

Lech Lecha

The Search for Spirituality

A. Hashem's first command to Avraham

The *parsha* opens with Hashem's famous first command to Avram. “*Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.*” A quick look at the end of the previous *parsha*, however, shows us that Avraham had already left Ur Kasdim, his birthplace, together with some of his family, to go to the Land of Canaan, although they only reached Charan.

Why did Hashem command Avraham to leave his birthplace if he already left it previously? Rashi answers that Hashem commanded Avraham to go even *further* away from his birthplace. What was the point of going further, Avraham had already left?

B. The Floating Earth

In order to answer this question, we will take a detour into metaphysics.

Ohr HaChayim in Parshas Braishis explains an interesting natural phenomenon from the perspective of metaphysics and kabbala. The Earth is suspended in space, surrounded by the heavens. From a simple human perspective the sun and the Earth always seem to remain at a certain distance from each other. Why did God make the world appear to us in this way?

Ohr HaChayim teaches, kabbalistically, that the physical earth has a great desire to become spiritual. Every side of the planet is therefore trying to move towards the sky. But since every side of planet earth is trying to expand, these forces cancel out, and the earth stays in one spot, suspended in space.

Braishis Raba, *perek 5*, discusses the meaning of the Hebrew name for the earth. Why is the earth called *eretz*? The root of *eretz*, *Reish Tzadi*, means to run. The earth wants to run towards God to do the will of its Maker. The Hebrew name of a thing signifies its essence. The name *eretz* intimates that the essence of matter is really something spiritual. Matter cloaks the spirituality within it. Matter itself though, would like to become completely spiritual. Even the ground wants to be completely spiritual and ascend to heaven. For this reason the ground is called *eretz*, because it wants to run towards the sky.

Everything in this world is really a shadow of its true essence in the higher, spiritual worlds. Even lifeless earth is a shadow of its reality in a higher sphere. Therefore, even in this world the earth has a desire for more spirituality, and the earth is drawn to more. So it runs towards the sky, revolving around the sun.

People also desire spiritual, elevated experiences. They have a tremendous yearning for religion. If that true yearning is, God forbid, unrealized or distorted, false religious experiences and values take its place. Some people try to attain the ecstatic experience through drug use, orgies, wild music, and drunkenness. These are all distortions of the spiritual drive in a human being. People don't want to live a boring, tedious, earthly existence. We yearn to reach something higher and more spiritual.

C. Spirituality Tends to Reject Physicality

Other commentaries explain the earth's position in a different metaphysical, kabbalistic way. While the world is

pushing upwards to get to heaven, heaven is pushing the world away. Since the heavens surround the planet, they push the planet back down, so it stays where it is. As much as Earth wants to go towards heaven, heaven is rejecting it. It is as if the heavens say that the physical should not be allowed into the spiritual domain, and that the spiritual domain should not be made physical.

D. The Difference Between Torah and Other Religions

People desire meaning. We want to have spiritual feelings as we go through the day. At work, we want a spiritual experience. We want house chores to be spiritual. We want raising children to be a spiritual experience as well. Can we achieve this? The answer is *yes*, we can. How can we attain this goal? Through the performance of *mitzvos*.

The Torah gives us ways to bring spirituality into our mundane lives. There are two kinds of *mitzvos*, positive *mitzvos asei*, and negative *mitzvos lo sasei*. The “do's” tell us how to make the mundane spiritual. The “don'ts” tell us how *not* to make the spiritual mundane. The life we lead is supposed to be both spiritual and physical. This is because we ourselves are a combination of the two, having a body and a soul.

There are religions that reject the physical dimension that we live in. They maintain that the spiritual and physical realms cannot be combined. Some religions, specifically Far Eastern religions such as Buddhism, focus on meditation and neglect the physical world. In distinction to this, Torah has rules for mundane, everyday activities. For example, the Torah instructs us how to take out a loan. A Jew cannot borrow from another Jew and pay interest. The Torah tells us how to conduct business. A store owner can't overcharge his customers. Employers must pay their workers on time. The Torah instructs us regarding relationships between man and wife, about raising children, about working during the week and resting on Shabbos. The Torah addresses every aspect of life. The Torah teaches that the spiritual experience is better off having a physical expression, and that the physical world is enriched by the spiritual dimension. *Mitzvos maasiyos*, active *mitzvos*, are thus very important in Judaism. They are meant to be performed together with the meditative side of prayer and learning.

