself from the immoral ways of the world, tap your inner resources, and discover your mission, your higher purpose in life. If necessary, be the lone voice standing up against the world, but stand steadfast in your commitment to Torah ... do not compromise!”

If we, the Jewish people, have had the courage to be that lone voice throughout the centuries and have lived by our own ideals proclaimed at Sinai, it is because our forefather, Abraham, paved the way for us; we need only follow in his footsteps.

Finding Our Inner Strength

Commentators teach that when Abraham was tested, he was not given Divine assistance, but had to seek strength from within himself. This appears rather paradoxical. Does not God help us fulfill every mitzvah? Isn't His guiding hand always there?

But if a test is to be truly a test that will accomplish its goal, then God has to restrain Himself from helping us, even as a parent or teacher has to refrain from providing the answers, and thereby encourage his children or students to research, study, and probe. Therefore, God denied Abraham assistance so that he might unearth the treasures buried within him and create those immortal character traits that would enable his descendants to survive for all time.

Thus, because Abraham was able to pass that first test and depart from his country, from his birthplace, from his father's house, we too have been able to adapt to those new lands to which destiny has led us throughout the centuries. Because Abraham was able to retain his faith in the face of famine and the terrible ordeal of Sarah's abduction, we too have been able to retain our faith in days of total darkness, when all appeared lost. Because Abraham was able to respond to the call of God and offer his son Isaac on the altar, Jewish parents have been able to pass the tests of the Hitlers of every generation. Thus, every test that Abraham passed has become part of our spiritual genes. So when confronted by life's many trials and tribulations, we are not to despair. We have

what it takes; our forefather Abraham prepared us well. We need only pray to God for His Divine Providence, summon our energies, our inner reserves and we will pass the test and triumph.

To Be Blessed or to Be a Blessing

After blessing Abraham, God tells him, “*He’yei berachah* – “You shall be a source of *blessing*,”² words that imply a higher level of blessing than simply, “You shall be *blessed*.” Most people seek blessings for themselves, and if given a choice, would opt to be *blessed* rather than be a *source of blessing* – receiving rather than giving, being served rather than serving. But the Torah teaches just the opposite: we will attain a greater level of fulfillment if we aspire to be a blessing to others. Our eminent *Zeide*, HaRav HaGaon Avraham HaLevi Jungreis, z’*tl*, would often say in Yiddish, “*Zolst eemer kenen geibon, un kein mol nisht darfen beiten*. – May God grant that you always be in a position to *give* and never need to *ask* [for financial assistance].” If we bear this in mind, we will not feel burdened when called upon to serve, and will become a blessing to our families, to our community, and to our people. If we can do that, we will make a

difference in the world – and indeed, we will be truly blessed.

God’s Command or Our Desire

Amazingly, the Torah introduces Abraham in a very modest manner, simply telling us that God commanded him to depart from his land.³

In contrast, in the previous *parashah*, Noah, the father of mankind, is presented as “righteous and perfect [wholehearted].” This is all the more puzzling when we consider the many wonderful, miraculous stories that we know of Abraham’s early years, such as his emergence unscathed when King Nimrod cast him into a fiery furnace. Why doesn’t the Torah relate them? The answer to this question defines the essence of our Jewishness.

Who is greater? He who performs a righteous deed because he is commanded by God, or he who does so because of the inclinations of his own heart? On first thought, you might think that the latter is superior, but our Sages teach that the person whose action is prompted by the command of God is on a higher level, for he sublimates his will for the sake of his Creator. Moreover, when one’s action is based on one’s own inclination, then one is subject to a change of heart, for while

today he might find pleasure in doing something, tomorrow the very same deed may leave him cold. There is no permanence to his act.

But when a man is motivated by God’s command, then no matter where life takes him, whether he is challenged by storms or calm, whether he is enveloped in darkness or showered with light, in illness or in health, his commitment will remain constant. That which occurred during Abraham’s early years was the result of *his own feelings and thoughts and not God’s command*, and therefore, in delineating his character, the Torah does not make reference to it. Our *parashah* introduces Abraham with the simple yet stirring words, “*Lech Lecha ... – “Go for yourself.”* Thus, the first Jew is commanded to look within himself, *to dare to be different*, to defy the world and *live by the Word of God*.

Even as Abraham did, we perform our mitzvos because God spoke, and in every generation we are fortified by the knowledge that we have the ability to do so, for Abraham paved the way for us. But there remains a puzzling question. In the opening verses of the *parashah*, God promises Abraham, “I will make you a

great nation and you will prosper.”⁴ The obvious question that arises is: If God promises that the Patriarch will benefit, then why is his obedience considered the fulfillment of God’s Will?

