

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Lech-Lecha

Genesis 12:1-17:27

Torah Reading for November 2-8, 2003

After devoting its first two sections, *Bereishit* (Genesis 1:1-6:8) and *Noach* (Genesis 6:9-11:32), to the first 2000 years of human history, the Torah moves on, in the section of *Lech-Lecha*, to recount the origins of the people of Israel, which it traces to a Divine call received by the first Jew in the 75th year of his life:

And G-d spoke to Abram: "Go you from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you.

"I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make great your name... and all families of the earth will be blessed by you..."

And Abram took with him his wife Sarai, and his brother's son Lot, and all the possession which they had acquired, and the souls which they had made in Charan. And they set out to go to the Land of Canaan, and they arrived in the Land of Canaan.

Abram traversed the land to the area of Shechem, to the Plain of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

G-d appeared to Abram and said: "To your offspring I shall give this land." And he built there an altar to G-d... and he called in G-d's name.

The Egyptian Ordeal

No sooner do Abram and Sarai (as they are called until G-d changes their names to "Abraham" and "Sarah" in the closing chapter of our Parshah) arrive in the Land of Canaan, that they are forced by famine to "descend" to Egypt (the Torah refers to all journeys to the Holy Land as "ascents," and all departures from it to other lands as "descents"). And then the journey to Egypt brings on a new trouble:

Commentary

AND G-D SPOKE TO ABRAM (GENESIS 12:1)

There was once a person who was traveling from place to place and he saw a palace in flames. Said he: "Can it be that there is no master to this palace?" So the owner of the palace looked out to him and said to him: "I am the master of the Palace." By the same token, because Abraham would go around saying, "Can it be that the world has no master?" G-d looked out and said: "I am the owner, the master of the world."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND G-D SPOKE TO ABRAM: "GO YOU FROM YOUR LAND..." (12:1)

From the time that G-d said to our father Abraham, "Go from your land," and "Abraham went on, journeying southward," began the process of *birurim*—the process of extracting the "sparks of holiness" that are scattered throughout the universe and buried within the material existence.

By the decree of Divine providence, man wanders about in his travels to those places where the sparks that are to be extracted by him await their redemption. The Cause of All Causes brings about the many circumstances and pretexts that bring a person to those places where his personal mission in life is to be acted out.

(Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch)

GO YOU FROM YOUR LAND, FROM YOUR BIRTHPLACE AND FROM YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE, TO THE LAND WHICH I WILL SHOW YOU (12:1)

"From your land"—from your will (*eretz*, the Hebrew word for land, is etymologically related to the word *ratzon*—"will"). "From your birthplace"—from your emotional and behavioral self (which is the product of a person's environment). "From your father's house"—from your intellect (In the terminology of Kabbalah, the intellect is referred to as the "father" within man, since it is the progenitor of and authority over his feelings and behavior pat-

terns).

(The Chassidic Masters)

ABRAM TOOK WITH HIM HIS WIFE, SARAI... AND THE SOULS WHICH THEY HAD MADE IN CHARAN (12:5)

Abraham would invite people in to his home, give them to eat and to drink, show them love and bring them close to G-d, convert them and bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence. This is to teach us that whoever brings a person under the wings of the Divine Presence, it is considered as if he has created him, formed him, and developed him.

(Sifri, Va'etchanan)

Maimonides describes Abram's early years:

No sooner was the mighty one weaned—and he was but a child—than his mind began to seek and wonder: How do the heavenly bodies circle without a moving force? Who turns them? They cannot move themselves! Immersed amongst the foolish idol-worshippers of Ur Casdim, he had no one to teach him anything: his father, mother and countrymen, and he amongst them, all worshipped idols. But his heart sought ... until he comprehended the truth and understood the righteous path by his sound wisdom, and came to know that there is one G-d ... Who created all, and that in all existence there is none other than Him. He came to know that the entire world erred...

At the age of forty, Abraham recognized his Creator ... He began to debate with the people of Ur Casdim and take them to task, saying: "This is not the way of truth that you are following." He smashed the idols and began to teach the people that it is only fitting to serve the One G-d ... When he began to defeat them with his arguments, the king wished to kill him; he was miraculously saved. He departed to Charan and continued to call in a great voice to the world, teaching them that there is One G-d.

(Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Idol Worship 1:3).

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As he approached Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai: "Behold, now I am aware that you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians will see you, they will say, 'This is his wife,' and they will kill me and leave you live. Please, say that you are my sister, in order that it be good with me for your sake, and my soul shall live because of you."

Abram's fears are confirmed. Sarai's beauty is discovered and praised as fit for a king, and she is taken to the Pharaoh's palace. Abram, as her supposed brother, is given "sheep, cattle, donkeys, slaves, maids, she-donkeys and camels."

A sudden plague visited upon the royal palace convinces Pharaoh to return the visitor's "sister" to him, and further compensate him for the suffering caused him. Abram returns to the Holy Land a wealthy man, "laden with cattle, gold and silver."

