

PARSHAT LECH LECHA
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“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.’” With this one sentence the story of the Jewish people begins. Until now, we have been concerned with the story of humanity at large: Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood. With this verse G-d now becomes engaged with one unique individual who will take G-d’s message forward. Abram is instructed to follow G-d’s directions to a land he does not know, a place with which he is not familiar, towards a future that is uncertain.

It is unclear exactly where and when Abram received this command. If we look toward the end of last week’s Torah portion we are told that the initial journey did not begin with Abram, but with his father Terah: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.” It is at this place that Terah dies. Most of us have learned that Abram received the command alone and set forth with his wife Sarai to go to the land that G-d had promised him. If we look closely at this verse perhaps it was Abram’s father, Terah, who started the initial journey.

There is some disagreement among the Medieval Jewish commentators as to exactly what happened in those days. Nachmanides, the Ramban, comments that the Land of Canaan was a special place even before Abram’s journey there. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin suggests that perhaps Terah, having heard of this unique land, wanted his children to be brought up in its environment and, therefore, set out upon a journey to Canaan. He never made it to Canaan and it was only Abram who completed the journey. Ibn Ezra suggests that though Terah set out for Canaan for unknown reasons, when he came to Haran he was satisfied and remained there for the latter years of his life. Abram was not satisfied to remain there and with the call from G-d went out on his own with his immediate family to the Land of Canaan. It was his journey, and his journey alone, and not the completion of his father’s.

However it occurred, Abram took upon himself the responsibilities of making the journey to the Land of Canaan and establishing our relationship with that special place, now called the State of Israel.

I was not supposed to be in Israel this week, but circumstances changed and I just returned Thursday morning from a visit there. Last February, the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency decided to hold its October meetings in Mexico City where we would be hosted by the local community and would study the present situation of Latin American and South American Jewry. However, after the events of this summer and Operation Protective Edge, it was decided, and rightly so, that we needed to go back to Israel. Rather than staying in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv to hold our meetings, it was deemed appropriate to be based in Ashkelon and show our solidarity with the people of the south who had experienced a most traumatic

summer. So however it was that circumstances led me to the State of Israel, I am pleased that the decision was made to travel to the south, to learn of the events of the summer and, most importantly, of the events concerning the day after. While regular meetings did take place with our usual business, most of our time was spent with the residents of the south, learning of their trauma, visiting their communities, their homes, their schools, meeting with the Mayors of the towns subject to the rocket fire, hearing their stories, their anxieties, and their cautious hope for the future.

Our first visit was to Kibbutz Nahal Oz, a kibbutz just one-half mile from the Gaza Strip. It was at this place that a four-year-old boy, Daniel Tragerman, was killed by a mortar near the end of the war. Being so close to the Gaza border they were under constant bombardment and while the Iron Dome was able to protect most of Israel from missiles, there was no protection from mortar fire. When the sirens sounded they had three to five seconds to find shelter. We saw walls everywhere, including a large walled-in kindergarten. Originally simply gray reinforced concrete, the residents used bright colors to spruce it up to give the impression that all is well for the benefit of their children.

We hosted General Sam Turgerman, head of the southern command, who showed us the impact of Operation Protective Edge – the missiles, the mortars, and Israel's response in destroying over 30 tunnels which were going to be used by terrorists to massacre Israeli families. He told us that Israel did not want to kill innocent civilians and many times had to abandon preferred targets as Hamas terrorists shot rockets from mosques, homes and schools. Each target had to be agreed upon by the high command before fire was returned. What he told us was that the spirit of the civilian population is what gave the IDF the courage to fight the battles. The civilians in Israel did not abandon their homes, but instead helped the soldiers to combat the terrorists and their armaments. In the end, he thanked us for coming and showing our support.

We were shown presentations of the needs during the war and today. 73,000 children were transported from the south for respite care in the north – to camps, water parks, beaches – so that they would be safe and not spend their time in shelters. Money was given by the Jewish Agency to families who experienced a loss from a larger fund for terror victims and loans were given to businesses which were damaged or closed during the war. All of this the Jewish Agency was able to do because of the money we contributed through our JUF campaign and special Israel Emergency Campaign.