We learn that even when God promised great blessings for the fulfillment of the commandments, Abraham acted solely for the sake of God and never thought of personal gain. As it is written, “So Abram went as God had spoken to him”⁵ This is the key element in serving God: the ability to overcome our personal needs and desires and bow to His will. This trait of our forefather Abraham has been integrated into our psyches. No matter where life has taken us as a people, whether we bore the yoke of slavery and oppression or lived in freedom and had to battle assimilation, we cleaved to our Torah and mitzvos. It is that faith and that ability to sublimate our will for the sake of our Creator that enabled us to survive the centuries and remain Jews, no matter how great the odds were against us.

Bitter or Better

You might ask why God imposed painful and difficult trials upon Abraham. Surely, God was aware of his lofty spiritual gifts. The answer can be found in the very word

“test.” In Hebrew, “test” is called *nisayon*, which literally means “to be lifted up,” for in truth, every difficulty, every stumbling block that God places in our paths is, in reality, a challenge through which we can become elevated.

Abraham understood that the hardships confronting him were orchestrated by God for his spiritual development. Therefore, Abraham accepted his trials with equanimity and serenity, and never complained. He transformed life’s problems into windows of opportunity, and from each trial, he emerged stronger and greater, until he became the spiritual giant he was destined to be.

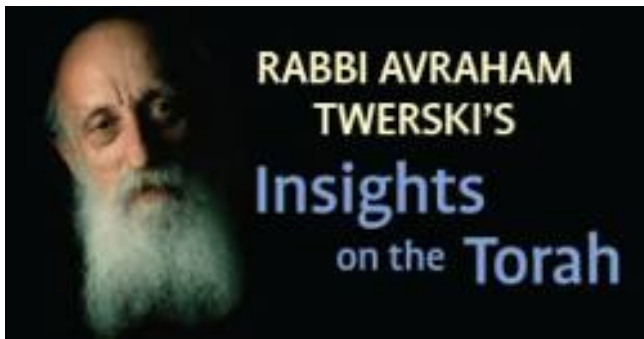
Our dearly beloved father, Rabbi Meshulem HaLevi Jungreis, *z’tl*, would often say that the difference between *bitter* and *better* is just one letter. So too, in life everything depends on attitude. One little letter can change everything. The way we react to onerous, trying challenges will either make us *better* or *bitter*. This message is especially significant to us today as we are beset by so many unknowns, so many fears. Let us convert our anxieties into challenges for growth. Let us become *better* and not *bitter*. This teaching should guide us in every aspect of our lives. Should the challenge be major or

minor, big or small, the image of our forefather Abraham should remind us to seize the opportunity to make that which is *bitter, better*.

If We Will It

God tells Abraham, “Go ... *from* your land, from your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”⁶ Abraham leaves and *arrives* in the Land of Canaan, as it says, “Abram took his wife ... and they left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.”⁷ From the two words “*left*” and “*came to*” we can glean a fount of wisdom that can help us throughout our lives. If we demonstrate the will to fulfill God’s command, there is nothing that can stand in our way; we will surely achieve our goals.

1. Ibid. 12:1.
2. Ibid. 12:2.
3. Ibid. 12:1.
4. Ibid. 12:2.
5. Ibid. 12:4.
6. Ibid. 12:1.
7. Ibid. 12:5.



Maximizing Faith

And he trusted in God, and God reckoned (it to him as righteousness 15:6)

The Torah tells us that God considered the patriarch Abraham’s faith to be meritorious. But let us reflect a moment. If God spoke to any of us, would we not have an unshakeable faith? In what way is Abraham praiseworthy for believing in God with Whom he communicated directly?

This question is also asked about Moses. How could Moses fulfill the mitzvah of having faith in God when he was in direct contact with him? We do not have faith that there is a moon or that two plus two equals four. That which we see or understand does not require an act of faith.

The answer was given by Rabbi Mordechai of Lechovitz, who cited the Talmud that at the end of a person’s life

when he stands before God, he will be asked, “Did you transact in faith?” (*Shabbos* 31a). This is usually understood as asking whether one transacted business honestly. Rabbi Mordechai said that it has an additional meaning. When a person transacts in business, he negotiates and tries in every way to maximize his profit. He does not settle for a meager gain. his is what one will be asked at the end of his life: “Did you *transact* in faith?” i.e., did you do everything possible to maximize your faith, or did you just accept whatever you were given?

Abraham and Moses *transacted* in faith. They, of course, *knew* there was a God. They did not have to have faith in His existence. But they tried to strengthen their faith by coming to an ever greater knowledge of God, and believing even that which they could not see about God.

Some people take their faith in God for granted. Of course they believe that there is a God. But they may not have gone beyond that to try to know more and more about God. We have great works available to us to increase our faith and broaden our concept of God. If we fail to do so, we will have no answer when we are asked, “Did you seek to improve the quality of your faith? Did you *transact* in faith?”