The Break with Lot

Commentary

Other accounts give different numbers for the age at which Abraham discovered the truth of the One G-d. The Talmud (Nedarim 32a) states that "Abraham recognized his Creator at age three"; other sources cite the ages 4, 48 and 50. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that these sources are not in conflict, but rather relate to the various levels of recognition and understanding achieved by Abraham. (Indeed, Maimonides, who places Abraham's moment of truth at 40, "the age of understanding," also tells us that his quest began "soon after he was weaned, and he was but a small child.")

AND ABRAM TRAVERSED THE LAND (12:6)

Everything that happened to the Patriarchs is a signpost for their children. This is why the Torah elaborates its account of their journeys, their well-digging and the other events [of their lives]... These all come as an instruction for the future: for when something happens to one of the three Patriarchs, one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants.

(Nachmanides)

THE CANAANITES WERE THEN IN THE LAND (12:6)

The Torah itself attests that the Canaanites then ruled the Promised Land. Yet G-d granted it to Abraham, pledging "To your offspring I shall give this land"; later in our Parshah (15:18), G-d goes a step further, saying "To your offspring I have given this land"—already given, in the past tense.

Therein lies a lesson for all generations of Jews. Although we may find ourselves in *galut*, under the dominion of nations more powerful than our-

Soon after the return to Canaan, discord breaks out in Abram's family. Lot, who had accompanied his uncle throughout his travels and travails, was also enriched in the process; now there developed a conflict between Abram's shepherds and Lot's shepherds.

And Abram said to Lot: "Please, let there not be strife between me and you, between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brothers. The entire land is before you—please, separate from me. If you turn to the left, I'll go right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Lot chooses to settle in Sodom, enticed by the fertility of its environs, despite the fact that its residents were "extremely evil and sinful towards G-d."

Following Lot's departure, G-d again appears to Abram and reiterates His promise of the land to Abram's descendants:

"Lift your eyes and look from the place in which you stand to the north, to the south, to the east and to the west; for all the land which you see, I will give to you and to your seed forever."

"I will make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man can count the grains of dust in the earth, so, too, shall your offspring be able to be counted. Arise and traverse the land to its length and its breadth; for to you shall I give it."

selves, this does not in the least affect our ownership of the Holy Land. The land of Israel is ours by Divine bequest, and no force on earth can take it from us.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND HE CALLED IN THE NAME OF G-D (12:8)

Said Reish Lakish: Read not "and he called (*vayikra*)" but "and he made others call (*vayakrei*)."¹ This is to teach us that Abraham caused G-d's name to be spoken in the mouths of all passerby. How so? After they ate and drank [in his home], they made to bless him. Said he to them: "Have you eaten of mine? Your food has been provided by the G-d of the world! Thank, praise and bless He who spoke the world into being!"

(Talmud, Sotah 10a)

When Abraham's guests wished to bless him for his generosity, he would say to them: "Has the food you have eaten been provided by myself? You should thank, praise and bless He who spoke the world into being!" If they refused Abraham would demand payment for the food they had eaten. "How much do I owe you?" they would ask. "A jug of wine is one *furlin*," Abraham would say; "a pound of meat, one *furlin*; a loaf of bread, one *furlin*." When the guest would protest these exorbitant prices, Abraham would counter: "Who supplies you with wine in the middle of the desert? Who supplies you with meat in the desert? Who supplies you with bread in the desert?" When the guest would realize the predicament he was in he would relent and proclaim: "Blessed be the G-d of the world, from whose providence we have eaten."

(Midrash Rabbah; Tosofot Shantz on Sotah 10)

What value, we might ask, was there in such an unwilling proclamation,

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War

The Torah now describes a regional conflict which engulfed the city-states of the Land of Canaan.

Twenty five years before Abram's arrival in the Holy Land, an alliance of four kings headed by Chedorlaomer the king of Eilam conquered the five city-states of the Sodom Valley (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Tzevoyim and Tzoar). After twelve years of subjugation and tribute, the "five cities of the plain" rebelled. For thirteen years they persisted in their insubordination, until Chedorlaomer and his allies decided it was time to put down the rebellion.

The four kings massed their armies and marched to the Sodom Valley. On the way, they fought a number of battles, defeating the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emim, the Hori, the Amaleikites and the Emorites. They then proceeded to rout the armies of Sodom and its sister cities. The cities of the plain were pillaged and their inhabitants taken captive. Among the captives was Abram's nephew, Lot. A refugee brought the news to Abram's camp:

When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he rallied the trained servants of his household, three hundred and eighteen in number, and chased after [the four kings and their armies] to Dan.

And he and his servants split up against them by night and smote them, pursuing them until Chovah, which is to the left of Damascus. He recovered all the property; also his kinsman, Lot, and his property were recovered, and also the women and the people.

The grateful king of Sodom offered to Abram all the recovered property as his reward, asking only that he restore to him the freed captives, but Abram replied:

"I have lifted my hand in oath to G-d most high, Possessor

Commentary

extracted under duress? Was this not a mere mouthing of words, devoid of any conviction as to the truth of the One G-d or any desire to thank Him for His providence?

