בס"ד

***פרשת לך-לך***

**Parshas Lech Lecha**

Just Walk Beside Me

*"וַיֵּרָא יְקֹוָק אֶל אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר...הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי וֶהְיֵה תָמִים." (בראשית יז,א)*

*“And Hashem appeared to Avraham and he said to him, ‘…Walk before Me and be perfect.’” (Genesis 17, 1)*

**I – Avraham vs. Noach**

The Torah describes Noach as a “perfectly righteous man” who “walked with God.”[[1]](#endnote-1) In contrast, Avraham, after following Hashem’s command to circumcise himself walked “before” Hashem.[[2]](#endnote-2) *Chazal* explain that Avraham was greater than Noach. The latter walked *with* Hashem because he needed Hashem’s support in order to maintain his righteousness.[[3]](#endnote-3) Avraham, however, walked in front of Hashem; he did not need to rely on Hashem for strength to follow *mitzvos*.[[4]](#endnote-4) When he was commanded to leave his homeland he listened. When he was commanded to circumcise himself he listened. He was like a solider following marching orders with unwavering faith and loyalty.

**II – The Loyal Marching Solider?**

It would seem that walking “in front of Hashem,” completely subjugating one’s self to fulfilling the commandments of Hashem represents a greater level of spiritual development. The truth, however, is a bit more complex. In the beginning of *Parshas Vayera* after Avraham circumcised himself, ostensibly becoming “perfect” and capable of walking “in front of Hashem,” the Torah relates how Hashem came to Avraham who was sitting by the entrance of his tent.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Though Avraham’s recuperation from his circumcision certainly explains his sedentary behavior, as well as the reason why Hashem wanted to visit him,[[6]](#endnote-6) the imagery described sharply contrasts with Hashem’s declaration in the previous chapter. Hashem had said that after performing *milah* Avraham would walk in front of Him. In the aftermath, Avraham is not walking at all. He is sitting in his place. Indeed, the *sefer Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh* explains that this imagery symbolizes how Avraham had reached a certain plateau in his spiritual development.[[7]](#endnote-7) What is even more puzzling is that at this plateau, he is *with* Hashem, not *before* Hashem!

Another episode in this week’s *parsha* also challenges this model. When Hashem tells Avraham to leave his homeland and travel, He does not tell Avraham where to go. Rav Nissan Alpert explains that because Avraham, through years of thinking and character refinement, had developed a sensitivity for spirituality, he traveled throughout the world until he reached the place that *he* felt was best suited for spiritual pursuits: Eretz Yisrael.[[8]](#endnote-8) Although Avraham was certainly following the order of Hashem to travel, this display of nullification and faith in Hashem is much more nuanced than a mere solder following marching orders. A solder is told where to go. Avraham was not. He used his own initiative and abilities to *choose* where to go (and only then did Hashem tell him that he was right[[9]](#endnote-9)).

Moreover, the spiritual sensitivity that Avraham utilized was the product of decades of spiritual development that the Torah omits. The Lubavitcher Rebbe and others explain in the name of the Ramban that the reason why the Torah does not describe Avraham’s inner journey to coming to believe in Hashem is because the story of Avraham as a Jew only began when he began to follow Hashem’s commandments – by Lech Lecha; the dynamic of *maaseh avos siman labanim* and *kedushas Yisroel* – the very foundation of who we are as a people and our relationship with Hashem - is defined by following His command.[[10]](#endnote-10) If that is the case, then why did Hashem leave it up to Avraham to ‘choose’ the land? Why didn’t He just tell him where to go?

**V – A Basket Full of Toys Helps the Medicine Go Down**

About 15 years ago, a family – let’s call them the Fried family[[11]](#endnote-11) – was traveling from their home in Silver Spring, Maryland to spend Pesach with Mrs. Fried’s parents in Paramus New Jersey. About a 4 hour drive.

3 and half hours into the trip, Mrs. Fried realized that they had forgotten their medicine bag at home. Their twin boys suffered from a rare protein deficiency which required a rare medicine without which they might die. With little recourse, they prepared to turn around and retrieve the medicine from their home, until they had an idea. Earlier that year, the Frieds had participated in a support group for parents of children with that disease and had met a chassidish family from New Square. They called and the family and asked if them if they had any extra medicine that they could use.

Thankfully, the family did, and the father offered to meet Mr. Fried halfway between Fair Lawn and New Square so that each could return in time for Yom Tov. The two fathers met in a supermarket parking lot, and as Mr. Fried got out of his car, he saw the father from New square holding an enormous basket filled with toys, candy, and books.

“What’s all this stuff?” Mr. Fried asked.

“We know the trip up must have been tense,” the Chassid explained, “so my children wanted to share their afikomen presents with your sons. That way you and your family can have both a healthy *and* happy Yom Tov.”

Mr. Fried was overwhelmed by their thoughtfulness. He quickly thanked the chassid and drove back to Fair Lawn. It was a Yom Tov that neither he nor his family would soon forget.

Now this is obviously a very touching and powerful story about *chessed* and caring for a fellow Jew. But if you think about the story for a few moments, there’s also another very critical idea. You see, I left out one very small detail:

I never actually told you if the chassid gave Mr. Fried the medicine his sons needed.