Yet, under all of this nightmare Israelis didn't stop their normal business. While 4,000 missiles rained down upon Israel, 4,500 Olim, new immigrants, made their new homes in Israel. As part of our meeting, we met a new Olah, a new immigrant, who had lived in Donetsk, Ukraine, which has been subject to violence and warfare. She told us her family lost everything. They came as refugees to Dnepropetrovsk and then decided to come to Israel. They are now forced to start all over with a new language and culture. While it has been difficult, she is grateful that the State of Israel took in her family, for there was no other place to go and she is convinced eventually all will be well.

Over and over again we were told that the response to the missiles was a refusal to be vanquished. Rebuilding the south is our answer to terrorists who want to destroy all who live

there as a beginning to the destruction of the entire state. We did not see destruction, everything had been built up once more. We know that there continues to be psychological and medical needs, but the spirit of the people continues to be strong. These, we were told, are the new Zionist pioneers. These individuals are the ones upon whom the State of Israel continues to be built.

We spent some time in Sderot, a city which has endured ongoing missile fire for years and met with its energetic Mayor, Alon Davidi. His response to the rocket fire – bring more students, more residents, build a larger city. In fact, the largest Hesder Yeshiva, a program of both religious study and army service, is now housed in Sderot. My own nephew has taken up residence in Sderot this year for a pre-army program. Five thousand safe rooms were added on to apartments in the city and the entire country has supported the residents by shopping there and visiting the region.

Upon the city of Ashkelon 277 rockets were fired. Thankfully, the Iron Dome was able to knock down most of them. But having been in Ashkelon during the war itself, I know the trauma that was present there just standing on the streets, looking where the nearest shelter may be, and knowing that if a missile goes off you have only a few minutes to prepare for the impact.

The most touching time was spent in a moshav, Netiv HaAsara, which is literally on the northern Gaza border. We walked to the high walls and observation towers and knew that we were just a few yards from Gaza itself. Many of the people who live there had experienced the Sinai evacuation after the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel when their moshav was forced to move. Most of the group stayed together and rebuilt, this time right near the Gaza Strip. There are generations of families who have made this place their home and, while knowing constant fear, have built their lives with a great deal of spirit and inner strength. One person was killed in Netiv HaAsara, eight homes received direct hits, as the Iron Dome could not knock down these Kassam rockets. We talked to two individuals who simply said: “This is the best place on earth. We feel safe, but we know that it can start again at any time.”

I was amazed by the strength and resiliency of these people. One woman said that she and her two young children left during the war and she debated whether to return. Could she put her children through the trauma once more should war break out again? However, she said, “my parents are here, my sister is here, I need to be here, and we will get through this period of time. Hopefully, there can be peace and we can learn to live together to create the opportunity for children on both sides of the border to experience lives of peace and quiet.”

This is the spirit of the people. This is why we had to go to the south. They thanked us for coming, for our support, both financial and personal. We were amazed by their resiliency and their ongoing strength. Life is not easy and they are far from being totally healed, but with the strength of their Zionist spirit and faith in the future, they are moving on with their lives.

Our final meeting was with Racheli Frenkel whose son, Naftali, was one of “our boys” who were kidnapped and killed in July. She stood before us, a woman who had clearly been consumed with grief, full of an energetic spirit reminding us of the great unity of purpose that we had when the three boys were kidnapped. She told us she received great strength from the

support from people all over the world who did not know her personally, but were now part of her family, and she encouraged us to keep that unity, that commonality of purpose, on behalf of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Almost 4,000 years ago, Abram set out on a journey. It makes little difference whether he was simply completing his father's journey or it was his alone. He had the strength, courage, faith, and conviction to make of his journey a new experience not only for our people, but for all humanity exemplified by his belief in one G-d. We are the children of Abram and Sarai and we, too, are on a journey. The purpose of that journey is to continue our link to our common past and to strengthen our people in the future. It is no less an important task than that of Abram's and Sarai's. It is crucial for the Jewish people of today and tomorrow.

As I return to you from the south of Israel, I come back with renewed hope and purpose. We live in challenging times. It is not only the military might of the IDF that gives our people strength, it is the spirit, faith, and courage of the Jewish people throughout history that allows us to proceed forward even under the most trying of conditions. May G-d's promise to Abram that he would be a great nation, that G-d would bless him, that He would make his name great, and that he shall be a blessing, come true through us in our time. And may we, the children of Abram and Sarai, continue the journey of the Jewish people, strengthening one another and working towards a common mission of being witnesses to our G-d and strengthening the State of Israel and the Jewish people now and forever.