But Abraham had a vision of humanity which convinced him that every positive deed, word or thought does have value, no matter how "superficial" or "hypocritical" it might seem to a less discerning eye. When Abraham looked at his guests, he did not see pagans and idolaters; he saw creatures of G-d, men and women who had been created in the Divine image and possessed a potential, inherent to the very essence of their being, to recognize their Creator and serve His will.

Most often, a kind word and a helping hand will bring to light this inner potential. At times, however, a soul might be so encrusted by negative influences and a corrupted character that a certain degree of "pressure" must be applied to quell its resistance to a G-dly deed. (Of course, any use of such "pressure" must conform to the dictates of G-d's Torah, whose "ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its pathways are peace"—as in the case of Abraham's legitimate demand for payment.)

Abraham understood that no human acknowledgment of G-d can ever be "hypocritical." On the contrary: a denial of G-d is the ultimate hypocrisy, for it is at variance with the person's quintessential being. When a creature of G-d proclaims "Blessed be the G-d of the world from whose providence we have eaten," nothing can be more consistent with his or her innermost self.

(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

"BEHOLD, NOW I AM AWARE THAT YOU ARE A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN" (12:11)

How can it be that Abram has only *now* discovered that his wife is beautiful?

Rashi offers three explanations. First he cites what he calls a "Midrashic

explanation" that Abram was indeed unaware of Sarai's beauty because of their mutual modesty, and that it only now became known to him by a happenstance. Rashi then cites a "second explanation" that usually a person's looks are ruined by the difficulties of life on the road, yet Sarah retained her beauty. Finally, Rashi concludes with "the simple meaning of the verse," which is that Abram was saying: I have been long aware of your beauty, but now has come a time that it is cause for worry.

WHEN ABRAM ARRIVED IN EGYPT... (12:14)

And where was Sarah? Abram had locked her in a chest. When he arrived at the gates of Egypt, the tax officers said to him: "What are you transporting in this chest?" Said he to them: "Barley."

Said they to him: "You're carrying wheat!"

Said he to them: "So charge me the tariff for wheat."

"You're carrying peppers!"

"Take the tariff for peppers."

"You're carrying gold!"

"Take the tariff for gold."

"You're carrying silks!"

"Take the tariff for silks."

"You're carrying pearls!"

"Take the tariff for pearls."

Said they: If he didn't have something truly precious, he would not accept whatever we ask for. At that moment they said to him: "You're not moving from here until you open the chest and show us what's inside." As soon as

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of Heaven and Earth: Not a thread nor a shoe-strap, nor shall I take anything that is yours; lest you say: 'It was I who made Abram rich.' Save only that which the lads have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol and Mamre—they shall take their share."

Upon his return from the battlefield, Abram is also greeted by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem), who was "a priest of

the most high G-d." The king (whom the Midrash identifies as Abram's ancestor, Shem the son of Noah), brought an offering of bread and wine, and blessed Abram; Abram gave him a tenth of his wealth, in fulfillment of the mitzvah of *maaser* ("tithing").

The Covenant

Abram's amazing victory, in which he and a handful of servants and friends defeated the armies which had terrorized the entire region, evoked in him not feelings of satisfaction and self-confidence, but of humility and inadequacy. Certainly, he thought to himself, the miracles which G-d had performed for him had more than rewarded all his good deeds; he felt shorn of his merits and no longer worthy of the blessings which G-d had bestowed upon him.

And of what use are all these blessings, he further mused, if he and Sarai are childless? Abram had passed his seventh decade, and Sarai was but ten years younger; what was the point of their achievements, if there would be no one to carry on their name and path?

Commentary

(Midrash Rabbah)

he opened it, the entire land of Egypt glowed from Sarai's radiance

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THEIR WAS STRIFE BETWEEN THE HERDSMAN OF ABRAM'S CATTLE AND THE HERDSMAN OF LOT'S CATTLE; AND THE CANAANITES AND THE PERIZZI THEN DWELT IN THE LAND (13:7)

The cattle of our father Abraham would go about muzzled, while Lot's cattle would go about unmuzzled.

Abraham's herdsman would say to them: "Has it become permissible to steal?"

Lot's herdsman would respond: "G-d has said to Abraham: 'To your seed I shall give this land.' But Abraham is an infertile mule without progeny; tomorrow he will die, and Lot, the son of his brother, will inherit him. So our animals are eating what is ours."

But G-d said to them: I have given the land to his seed only after the seven nations shall be uprooted from it. "The Canaanites and the Perizi then dwelt in the land"—as of now, they have rights in the land.

(Midrash Rabbah)

I WILL MAKE YOUR PROGENY LIKE THE DUST OF THE EARTH (13:17)

Just as the dust of the earth is from one end of the world to the other, so, too, will your children be scattered from one end of the world to the other. Just as the dust of the earth is made fertile only with water, so, too, the people of Israel are blessed only in the merit of the Torah which is analogous to water. Just as dust erodes all metal utensils while it itself lasts forever, so is it with Israel: all idolatrous nations disintegrate, while they persist. Just as dust is treaded upon, so, too, you children are destined to be treaded upon by the nations.