Now, I’m sure that almost everyone would say immediately say, “of course he did” with the utmost conviction – and that is in fact what happened – but why are we so sure? Let’s consider the hypothetical scenario in which the chossid *didn’t* bring the medicine and he just brought the gift basket. What exactly would Mr. Fried’s reaction be?

Unmitigated rage would probably be an understatement. He would yell at the chossid, demanding to know why he *schlepped* out of his way right before candle lighting and would now have violate the sanctity of Yom Tov to ensure his children’s survival.

But wait a minute. What was so touching and meaningful was the gift basket. That’s what makes the story so beautiful. So why then would Mr. Fried be so upset? Why would he feel that he drove out for nothing?

The answer, as I’m sure you know, is quite obvious. Yes, the gift basket certainly enriched the Fried’s Yom Tov experience, but without the medicine there would be no Yom Tov! The gift basket is only meaningful if you also get the medicine. What makes a personal touch so special and significant is that it adds an intimate dimension to a preexisting responsibility. It shows that what you’re doing, or whom you’re doing it for, is so important on a personal level that you want to personalize it.

**III – Walking Together**

We can now understand why Avraham Avinu sat together with Hashem after his *bris*. Why would two people choose to walk together? One possibility is that one requires the assistance of the other to walk, just as *Chazal* said by Noach. The other possibility is that the two people want to walk together because they like each other. They don’t need each other’s help to walk. They just want to spend time together. This latter group symbolizes a second way we relate to Hashem – as someone who wants to spend time with Him. Like a good friend or a wife, as described by Shlomo Hamelech in Shir Hashirim.

However, marriage and friendship are examples of social relationships. While these relationships carry significant moral and legal implications, they are man-made and can be undone. Friendships can be dissolved. Marriages can be divorced. The same is unfortunately true with Hashem. If we were merely married to Hashem, then He could *chas veshalom* divorce us if we would act unfaithfully.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Thus, the Jewish people’s relationship with Hashem is also described as children of Hashem, a biological, immutable relationship that is not based on fealty. We will always be Hashem’s children. This relationship, this *bris* that Hashem made with us is the *kedushas Yisrael, the ma’aseh avos siman labanim*, that was created by Avraham walking before Hashem like a loyal solider. Throughout history, Jews have marched before Hashem to fulfill His commandments with *mesiras nefesh* like Avraham Avinu. This is the *bittul*, the nullification that we experience before Hashem.

However, this relationship serves as the foundation for the far more intimate connection we share with Hashem as His bride. It is a more personal connection, *dveikus* to Hashem. As such, this connection isn’t uniform across the Jewish people. Each Jew is different, with a unique toolkit of talents, spiritual potential, and personalized *derech* of *avodas Hashem*. However, such an intimate connection is only sustainable when built atop the solid foundation of *mesiras nefesh* and fealty to following the *mitzvos*, walking before Hashem and following His marching orders. They enrich and give depth to our relationship with Hashem: by walking before Hashem, we become empowered to walk with Him. To spend time with Him.

**IV – The Aftermath of the Bris**

Avraham’s essence was *chessed*, kindness. However, there are many other *middos* required to serve Hashem depending upon the situation. Throughout Avraham’s life, he was tested to prove that he was not merely an *ish chessed*, someone who liked doing kindness, but an *eved Hashem* who did kindness. Thus, Avraham was tested over and over again to do things that appeared to not be kind or loving. He needed to leave his father, to banish Yishmael, to slaughter his son, and to perform *bris milah*. [[13]](#endnote-13)

Once Avraham had proved that he could walk before Hashem, however, his unique personality as an *ish chessed* could enrich his service with Hashem. His essence, his *chessed* could irrigate and nourish every aspect of his life. Thus, after he obeyed Hashem’s commandment of *lech lecha*, *he* ‘chose’ where to travel, relying upon the instincts and sensitivities that *he* had developed to find the Chosen Land.

Similarly, after following the commandment of *milah* and emblazoning his perpetual *mesiras nefesh*, *emunah*, and willingness to march before Hashem, he was able to also be *with* Hashem. Thus, Hashem didn’t relay any information to Avraham during His visit.[[14]](#endnote-14) The two just spent some time together.

As descendants of Avraham Avinu, we share a dual relationship with Hashem: We are his children and we are his bride. By walking *before* Hashem to fulfill His *mitzvos* with simple, unadulterated faith and self-sacrifice, we establish a foundation of *yiddishkeit* that can never be broken. It is then, upon this foundation, that we become empowered to walk *with* Hashem to spend time together by enriching our Torah and *mitzvos* with our unique forms of *avodas Hashem*.

1. Genesis 6:9 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Genesis 17:1; 24:40 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The same understanding can be applied to the verses discussing the life of Chanoch. (See Genesis 5: and Rashi ad loc.) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rashi Genesis 6:9 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 18:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sotah 14a [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh Al Hatorah 5766, Vayera. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Limmudei Nissan* Genesis 12:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See *Kedushas Levi* 12:8 and Alshich ad loc [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Likkutei Sichos vol. 25, Lech Lecha 1 47-50. See also Ramban, Genesis 12:2; and Breishis Rabbah. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Touched By a Story 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Gur Aryeh to Rashi 12:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Shiurim Lech Lecha 5766. See also Derech Mitzvosecha - Mitzvas Milah and Degel Machaneh Ephraim Breishis 18:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rav Tzadok Hakohen See also Gra ad loc. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)