

Lech Lecha – Jonathan Gershlick

n חשון תשע"ח - 28th October 2017 - *ShabbatUK* - שבת פ' לך לך

“...Lech lecha me'aretzecha, umimoladetecha umibeit avicha...”

“...Go for yourself from your land, from your birth place and from your father's house...”

This was one of Avraham Avinu's ten tests. Why was it such a great test and how can we relate to this test from our own perspective? And why did HaShem give Avraham the instructions about leaving in what appears to be reverse order? Would it not have been more logical for HaShem to have said “leave your father's home, leave your birth place, leave your country” in that order?

Taking the second issue first, the Or HaChayim says that the Torah lists the departures according to the pain involved in leaving. Effectively, the instructions from HaShem are in ascending order of difficulty or the degree of nostalgia that is involved. So, the greatest difficulty for Avraham (a Ba'al Chessed who instinctively would have wanted to fulfill the mitzvah of Kibbud Av) was leaving his “father's house” – “umibeit avicha”, and therefore this is the last of the three instructions from HaShem regarding his journey.

The Or HaChayim also explains that each aspect of “the leaving” (that is the leaving of his family, his birth place and his land) was necessary for Avraham to pass his first test. Leaving his physical environment (his country) would improve his fortune or his Mazal. Leaving his birthplace was essential because Avraham could not continue to live in a place endemic with Avodah Zara and other chata'im (sins).

The Torah seems to tell us that leaving the whole of his family was the hardest part of Avraham's test. Despite HaShem's specific instruction to leave his whole family, it is interesting that Avraham took his nephew Lot with him on the journey from Charan. The passuk (Bereishit chapter 12, verse 4) soon after Avraham receives the “Lech Lecha” instruction says: “And Avraham went exactly as HaShem had spoken to him, and Lot went with him...”. It seems that on the one hand the Torah is satisfied that Avraham had carried out HaShem's instructions exactly and yet at the same time the Torah needs to insert a point of clarification, saying that Lot was still with him! The Or HaChayim suggests that Lot was attached to Avraham; and in order not to shame his nephew, Avraham decided not to push his nephew away until he had found a suitable pretext since he did not want to shame him. The relatively minor incident of their shepherds starting to feud was the excuse that Avraham needed to separate himself from Lot.

Avraham's journey from Ur Kasdim to Eretz Canaan took place in two very distinct stages. In the first stage, Avraham journeyed from Ur Kasdim to Charan, accompanied by other members of his family (including his father, Terach and his brother, Nachor). Rashi brings down that Avraham's other brother, Haran had been murdered by Nimrod in the furnace from which Avraham had miraculously survived. So, it appears that the family had to escape from Ur Kasdim to Charan, fleeing physical persecution. The reason for this part of the journey is all too easy for us to identify with.

The second stage of Avraham's journey to Eretz Canaan was from Charan, and now he took only Sarah and Lot. The first puzzle is why Avraham was instructed to go “from your land, from your birth place and from your father's house” after he and his family had already completed the journey out of Ur Kasdim to Charan. How do we make sense of this instruction? The Ramban says that the birthplace of Terach, Avraham, and his brother Nachor was not Ur Kasdim but was in fact Aram in which the settlement of Charan was situated.

It is in Charan that Avraham's test really starts. Leaving his family meant that, Avraham – a Ba'al Chessed - would no longer be able to do the mitzvah of honouring his father. Regular, modern communication (verbal or in person) with parents living in far away places was not an option in Avraham's day!

And not only did Avraham realise that he had to isolate himself physically from his family, birthplace and land, the Torah also says he was told to take himself to “the land that I will show you”. HaShem had told Avraham to cut himself off from his past but had not divulged to Avraham where his future would lie – surely an unprecedented level of Bitachon (trust in HaShem)?

This episode in the Torah has numerous implications for us. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains how this episode in our Parasha reveals a complete lack of logic in the contemporary statement that: “Judaism has to move with the times”. The logic behind this statement is that there was a time when Jewish values were in step with wider society, but “times have changed now”. We can see from our Parasha that this makes no sense. When Avraham Avinu started out on his spiritual journey, his beliefs and values made him the most isolated man in the history of mankind! The Ivrim were different then and we are different now.

Another thing that occurs to me is that just like Avraham showed the determination to go out of his comfort zone to change himself and improve his own situation, we also need to realise where we are in relation to our own comfort zone so that we can make the best for ourselves.

In our “advanced” post-industrial society, there are calls for “change” on a daily basis. Not only that, but in the workplace we face the daily reality that decisions are made for us that we do not fully comprehend but which we have to implement “for the good of the organisation”. In today's environment, being comfortable with change is often necessary to succeed. Resisting change is futile; if we do not respond positively then changes are forced on us anyway, and they are less likely to be the sort of changes that we would have wanted. To be successful in life, most of us need to operate outside our own comfort zone from time to time. B'ezrat haShem we should all be as alert as possible to the opportunities around us and the possible changes in circumstances that may be around the corner. We should have the wisdom and strength to respond to these opportunities and changes to the best of our abilities, so that we can all join together in the mission began by Avraham Avinu of Tikkun Olam and bring closer the day when “V'haya HaShem leMelech al kol ha'aretz.”