NOT A THREAD NOR A SHOE-STRAP, NOR I SHALL TAKE ANYTHING THAT IS YOURS (14:23)

In reward for Abraham's saying, "Not a thread nor a shoe-strap," his children merited two mitzvot: the thread of blue [in the tzitzit] and the strap of the tefillin.

(Talmud, Sotah 17a)

LOOK NOW TOWARD HEAVEN AND COUNT THE STARS... SO SHALL BE YOUR PROGENY (15:5)

When they rise, they will rise as high as the heavens; when they fall, they will fall as low as the dust.

(Pesikta Zutrat)

AND HE SPLIT THEM IN THE MIDDLE (15:10)

Rashi explains that it was the custom in those times that two people who wished to pledge everlasting friendship and devotion to each other conducted a ceremony in which they passed together between the divided halves of a slaughtered animal, symbolizing that just as the two halves are, in truth, a single creature, so, too, their persons, though ostensibly two distinct beings, are henceforth to be regarded as a single entity. Thus, a "smoking furnace and flaming torch," representing the Divine Presence, passed "between the parts" together with Abraham.

In addition, our sages explain the symbolism in the animals which G-d told Abraham to take. On one level, they correspond with the various offerings brought by the Jewish people in the Holy Temple. On another level, they represent the *galut* of Israel in its various incarnations—the powers to which the Jewish people will be subject in the course of their history (Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, etc.) The eagle which came to consume the carcasses but was shooed away represents Moshiach (the Messiah), who will be prevented from liberating the people of Israel until the time for the

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G-d appears to Abram in a vision to reassure him: "Fear not, Abram, I am your protector; your reward will yet be great." G-d also reiterates His promise of the great nation which will issue from him. Earlier, G-d had promised Abram that his progeny shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth; now He compared them to the stars of the heavens:

He took him outside, and said: "Look now toward heaven and count the stars, if you be able to count them... So shall be your offspring."

The Torah then describes how G-d and Abram forged a special covenant—the "Covenant Between the Parts"—in which the destiny of the Jewish people was foretold. The Holy Land is

bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage, but first they must experience *galut* (exile and persecution).

And [Abram] said: "L-rd G-d, by what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" And He said to him: "Take Me three heifers, three goats, three rams, a turtledove and a young pigeon."

And he took to him all these, and he split them in the middle, and he placed each half opposite its fellow; the birds, however, he did not divide.

The eagle descended upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

As the sun made to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him.

And He said to Abram: "Know surely that your descendants shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and they will be enslaved to them, and they will afflict them four hundred years."

Commentary

Redemption has come..

Galut is thus revealed to be not merely a punishment for the failings of the Jewish people, but an integral part of our destiny, foretold to the very first Jew at the forging of our covenant with G-d.

YOUR DESCENDENTS SHALL BE A STRANGER IN A LAND THAT IS NOT THEIRS, AND THEY WILL BE ENSLAVED TO THEM, AND THEY WILL AFFLICT THEM, FOUR HUNDRED YEARS (15:13)

The "four hundred years" refer to the period from the birth of Isaac (in the year 2048 from creation—1713 bce), to the Exodus from Egypt (in 2448), during which time Abraham's descendants were "strangers in a land that is not theirs." The actual sojourn in Egypt was for 210 years, of which the final eighty-six were a time when the children of Israel were enslaved and afflicted..

(Rashi)

AND SARAI... HAD AN EGYPTIAN HANDMAID, WHOSE NAME WAS HAGAR (16:1)

Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw what was wrought upon his house for Sarah's sake, he took his daughter and gave her to her, saying: "Better that my daughter be a maid in this house, than a mistress in a different house."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND AN ANGEL OF G-D FOUND HER... AND HE SAID... AND AN ANGEL OF G-D SAID TO HER... AND AN ANGEL OF G-D SAID TO HER...AND AN ANGEL OF G-D SAID TO HER (16:7, 8, 9, 10, 11)

How many angels did she meet? Rabbi Yossi bar Chananiah said: Five; each time that it says "and he said" it was another angel. The other sages

say: Four; each time it says "an angel," it was another angel.

Said Rabbi Chiya: See the difference between the earlier and later generations! Manoach said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen an angel" (Judges 13:22); but Hagar the maid of Sarah sees five angels one after the other and is not afraid of them... Said Rabbi Yitzchak: ... The members of Abraham's household were all prophets—she was used to seeing them..

(Midrash Rabbah)

NO LONGER SHALL YOUR NAME BE CALLED ABRAM. YOUR NAME SHALL BE ABRAHAM, FOR I HAVE MADE YOU A FATHER OF A MULTITUDE OF NATIONS (17:5)

Abraham's name change, in conjunction with his circumcision and his entry into a covenant with G-d, marked a profound turning point in his life. Up until this point, the thrust of Abraham's life was his spiritual relationship with G-d; from this point on it was to be his role as a leader of the masses, a teacher of the Divine truth to the "multitudes". Thus the Hebrew letter *Heh* was added to his name. "Abram" (*Avram*, in the Hebrew) is an acronym of *av ram*, which means "exalted father"; Abraham stands for *av hamon goyim*—"a father of multitudes of nations."

