



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

LECH LECHA 5784

A Jewish Dilemma: Doing Business with the Russians

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered October 21, 1972)

I devote my comments this morning to a sensitive moral dilemma that is faced by a number of American Jews. Although most of us are not directly affected, the ethical dimensions of the problem are such that they should interest every Jew, and the social and political aspects may well have consequences for the entire community.

Earlier this week, The New York Times reported that trading with U.S.S.R. had become an emotional and divisive concern of American Jewish businessmen now that the Soviet government has placed its notorious emigration tax on Jews who wish to emigrate to Israel. The dilemma consists, simply, of the requirements of business on the one hand, against the need to protest this brutal modern form of slavery on the other.

Now, I have an opinion on this problem. I am against dealing with the Russians under these circumstances. I will explain my point of view, argue it, and hopefully I may even convince some of my listeners of its merits. But I wish to say at the outset, that I can understand and sympathize respectfully, even if I cannot agree, with those who experience dilemma and anguish but nonetheless decide to go ahead and do business with the Russians anyway. In addition to any other arguments they may have, they feel that if they do not trade with the Russians, others will anyway. That is not a moral argument, but it has the virtue of integrity. At least it is not hypocritical.

But I have no sympathy, no understanding, no respect – only derision and contempt – for those American Jews who imagine themselves fashionably liberal when all they are doing is reviving the vestigial leftism that used to be a dogma in American Jewry. I refer to those people quoted in the Times article who said that whereas they are ready to do business with the Russians under any circumstances, they make clear distinctions between trading with the U.S.S.R. and doing business with the rightist racist regimes

such as Greece, South Africa, or Rhodesia. They clearly see the evil in encouraging rightist regimes who oppress blacks or liberals, but they feel no compunction about negotiating commercial deals with the Russians who discriminate against Jews. The same holds true for that inane statement, also quoted in the same article, by an American Jewish businessman who said that he would do business with the Russians, but nevertheless will not allow lettuce to appear on his table, as a sign of protest against the exploitation of Mexican American laborers in the country's Southwest. Now, I am not commenting on the morality of doing business with the rightist regimes, or with the question of lettuce. But to make such invidious distinctions is shameful, blind, and a particularly disgraceful example of Jewish self-hatred. So I wish to make it clear that I do not speak about such people, for there is nothing to speak about with such anti-Jewish Jews. My remarks are intended, rather, for those who are genuinely perplexed by the moral dilemma with which they are confronted.

The arguments for trading with the Russians are primarily three. First, there is the conviction that such trade will help relax the tensions between East and West, and thus bring peace closer. Second, there is the commonsensical attitude that you cannot do business only with those whose policies you approve of in all areas. Business is essentially a neutral enterprise, and if you begin to check on the moral credentials of your customers or suppliers, if you “examine their tzitzit,” you eventually find the circle of your business contacts shrinking until you can do business with no one but yourself. Third, profit is the heart of the business enterprise, and should be sought without recourse to any other facts.

I agree that there is a measure of justice and truth in these arguments. But I do not accept them under the present circumstances.

It is true that trade is a way of relaxing tensions and leading to international peace. However, I have never believed in peace at all costs. In the face of moral outrage, we are called upon to resist, not to submit; to show indignation and not relaxation. The name “Chamberlain” will always be a reminder that there are times when tension is morally preferable to appeasement. We dare not do anything which will encourage this slave trade. We dare not give dollars to international rogues. We dare not lose this opportunity to save or at least help Soviet Jewry.

Second, I accept that one cannot confine his trading only with those with whom he agrees. But surely there are limits to this doctrine. Would a legitimate businessman want it said that he does business with the Mafia? Would a self-respecting black man casually and callously do business with the Ku Klux Klan? Would a Jew trade with the Nazis? Would an Israeli feel comfortable dealing with El Fatah? One must be able to intuit the limits with a healthy moral sense. I would not, personally, have objected to Jews doing business with the Russians before this tax was levied, no matter how anti-Jewish or anti-Israel the Russians were. But we have now reached a new plateau of anti-Jewish and anti-human activity by the Russians. We have, I submit, crossed the threshold beyond which trading with the Russians is an act of complicity in their crime.

Third, I well understand the need of the businessman to seek new markets for his products. But a moral man must consider this legitimate interest of profit against factors which may outweigh the profit motive, against moral and religious demands which may prove more compelling.

Let us see what our Torah and tradition have to teach us with regard to our dilemma.

In our Sidra, we read of a war between four kings against five kings. The latter, which included the kings of Sodom and Amora, lost the war, and these two kings and their armies were bogged down in a swamp. Included with them was Lot, the nephew of Abraham and an inhabitant of Sodom. When Abraham, who was a powerful chieftain, heard of the predicament of his nephew, he rallied his allies and went to war to save his nephew. He soundly defeated the previously victorious four kings, and liberated those who heretofore were the losers. Whereupon the king of Sodom approached Abraham and said to him: *תן לי הנפש*, “give me the persons, and you take the goods.” He wanted his people returned to him, and was willing to relinquish all his booty and property to Abraham, in recognition of the fact that without Abraham he would have been totally defeated. Here Abraham turns to the king

of Sodom and says, in immortal words:

הרימותי ידי אל ה' קל עליון קונה שמים וארץ אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקח את כל אשר לך ולא תאמר אני העשרתי את אברהם.