In Christianity, at least in Catholicism, priests and nuns are not supposed to get married. That religion feels that marital relations are solely physical and not spiritual at all. Our tradition, though, teaches, “*Yafe talmud torah im derech eretz.*” Torah study is good when combined with natural life. This is the great idea that the Torah brought to the world.

In fact, Chassidus asserts that the main purpose of the existence of all of the spiritual worlds and angels is for this physical world. Hashem wants to see physical reality combine with spiritual reality. Indeed, in the days of Mashiach we will see physical life continuing in the way we now know it. However, it will be more imbued and perfected by our spiritual experiences. God's presence will be more perceived, but *mitzvos* and physical life will continue. We therefore *paskin*, as codified by the Rambam in Hilchos Melachim, that *mitzvos* will still apply in the days of Mashciach.

E. Why Hashem Designed the Conflict between Spiritual and Physical

The combination between spiritual and physical realities though *is* difficult. Naturally, they are in conflict. Why did God create this natural, strong conflict between the spiritual and the physical? Why did Hashem make spirituality resistant to the physical human being?

Hashem did this in order to foster a desire in man for spirituality. This is a fundamental part of being human. If something is easy to get, people take it for granted. Hashem doesn't want us to routinely and habitually engage in

the spiritual realm without joy and emotion. This is a terrible thing. At the end of *Hilchos Yom Tov*, Rambam writes that the reason the Jews were exiled from Israel, and the reason we have experienced terrible punishments since then is because we served Hashem without joy when we were in Eretz Yisrael. We went through the motions the Torah prescribes, but without the experience and joy of being a Jew. As the pasuk says, “*tachas asher lo avadta es Hashem Elokecha b'simcha*.” In other words, the Torah decrees, “You did not serve Hashem with joy when you had everything. Now you will have to struggle to fulfill your yearning for Hashem. You do not have joy now because you are not with Him. You will thus struggle because Hashem is distant – and you will seek Him.”

This is a punishment, but more so, it is a method of bringing us back. Now we do want Him, like a poor husband who comes home one day and finds his unappreciated wife has left him. Now he searches for her. We also want Hashem. We want Eretz Yisrael. We want Yerushalayim and the Beis Hamikdash. Similarly, why did Hashem make the spiritual experience so difficult for us physical, bodily people to have? To make us want it so much more!

F. The Influence of Location upon This Conflict

If you live outside of Israel, you will discover incredible barriers towards becoming a more holy and spiritual person. The world outside Israel has strong physicality, which heaven rejects. It is very difficult to break through.

This is not true about Eretz Yisrael. It is called Eretz HaChaim, a land that produces life. The eyes of Hashem are always on this land (Dvarim 11). The soil itself has spirituality inside of it. God lives in this land. He sent His holy Shechina to the land and in particular to Jerusalem. The physical and spiritual domains are easier to synthesize there.

Eretz Yisrael today is an incredible phenomenon. Young men and women in high schools of America go through the motions of Judaism. But they do not really connect with the spiritual side of life; they do not burn with the fire of the service of God, their Creator. But when they come to Eretz Yisrael they suddenly become new people. They experience a tremendous increase of spiritual feelings. They want to be better, holier people. This comes from the spiritual power of the Land of Israel.

G. Why Avraham was Commanded to Travel Further

Now we can answer our original question. Why was Avraham commanded to travel further from his home?

When Avraham first left his home, he embarked upon a quest for spirituality. Leaving his birthplace was a step towards spirituality, but he needed to go further away and arrive in the Land of Israel. The land itself is spiritual; it grants the power to combine body and spirit. This is why Hashem told Avraham he must move *further* away from his home, and go to the holy land of Eretz Yisrael.

There are many *mitzvos hatluyos baaretz*, mitzvos that we do with the land itself, including, for example, *shmita*. It is a year during which we don't work the land at all. Imagine, a whole country refraining from any agricultural activity for an entire year! This amazing *mitzva* turns a whole year into a Shabbos-like rest. It is a difficult *mitzva*. However, people who keep this *mitzva* achieve an incredible level of holiness. The whole year becomes a year of closeness to Hashem. Only the Land of Israel provides such a dramatic opportunity to achieve holiness.

H. Applications for Ourselves

When you encounter obstacles that block your spiritual aspirations, don't let them deter you. Instead, you should harness the emotions of frustration to strive for spirituality even more. Work a little harder and Hashem will help you achieve. There are many men and women nowadays who grew up far from Torah, felt inspired to learn, and worked to overcome their handicaps. Some were from irreligious backgrounds, and others had learning disabilities. They wanted Torah so much, though, that despite their frustrations – and indeed *because* of them – they reached great heights.