But according to this, his name should have been changed to "Abham". Why was the letter *Reish*, which stood for the *ram* ("exalted") in his name, left in? There is no *Reish* in the phrase "a father of multitudes of nations."

Often, there is a tendency for teachers and leaders to water down their message to their constituents. For myself, they say, I must set the highest standards and strive to understand the most sublime truths. But it is foolish to expect the same of everyone else. If I speak of such matters and make such demands, I will only be perceived as out of touch with reality. Indeed, the rarefied insight and pious behavior I have attained will only be coarsened and debased by its communication to the masses.

Therein lies the lesson of the "irremovable *Reish*" in Abraham's name. G-d added a *Heh*, anointing him as a leader for the *hamon* ("multitudes"), but

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"And also that nation whom they shall serve will I judge; and afterwards they shall come out with great wealth..."

And when the sun went down and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace and a burning torch which passed between those pieces.

On that day G-d made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your seed I have given these land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."

Hagar

Ten years had elapsed since Abram's arrival in the Land of Canaan, and still Sarai was childless. So she proposed to Abram that he take her handmaid, Hagar, as a wife; "Perhaps I shall obtain children by her."

Hagar conceived, and began behaving haughtily toward her mistress. Sarai responded by asserting her mastery over her maid and treating her harshly, causing Hagar to flee Abram's home.

And an angel of G-d found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain on the way to Shur. And he said: "Hagar the maid of Sarai! From where do you come? And where do you go?" And she said: "I flee from my mistress Sarai."

And an angel of G-d said to her: "Return to your mistress, and suffer under her hand."

And an angel of G-d said to her: "I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude."

And an angel of G-d said to her: "Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael ('G-d has heard'), for G-d has heard your affliction.

"He will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand will be against him."

Ishmael was born in Abram's 86th year.

A Father of Multitudes

Commentary

left the *Reish* of "exalted" in. For the true mark of a teacher is one who can convey the most sublime truths to the most ordinary of minds, and the true mark of a leader is one who can inspire the loftiest aspirations in the most mundane of hearts. Such a teacher and leader was Abraham, and such is the

Another thirteen years go by. Abram and Sarai have now been in the Holy Land for 24 years, most of them in the Plain of Mamre at Hebron.

At age 99, Abram's life enters a new phase. G-d appears to him and changes his and Sarai's names:

"No longer shall your name be called Abram. Your name shall be Abraham ('Father of Multitudes'), for I have made you a father of a multitude of nations... As for Sarai your wife, you shall no longer call her name Sarai, but Sarah ('Princess') shall be her name."

Sarah, G-d promises, will bear a son, from whom shall spring the great nation which is to issue from them.

Abraham fell on his face and laughed. And he said in his heart: Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?

And Abraham said to G-d: "O that Ishmael shall live before You!"

No, said, G-d, the nation with which I shall establish My special bond will be the offspring of a child that will be born to you and Sarah, whom you should name Isaac (*Yitzchak*, in the Hebrew, meaning "laughter"). Ishmael, too shall be blessed: "I will make him fruitful, and multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

The new phase in Abraham's relationship with G-d is to be marked by Abraham and his household "setting My covenant in your flesh":

"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you..."

The section of Lech Lecha concludes:

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. On that very day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. And all the men of his household—those born in the house and those purchased from a stranger—were circumcised with him.

quality of leadership he bequeathed to his heirs in their role as a "light unto the nations."

(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

IT'S BEEN DONE BEFORE

One of the things about being a Jew is that no matter what you do, one of your grandfathers or grandmothers has done it already.

If you discover the truth of the one G-d and sell half the world on it — Abraham did that. Be thrown into a fiery furnace, have your wife abducted, raise cattle, fight a war, rescue your nephew, pray for a child, have your son rebel, have him return to you, make a fortune and give it away, traverse the globe, stay home for 60 years, dig a well, farm the land, study half your life in a yeshivah, become an exile, fall in love, be cheated, work yourself to the bone, run away from your father-in-law, be the victim of sexual assault, take revenge, sell your brother into slavery, be thrown in jail, survive a famine, rule an empire — it's been done.

In the words of Nachmanides: "Everything that happened to the Patriarchs is a signpost for their children. This is why the Torah elaborates its account of their journeys, their well-digging and the other events [of their lives]... These all come as an instruction for the future: for when something happens to one of the three Patriarchs, one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants..."

To some, this can be very frustrating. How can one ever do anything original with such ancestors?

(Which brings to mind an interesting difference between a Torah scholar and an academic scholar. Imagine an academic scholar laboring for years on a thesis only to discover that the very same arguments and proofs have been made years earlier by another scholar. It would be a catastrophe! For the Torah scholar, it would be the high point of his career and the ultimate validation of his legitimacy.)

