

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5783
Abraham's Second Journey
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

I was in seventh grade when I got a homework assignment they only give in Jewish day school: to interview our own synagogue rabbi. I forget what most of the conversation was about with Rabbi Barnard, my synagogue rabbi in Cincinnati and a wonderful and wise man.

But I do remember this: I asked him, "Do you feel closer to G-d because you are a rabbi?" He answered no, which shocked me. I was so surprised that I forgot his explanation why.

Fast forward to today. No 7th grader has asked me that question, but allow me to answer that now for myself: "Yes, I do feel closer to G-d because I'm a rabbi. But not for the reason you might expect. Between the day before I became a rabbi and the day after, I don't think anything magical happened. But between the day I began studying to be a rabbi six years earlier and Ordination Day, I feel much closer to G-d than previously. It's not the certificate that deepened my relationship but the articles I read, the books I pondered, the experiences I had in Israel, and the important conversations I joined that changed my relationship with G-d. And those steps are equally open to you and everybody else, not just rabbis."

Parashat Lech Lecha is about journeys. The portion famously begins "*Lech Lecha!* Get going!" We think first of the physical journey for Abraham, Sarah, and Lot from Haran to Canaan. Not an easy task, especially at age 75. If that were the only journey, Dayeinu. The words "*Lech Lecha*" are the same consonants twice, *Lamed Caf, Lamed Caf*. The vowels change, but it's essentially the same word twice. In context it means "go for yourself." But we can read it creatively "*Lech, Lech* - go, go." Go on a physical journey, and go on a spiritual quest too.

Abraham and Sarah set out on this journey to form a relationship with G-d. The product of this successful odyssey is the covenant - *Brit*. I think it's deeply significant that this spiritual journey is constantly in motion as well, never static.

We readers meet Abraham as Abram the adult. But the rabbis imagined Abraham even as a child seeking out the one true G-d, alone as a small island standing firm in the vast ocean of idolatry.

Several Midrashim seek to understand Abraham even as a youth on his path toward a personal relationship with G-d.

Like this one: “Rabbi Hiyya said that Abraham’s father Terah was an idolmaker who sold them in a store. One time, the father went out, and he left Abraham to sell the idols in his place. A customer came and asked to buy one, and [Abraham] asked him, ‘How old are you?’ And the man said to him, ‘50 years old.’ And [Abraham] said, ‘Oy to the man who is 50 years old and needs to worship [an idol] that is one day old!’ [The customer] was embarrassed, and he left.” (Genesis Rabbah 38:13).

While Abraham excelled at many things, customer service was not one of them! But the point is that even as a youth he is pursuing a general understanding of G-d, which leads him to distance himself from idols.

Later on, at age 75, he hears the call from G-d to leave everything and go to Canaan - This is “*Lech Lecha*.” Whereas before G-d was an abstract *idea*, now G-d is talking to him. The relationship deepens.

Later, at age 99, G-d tells him His personal name El Shaddai and assures him that G-d will establish a covenant with Abraham's family for all time symbolized through the mitzvah of circumcision. G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham, signifying a new stage in their relationship, as the letter Hey, one of G-d's name, is added to Abram.

Finally, Abraham is 137, according to traditional sources, when G-d gives him the test of binding his son Isaac. At its conclusion, G-d says, “for now I know that you fear G-d.” That always puzzled me. Now and not before?

It's important to note that these moments with G-d did not happen all at once. There were stages to this relationship. Abraham's spiritual journey did not end once he set foot in Canaan but lasted his entire life. His relationship with G-d was dynamic and not static.

This should not be surprising, given that human relationships fit this pattern too. You may have had a friend for a few years or a few decades, but the more time you spend with them, usually the closer you become. Conversations veer to more important topics

because trust has been established, values have been clarified. You may share more personal information or emotions as the relationship deepens. You may let down your guard with them. If you have the same friends for decades, you may still talk about topics you conversed about as kids, like the Bears. But as adults, you will talk about things that you as kids did not - maybe a spouse, your kids or grandkids, or a career. For a relationship to be genuine and truly fulfilling, it has to keep moving forward.

The same is true when it comes to our understanding about G-d and relationship with G-d. Of course, each of us here may understand G-d differently from each other, and that's okay. It's complicated, I know. But I want to emphasize that wherever you are now in your spiritual journey, in your understanding of the Divine, it's natural if it's different today than it was 5 years ago. That's good. And don't be surprised if it's different in 5 years.

Our theology comes from two places - our own personal lived experiences and classic Jewish teachings. In the next 5 years, each of us will have 5 more years to live life and make personal observations about the world around us. And I hope in the next 5 years, each of us opens the books about Jewish teachings about G-d, or reads articles, or listens to podcasts, or reads the comments on the bottom of the pages in the Etz Hayim Humash. Hopefully sooner than five years. Rabbis have the convenience of exploring these in-depth during school, but all of us have the chance to deepen our understanding even just a little bit, to take even just one more step forward, even as we sit in these very seats today.

Here's one thought about G-d for today, from the theologian I turn to first, the late Rabbi Neil Gillman:

"I believe that all human characterizations of G-d are metaphors borrowed from familiar human experience. Precisely because G-d transcends all human conceptualization, we can only think of G-d through metaphors. Our ancestors discovered G-d in their experience of nature and history. Those experiences, as understood, interpreted, and then recorded in Torah and the rest of our classical literature, serve as the spectacles through which we recapture the experience of G-d for ourselves. We discover G-d, but we invent the metaphors that capture the variegated qualities of our experiences of G-d. They bring G-d into our lives and then in turn, help us discover G-d anew."

Judaism is kid-friendly, but it's ultimately not for kids. It's for adults starting with Bar/Bat Mitzvah. We do our best to get our children to feel connected, of course, but that's so they'll be prepared when they become adults themselves.

But perhaps “prepared” is the wrong word. How prepared can we actually be when it comes to G-d?

I remember spending the summer in Israel when I was 17 with Ramah Seminar after an intense week in Poland. Upon landing, we went to the Kotel in Jerusalem, where we all had an incredibly intense, wonderful, spiritual experience. The kind that makes you cry. A few weeks later, we returned in the middle of the weekday, and when I touched the stones, I didn't feel the pulse of spiritual electricity that I did mere weeks earlier. The stones felt ordinary. I didn't understand. What was wrong with me? I had just spent a month in Israel and that intensity was gone?

I shared this with my counselor, who smiled and said nothing was wrong with me. I was a different person one month later, armed with an entirely new set of experiences. Of course I should feel different at the Kotel because I myself was in a different place. This conversation reassured me. Naturally I return to the Western Wall when I visit, but now I prepare to have a different experience each time, one perhaps I cannot anticipate in advance.

This reminds me of a striking verse in the Exodus story: “we will not know how to serve G-d until we get there.” In the story, Moses is telling Pharaoh why all the animals needed to leave as well - for the undefined sacrifices. But on its own, this verse offers us timeless wisdom, captured by the Etz Hayim Humash commentary: “We will not know how to serve G-d until we get there - G-d makes unique demands on each of us. We cannot know what G-d wants of us until we encounter G-d in each new stage of our lives.”

“*Lech Lecha*-Get going” is a timeless echo from G-d. Abraham heard it thousands of years ago. If we listen carefully, we can still hear its call today.

Shabbat Shalom.