So can you. When you encounter obstacles, take pause and rethink. Instead of seeing obstacles, consider these situation as opportunities. You can and will find more energy to succeed. Hashem never puts a person in a situation that he can't overcome. These challenges are opportunities to find more strength to do what's right.

Even if you are not living in Israel, you can bring Israel into yourself. A *chassid* once came to one of the Lubavitcher rebbes in Europe a long time ago, and told him that he wanted to live in Israel but could not go. The rebbe said, “*Mach Israel da*. Make Israel here!” If you have a desire for holiness, do what you can to make your life holier, wherever you are.

You should go to Eretz Yisrael as much as you can. Go to the *Kotel*. Breathe in the holiness found in the air around you. If you can, live in Israel. It is the place where spiritual energy is flowing into the world.

I. Spirituality and Holiness on Shabbos

Shabbos is a day when the spiritual dimension is much stronger than the physical dimension. Shabbos shouldn't be a day where you just sleep and don't work. Shabbos should be a day of spiritual growth. You should spend the time singing *zmiros*, participating in Shabbos *seudos* for hours, and learning Torah as much as you can. Shabbos can help you access spirituality. The day itself is holy and will help you access *kedusha*, the holiness you seek.

The night and day of Shabbos are different. At night, as Shabbos begins, we leave the previous week. It was so hard during the week for us to find *kedusha*. During the night of Shabbos, however, one can fulfill this great desire for Hashem. Some people find Hashem at home when lighting Shabbos candles, others in *shul* when singing L'cha Dodi, or at the Shabbos table singing *zmiros*. As the morning of Shabbos arrives, the *kedusha* grows. The fire of holiness burns brighter. It gets progressively stronger until *shalashudos*. Then the Jew is soaring up to heaven. This is because of the unique *kedusha* of Shabbos. In the dimension of time, Shabbos is our best vehicle for holiness.

J. Concluding Encouragement

There are barriers between heaven and earth, between our physical and spiritual sides, especially outside of Eretz Yisrael. These obstacles though, are really opportunities. They are facades Hashem puts up to make us want the spiritual parts of life even more. We can and must break through the barriers, even during the week and even in *chutz laaretz*.

Any desire to do something good counts. Hashem often helps us accomplish our wishes. It may be difficult, painful and frustrating. But those excruciating experiences are often the most rewarding ones. Even if a person had to go to heaven to find Hashem, he would be able to do so, says the Torah. After all, Moshe did it! The Jews after the Holocaust needed Eretz Yisrael so much and, incredibly, they got it. We need the Beis Hamikdash so much now and we too can get to see it, *iy"v*. It is up to us to desire it and to work for it. Hashem will remove the barriers in our way and let us see it! *B'ezeras* Hashem, we will see *geula* in Eretz Yisrael, in Yerushalyim, and, yes, in the Beis Hamikdash!

In your daily life, try as hard as you can to find the spiritual dimension. Do a *mitzva* with enthusiasm. Break through all the barriers and don't let a routine settle down upon you. Think of Eretz Yisrael and of Shabbos all the time. Use their holiness to give you the passion and energy to do Hashem's will *b'simcha*! With joy we will *iy"h* be able to combine our spiritual and physical sides, the holy and the mundane, and heaven with earth!

Questions

- 1) Why did Hashem command Avraham to go further on in his travels?
- 2) Give two metaphysical reasons why the earth and sun always seem to stay the same distance from each other.
- 3) How does the Torah approach the conflict between the spiritual and the physical experiences of life?
- 4) Give two examples of a purely spiritual experience you have had.
- 5) Give two examples of when you combined a spiritual experience with a physical activity you did.
- 6) Have you had spiritual experiences in Eretz Yisrael? If yes, what have you done to continue those experiences?
- 7) What is a good strategy to develop more spirituality in a person's life?

Exercises

- 1) Keep a daily log for a week of three types of activities you did each day.
 - A) Purely physical and mundane
 - B) Purely spiritual
 - C) Spiritual combined with physical
- 2) Log in the amounts of time you spent on each of these three activities.
- 3) Could you change your lifestyle to increase the spirituality in your life and reduce the purely mundane?
- 4) Take a small step at a time to change your lifestyle and keep a log to see your progress.
 - A) Do the above for one week.
 - B) Do the above for one month.