It's good to be original. It's a blessing to be creative. (In fact, according to the Chassidic masters, the entire point of being created in your Creator's image is to be creative yourself.) But originality and creativity does not mean doing something that hasn't been done before. It means re-creating 4000 years of Jewish marriages in your marriage — and then adding to that your own special something. It means raising your child with all the wisdom of 100 gener-

ations of Jewish parents and educators — and enhancing that with your own unique insight. It means giving of yourself with the generosity of a million philanthropists — and then inventing your own special brand of charity. It means facing adversary with the courage and integrity of martyrs and heroes of every era and continent — and then achieving your own personal victory.

When embarking on your adventure, you have a choice. You can ignore the signposts, and end up doing exactly what some other hapless wanderer did sometime, somewhere else, your "originality" intact only because you never heard about that other guy. Or you can follow the signposts to a true understanding and experience of your path, which will then become your foundation and platform upon which to play your own distinct role as G-d's partner in creation.

*By Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com;
based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*

THE QUEST FOR SELF

There's a passage in the book of Zechariah that describes an encounter between a human being and a flock of angels, in which the human is referred to as "a journeyer among the stationary ones."

"The Journeyer" is a most apt appellation for our restless race. Other creatures also move from place to place, but only man's migrations are motivated by the desire to be someplace other than where he is now. Unlike mice, maple trees and angels, who are content to be what and where they are, the human being is constantly on the go—forever striving to get somewhere, preferably somewhere where no one has been before..

The problem is, there's nowhere left to go.

A century ago it was "Go west, young man!"; west went the young men, until there was no west left. Then one man won the race to the North Pole, and another to the South. Another human was first to reach the summit of Everest (though who exactly that was is still a matter of debate), and yet another made the "giant leap" of leaving a footprint on the moon.

So what's left? A trip to another galaxy? A foray into the future? Will these destinations, if and when they are reached, satisfy the seeking spirit of The

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Journeyer?

We've all heard the story of the impoverished villager who dreams of a treasure buried under a bridge in Krakow. Arriving in the big city, he locates the bridge of his dream. The tollkeeper, noticing a loitering man with a shovel and suspicious intentions, confronts the pauper, who confesses his mission. "Dreams!" exclaims the guard. "Why, only last night I dreamt that in the home of Chaim Yankel the peddler in the village of Usseldorf, a chest of gold coins is buried in the wall behind the stove. So do I travel all the way to Usseldorf to break down the wall of some poor yokel's home?" Chaim Yankel hurries home, demolishes the wall behind his stove, and lives happily ever after on his buried treasure.

After all journeys are consummated, after all quests are realized, there remains one frontier which few have penetrated and fewer still have conquered: the frontier of self. We traverse the planet and beyond, we map the cosmos and the infrastructure of the atom, seeking some indication, some sign, of what it's all about; but how many of us have entered into the interior of our souls?

Lech lecha, the opening words of the Divine call to Abraham which launches and defines Jewish history, literally means, "Go to yourself." "Go to yourself," G-d commanded the first Jew, "from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

When the Divine call came, Abraham could look back at a life of unprecedented discovery and achievement. This was the man who discovered the truth of the One G-d, faced down the mightiest king of his time, braved death in a fiery furnace for his beliefs, and converted thousands to a monotheistic faith and ethos. All this he achieved entirely on his own, with no teacher, mentor or heavenly voice to direct him, with nothing but his great mind to guide him and his passionate quest for truth to drive him.

Then, in Abraham's 75th year, came the Divine command: "Go to yourself!" Now that you've completed your explorations and attained your goals, turn inward and embark on a journey into the essence of your own being.

Paradoxically, the more personal our journey, the

more we require guidance and aid.

A well-developed sense of direction can guide us through the most labyrinthal road system; a keen social sense can negotiate the most convoluted office politics; the data and learning patterns stored in our brain facilitate our pursuit of new fields of study. But when we seek a path to the core of self, the knowledge and skills of a lifetime are suddenly ineffectual. We find ourselves in the dark, with no recourse but to call upon our Creator. "G-d, who am I?" we cry. "Give me a clue; tell me why You made me."

This paradox is implicit in the Torah's first recorded instruction to the first Jew. When Abraham is commanded to "Go to yourself," this resourceful, self-made man is told to set aside his inborn talents ("your land"), the personality developed in seven-and-a-half decades of interaction with his environment ("your birthplace"), and the wisdom discovered and formulated by his phenomenal mind ("your father's house"), and "blindly" follow G-d "to the land that I will show you."

In our outward journeys, our knowledge, talents and personality are the tools with which we explore the world beyond us. But in seeking our true self, these very tools—which constitute an exterior, superimposed "self" of their own—conceal as much as they reveal, distort even as they illuminate.

We employ these tools in our quest—we have no others. But if our journey is to lead us to the quintessence of self rather than some phantom thereof, it must be guided by He who created us in His image and sketched the blueprint of our souls in His Torah.

