

## LECH LECHA

# THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY

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### A

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## Hashem's First Command to Avraham

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Parshas Lech Lecha opens with Hashem's famous first command to Avraham. Hashem tells Avraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you" (Bereishis 12:1). A quick look at the end of the previous *parsha*, however, shows us that Avraham and some of his family had already left his birthplace, Ur Kasdim, to go to the Land of Canaan, although they only reached Charan (11:31).

The Shem Mishmuel asks: Why did Hashem command Avraham to leave his birthplace if he already had? Rashi (ibid.) answers that Hashem commanded Avraham to go *even farther* away from his birthplace. But what was the point of going farther away?

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### B

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## The Floating Earth

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

The Ohr Hachaim (Bereishis 2:1) explains an interesting natural phenomenon from the perspective of metaphysics and Kabbala.

The Earth is suspended in space, surrounded by the Heavens. On a simple human level, we perceive that the sun and the Earth always remain the same distance from each other (though scientifically we know they move). Why did God make the world appear this way?

The Ohr Hachaim teaches that, Kabbalistically, the physical Earth has a great desire to become spiritual. Every side of the planet therefore tries to move towards the sky. Since every side of planet Earth is trying to move, these forces cancel out, and the Earth stays in one spot, suspended in space.

Bereishis Rabba (5:7) discusses the meaning of the Hebrew name for earth. Why is earth called “*eretz*”? The root of *eretz*, the Hebrew letters *reish* and *tzadi*, means to run. The Hebrew name of a thing signifies its essence. The name *eretz* intimates that the essence of matter really is spiritual; physical matter merely cloaks the inherent spirituality within. Matter itself 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 but a shadow of its reality in a higher sphere. In this world, the earth has a desire for more spirituality, so it runs towards the sky, revolving around the sun.

People also desire spiritual, elevated experiences. They have a tremendous yearning for religion. If, God forbid, that true yearning is unrealized or distorted, false religious experiences and values take its place. Some people try to attain the ecstatic experience through drugs, 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.

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### **Spirituality Tends to Reject Physicality**

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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 rejects 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.

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### **The Difference between Torah and Other Religions**

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People desire meaning. We want to have spiritual feelings as we go through the day. At work, we want a spiritual experience. We want household 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? Through *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 sa'asei*. The “dos” tell us how to make the mundane spiritual. The “don’ts” tell us how to avoid making the spiritual mundane. The life we lead is supposed to be both spiritual and physical, because we ourselves are a combination of the two, possessing a physical body and a spiritual soul.

There are religions that reject the physical dimension 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 contrast to this, the Torah has rules for mundane, everyday activities. For example, the Torah instructs us how to take out a loan: a Jew cannot charge his fellow Jew 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, raising children, and working during the week and resting on Shabbos. The Torah addresses every aspect of life, teaching that the spiritual experience is enhanced by having a physical expression, and the physical world is enriched by the spiritual dimension. *Mitzvos ma'asiyos*, active *mitzvos*, are extremely important in Judaism. These actions are meant to be performed together with the meditative side of prayer and learning.

In Catholicism, priests and nuns are not supposed to get married. That religion feels that marital relations are solely physical. Our tradition, though, teaches, "*Yafeh talmud Torah im derech eretz*. Torah study is good when combined with natural life." This is the critical idea that the Torah brought to the world.

In fact, Chassidus asserts that the main purpose of the existence of all 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. But it will be more imbued with holiness and perfected by our spiritual experiences. God's presence will be more perceived, but *mitzvos* and physical life will continue. We therefore *pasken*, as codified by the Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 11:3), that *mitzvos* will apply in the days of Mashiach.

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## Why Hashem Designed the Conflict between Spiritual and Physical

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The combination between spiritual and physical realities, though, *is* difficult. Naturally, they are in conflict. Why did God create this intense dichotomy? 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. That would be a terrible way of life. At the end of Hilchos Yom Tov (6:20), the Rambam writes that one must always serve God with joy. 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. We went through the motions the Torah prescribes, but without the experience and joy of being a Jew. This is written explicitly in the Torah: the exile happened "*Tachas asher lo avad'ta es Hashem Elokecha b'simcha*" (Devarim 28:47). In other words, because we did not serve Hashem with joy when we had everything, we now will have to struggle to fulfill our yearning for Hashem. We do not have joy now because we are not with Him. We thus will struggle because Hashem is distant—and we will seek Him.

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

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### **The Influence of Location upon This Conflict**

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If you live outside of Israel, you will discover incredible barriers to becoming a holier and more spiritual person. The world outside Israel has a strong physicality, which Heaven rejects. Spiritually, 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 (Devarim 11:12). The soil itself has spirituality and God lives, as it were, in this land. He sent His holy Shechina to the land, particularly Yerushalayim. The physical and spiritual domains are easier to synthesize there.

What takes place in Eretz Yisrael today is an incredible phenomenon. Many young men and women in high schools in 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. Yet 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.

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### **Why Avraham Was Commanded to Travel Farther**

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

When Avraham first left, he embarked upon a quest for spirituality. Leaving his birthplace was a step towards spirituality, but he needed to go farther 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 *farther* away from his home and go to the Holy Land of Eretz Yisrael.

There are many *mitzvos hateluyos ba'aretz*, *mitzvos* that we do with the land itself, including, for example, *shmitta*. 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*, but people who keep it 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.

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### Applications for Ourselves

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When we encounter obstacles that block our spiritual aspirations, we should not let them deter us. Instead, we should harness the emotions of frustration to strive for greater spirituality. If we work a little harder, Hashem will help us 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.

And so can we. When we encounter obstacles, let's take pause and rethink. We should consider these situations as opportunities. We can and will find more energy to succeed. Hashem never puts a person in a situation he can't overcome. These challenges are opportunities to find more strength to do what's right.

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.

Even if some of us are not living in Israel, we can bring Israel into ourselves. 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 Eretz Yisrael da*, Make Israel here!” If someone has a desire for holiness, one should do what one can to make their life holier, wherever they are.

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### **Spirituality and Holiness on Shabbos**

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

The night and day of Shabbos are different. At night, as Shabbos begins, we leave the previous week. It is 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 in *shul* when singing Lecha Dodi, others at home when lighting Shabbos candles or at the Shabbos table singing *zemiros*. As the morning of Shabbos arrives, the *kedusha* grows. The fire of holiness burns brighter. It gets progressively stronger until *shalosh seudos*. 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.



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## Concluding Encouragement

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There are barriers between Heaven and Earth, between our physical and spiritual sides, especially outside of Eretz Yisrael. These obstacles, though, really are 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 la'aretz*.

In our daily life, let us try as hard as we can to find the spiritual dimension. We should do *mitzvos* with enthusiasm. Let's break through all the barriers and not let a routine settle down upon us. We should think of Eretz Yisrael and Shabbos all the time, using their holiness to give us the passion and energy to do Hashem's will *b'simcha*! With joy, we will, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, be able to combine our spiritual and physical sides, the holy and the mundane, Heaven and Earth!

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Why did Hashem command Avraham to go farther 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?

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## PERSONAL QUESTIONS

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1. Give two examples of a purely spiritual experience you have had.
2. Give two examples of when you combined a spiritual experience with a physical activity you did.
3. Have you had spiritual experiences in Eretz Yisrael? If so, what have you done to continue those experiences in *chutz la'aretz*?
4. What is a good strategy to develop more spirituality in a person's life?

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## EXERCISES

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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 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 one small step at a time to change your lifestyle and keep a log to see your progress. Do the above for one week.

# *Answers and Exercises*

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