*By Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com;
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THE THREE JOURNEYS OF ABRAHAM

A sizable portion of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Abraham, the first Jew. Most curiously, however, we first meet Abraham rather late in his celebrated life: the first event of Abraham's life described in detail by the Torah occurred when he was seventy-five years old!

By that time, Abraham was able to look back upon a lifetime of fruitful—indeed unprecedented—achievement. As a young child, his inquisitive mind discerned a greater truth implicit in the workings of the universe, and he came to know the One G-d. A

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lone man pitted against the entire world, he battled the entrenched pagan perversity of his time, bringing many to a life of monotheistic belief and morality.

But then came an event of such significance that it eclipses the first seven and a half decades of Abraham's life. An event that marked the forging of a new phenomenon—the Jew—and redefined the journey of life.

The event was G-d's call to Abraham to "Go to you, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." Now that you have realized the full capacity of your conscious powers, go on *to you*. I will show you a place that is the essence of your own self, a place that lies beyond the land, birthplace, and father's house that you know.

Instinct, Environment and Reason

The countless factors involved in making us what we are can be generalized under three categories: the natural, the impressed, and the acquired.

We begin life already programmed with the drives and inclinations that form an inborn psyche and character. Then begins, from the moment of birth, the influence of our environment, as parents, teachers and peers impress their manners and attitudes upon our souls. Finally, a third and overriding influence comes with the attainment of intellectual maturity: man, alone among G-d's creatures, has been granted an objective intellect with which he can, to a great extent, control the stimuli to which he is exposed and the manner in which they shall affect him. With his mind, he is empowered to develop himself beyond—and even contrary to—his genetic and conditioned self.

This is the deeper significance of the words "your land, your birthplace and your father's house" in G-d's call to Abraham. *Eretz*, the Hebrew word for land and earth, is etymologically related to the word *ratzon*—will and desire; so your land also translates as your natural desires. Your birthplace—*moladtecha*—is a reference to the influence of home and society. And *beit avicha*, your father's house, refers to man as a mature and rational being, forging his mind-set, character and behavior with the transcendent objectivity of the intellect. (In the terminol-

ogy of Kabbalah and Chassidism, the intellect is referred to as the father within man, since it is the progenitor of, and authority over, his feelings and behavior patterns.)

By conventional standards, this constitutes the ultimate in human achievement: the development of one's natural instincts, the assimilation of learned and observed truths, and the remaking of self through the objective arbiter of mind. In truth, however, the intellect is still part and parcel of our humanity, remaining ever subject to the deficiencies and limitations of the human state; while it may surmount the confines of the inborn and the impressed, ultimately, the intellect is never truly free of the ego and its prejudices.

But there is a higher self to man, a self free of all that defines and confines the human. This is the spark of G-dliness that is the core of his soul—the divine essence that G-d breathed into him, the image of G-d in which he was created. The *eretz* that G-d promised to show Abraham.

[This explains the order in which the terms land, birthplace and father's house appear in the verse. When a person embarks on a journey, he first leaves his (father's) home, then departs his city (birthplace), and only then leaves the borders of his land; yet in our verse this order is reversed. According to the deeper meaning of these terms, however, the order is accurate: first a person departs from his base instincts via his education and environmental influences; these, in turn, are overruled by his faculty for objective reasoning; finally, he is called upon to transcend even his rational self in his journey to the divine essence of his soul.]

In his journey of discovery, Abraham must obviously depart the land, birthplace and father's house of his native Mesopotamia; he must obviously reject the pagan culture of Ur Casdim and Charan. But this is not the departure of which we are speaking in the above-quoted verse. For Abraham received this call many years after he had renounced the pagan ways of his family and birthplace, recognized G-d, and had a profound impact on his society. Still he is told: Go! Depart from your nature, depart from your habits, depart from your rational self. After rejecting your negative, idolatrous origins, you must now also transcend your positive and gainful past. Reach beyond yourself, albeit a perfected self.

Human perfection is simply not enough. For any-

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thing human—even the objective, transcendent intellect—is still part and parcel of the created reality, ever subject to and defined by it. Yet G-d invites us—in His first command to the first Jew—to experience that which transcends all limit and definition: Himself.

But first we must go to you. Go away from your finite self, to come to the you that only G-d can show you—the you that is one with Him.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe;
adapted by Yanki Tauber; editor@chabadonline.com*

SPARKS

At the “Covenant Between the Parts” G-d said to Abraham: “Know that your children shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they will enslave them and afflict them... and afterwards they will go out with great wealth.”

For much of our history, we have indeed been strangers in a land not ours. There was the Egyptian Exile that preceded our birth as a nation; the Babylonian Exile that followed the destruction of the First Temple; the Greek Exile during the Second Temple Era; and our present exile, which began with the Roman destruction of the Holy Temple in 69 ce and from which we have yet to emerge after more than nineteen centuries under the hegemony of alien powers.

Exile — *galut*, in Hebrew — is much more than a person’s physical removal from his homeland. A person in exile is a person severed from the environment that nourishes his way of life, his principles and values, his spiritual identity. In exile all these are in jeopardy, for the onus is now on him alone; he must call upon his own resources of resolve and perseverance to survive. In the words of our sages, “All journeys are dangerous.”

Why are we in *galut*? *Galut* is commonly regarded as a punishment for our national and individual failings. Indeed, the Prophets repeatedly describe it as such, and in our prayers we lament the fact that, “Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land.”

But if *galut* was solely punishment for sin, its intensity would gradually diminish as the sins that caused it are atoned for; yet we find that *galut* grows darker and deeper as it progresses. Furthermore, our state of *galut* was foretold to Abraham in his covenant with G-d as an integral part of the Jewish mission in history long before the sins for which it atones were committed.

The Promise

A clue to a deeper significance of *galut* can be found in the “great wealth” that G-d promised to Abraham as the result of his children’s sojourn in the land of Egypt. Indeed, this promise is a recurrent theme in the Torah’s account of the Egyptian Exile and the Exodus — to the extent that one gets the impression that this was the very purpose of our enslavement in Egypt.

In G-d’s first communication to Moses, when He revealed Himself to him in the burning bush and charged him with the mission of taking the Jewish people out of Egypt, He makes sure to include the promise that, “When you go, you will not go empty-handed. Every woman shall ask from her neighbor, and from her that dwells in her house, vessels of gold and vessels of silver and garments... and you shall drain Egypt [of its wealth].”

During the plague of darkness, when the land of Egypt was plunged into a darkness so thick that the Egyptians could not budge from their places, the Jewish people — whom the darkness did not affect — were able to move about freely inside the Egyptians’ homes. This, says the Midrash, was in order that the Jews should be able to take an inventory of the wealth of Egypt, so that the Egyptians could not deny the existence of any valuable objects the Jews asked for when they left Egypt.

And just prior to the Exodus, G-d again says to Moses: “Please, speak into the ears of the people, that each man ask his [Egyptian] fellow, and each woman her fellow, for vessels of silver and gold.” G-d is virtually *begging* the Children of Israel to take the wealth of Egypt!

The Talmud explains that the Jewish people were disinclined to hold up their departure from Egypt in order to gather its wealth:

To what is this comparable? To a man who is locked up in prison and is told: Tomorrow you shall be freed from prison and be given a lot of money.

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Says he: I beg of you, free me today, and I ask for nothing more ... [So G-d had to beseech them:] Please! Ask the Egyptians for gold and silver vessels, so that the righteous one (Abraham) should not say: He fulfilled "They will be enslaved and tortured", but He did not fulfill "and afterwards they will go out with great wealth."

But certainly Abraham, too, would have been prepared to forgo the promise of great wealth if this were to hasten his children's liberation. Obviously, the gold and silver we carried out of Egypt was an indispensable component of our redemption.

The Glitter in the Gold

The Talmud offers the following explanation for the phenomenon of *galut*: "The people of Israel were exiled amongst the nations only so that converts might be added to them."

On the most basic level, this is a reference to the many non-Jews who, in the course of the centuries of our dispersion, have come in contact with the Jewish people and have been inspired to convert to Judaism. But Chassidic teaching explains that the Talmud is also referring to souls of a different sort that are transformed and elevated in the course of our exiles: the sparks of holiness contained within the physical creation.

The great Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that every object, force and phenomenon in existence has a spark of holiness within it — a pinpoint of divinity that constitutes its soul, its spiritual essence and design. This spark embodies the divine desire that the thing exist, and its function within G-d's overall purpose for creation. When a person utilizes something to serve his Creator, he penetrates its shell of mundanity, revealing and realizing its divine essence.

It is to this end that we have been dispersed across the face of earth: so that we may come in contact with the sparks of holiness that await redemption in every corner of the globe.

Every soul has its own sparks scattered about in the world, which actually form an integral part of

itself: no soul is complete until it has redeemed those sparks related to its being. Thus a person moves through life, impelled from place to place and from occupation to occupation by seemingly random forces; but everything is by divine providence, which guides every man to those possessions and opportunities whose soul is intimately connected with his.

Thus the Torah relates how Jacob risked his life to retrieve some "small jugs" he had left behind after crossing the Yabbok River. "The righteous," remarks the Talmud, "value their possessions more than their bodies." For they recognize the divine potential in every bit of matter, and see in each of their possessions a component of their own spiritual integrity.

The Lesson

At times, a person might be inclined to escape *galut* by enclosing himself in a cocoon of spirituality, devoting his days and nights to Torah study and prayer. But instead of escaping *galut*, he is only deepening his entrenchment within it, for he is abandoning limbs of his own soul—his sparks of holiness—in the wasteland of unrefined materiality.

It is only by meeting the challenges that divine providence sends our way, by utilizing every bit of material gold and silver toward a G-dly end, that we extricate these sparks from their *galut*, achieve a personal redemption, and hasten the universal redemption when "The great *shofar* shall be sounded, and the lost shall come from the lands of plenty, and the forsaken from the lands of stricture, and they shall bow to G-d on the Holy Mountain in Jerusalem."

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com;

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