Abraham raises his hand in oath and says, “*I have lifted my hand to the Lord, the highest God, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing of yours, from a thread to a shoelace, and you shall not say: I have made Abraham rich.*”

How interesting: Abraham will have no traffic with the king of Sodom, he will not trade with him at all. Yet, in the very next verses, we read of Abraham turning to God and, instead of submitting to Him, he begins to – haggle with the Almighty! God promises him prosperity, and Abraham retorts: *מה תתן לי*, what can you give me that really counts? God promises Abraham wealth, and Abraham comes back at Him: *הן לי לא נתת זרע*, but I want children too. God promises Abraham the Land of Israel, and Abraham, like a shrewd and competent businessman, demands guarantees: *במה אדע כי אירשנה*, how do I know that I will indeed inherit it? A righteous man will do no business with Sodom. He will negotiate and drive a hard bargain with God, but no traffic with a cruel slave trader. Bartering and huckstering with God are legitimate; but no deals with this *רשע*, with this cruel man who heads this evil people of Sodom.

Moreover, and more to the point, is the interpretation of Netziv (in his commentary “הרחב דבר” to the above verse). Why, asks Netziv, did Abraham refuse the *רכוש* or goods of the king of Sodom? After all, we read later of how he freely accepted gifts from the Egyptians and Pharaoh, and then from Abimelech. Also, exactly what is meant by “הנפש” which we translated, “the persons?”

Netziv points to a Midrash which applies to Abraham a verse from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah refers to the righteous man as *נוער כפיו מתמוך בשוחד*: he shakes his hands, refusing to hold the bribe. The Midrash tells us that when Abraham raised his hand and said *הרימותי ידי*, I lift my hand in oath, he in effect was refusing to accept graft from the king of Sodom!

What this means, Netziv tells us, is that when Abraham won the war, he freed all – kings and subjects, soldiers and slaves. Upon being emancipated, the slaves of the King of Sodom refused to return to their former master for they knew from their bitter experience how cruel a slave-holder he was. They therefore asked Abraham to keep them free. But the King of Sodom wanted his slaves. And so he turned to Abraham and said: *תן לי הנפש והרכוש קח לך* -- give me my persons, i.e., my slaves, I want them back; and, as a reward to you, I am willing to give you the goods. In other words, the King of Sodom was offering Abraham a bribe to be

allowed to keep his slaves, but Abraham refused: no slavery and no business! No ransom and no profit! A Jew cannot be bought.

This is what Abraham would say today, and this is what the descendants of Abraham must answer now. Until this exorbitant ransom was demanded by the Russians, the injustices against the Jews did not cross the threshold of moral outrage. It was still possible to do business with them. Now we are in a qualitatively different situation. Now to trade רכוש, to buy the goods of Russia or sell them what we have, will result in muting the criticism of American Jewish leadership, especially businessmen, against the contemporary Sodomite king who wants our נפש, our souls, our people, as his slaves. But an American-type attitude must be: no deals! We will not be a partner to such a scandal against our own brethren. When Russia keeps its Jews and offers to trade with American Jewish businessmen, it is offering a Sodomite bribe: תן לי הנפש והרכוש קח לך.

Our response must be: קונה שמים וארץ. We must not extend our hand to grasp rubles.

We must not clench our fists tightly in our pockets holding dollar bills.

We must not stretch out our hands to grasp the hand of the Kremlin in friendship.

We must raise our hands like Abraham of old in a solemn oath: we will not be bribed.

We don't want your business, not your shoelaces and not your thread, not your pelts and not your furs.

Give us back our brothers. Release your Jews. Free your slaves.

I know – I am not an importer-exporter, and Russia does not represent new markets for my product, so it is easy for me to be moral and to urge those who have a stake to forego these markets and not deal with the U.S.S.R. But I believe that this is morally the right attitude under the circumstances, and that the thesis has sufficient moral weight for us to cancel other factors.

Just consider this: how would we react if the roles were

reversed; if American Jews were living under a totalitarian regime, if we found that life here was unbearable and that all we wanted was to emigrate to Israel, but our government was the only one which placed a head-tax of enormous sums on us – and we learned that Soviet Jews, living freely and in affluence, were ready to do business with a cruel American government that remains oblivious to our plight?

Hopefully, the Russians may yet relent. Perhaps the few small signs they show now of foregoing this tax will ultimately develop into a general policy, whether explicit or not, in which the whole ugly business will fade away. But until then, we have no choice but to remain alert. For those who are directly involved, who will have to pay for their convictions, this will be a difficult decision. But the prize is worth it.

The Rabbis (סדר אליהו רבה) told us about the historical response of Abraham to the king of Sodom: באותה שעה קידש אברהם אבינו שמו של הקב"ה, at that moment Abraham sanctified the Name of God.

At stake is nothing less than השם וחילול השם, the sanctification or desecration of the Name of God.

If we put profit first, gentiles throughout the world and especially in the United States will say, with a large measure of justice, that Jews are ready to pressure the President and Congress to forego American interests in order to get the Soviets to relent on their Jewish policy, but Jews themselves will do nothing if it hurts their pockets. What a חילול השם!

But if we are strong and courageous and of tough moral fiber, our response will be a true קידוש השם, a sanctification of God's Name.

The descendants of Abraham can do no less, at this juncture of history, than be שמם ברבים by telling the Russians: ולא תאמרו אני העשרתי את אברם, You cannot bribe us into silence. Our wealth will come from other, cleaner sources. We are the children of Abraham.

Neither our brethren nor our consciences are for sale.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

An Offer You Can't Refuse

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

After his victory in the battle of the four kings against the five, Avrohom is approached by the defeated king of Sodom, who tells him, "Give me the people and the possessions take for yourself." Avrohom responds that he will take nothing from the king, except for

the provisions coming to his men, so that the king would not say that he made Avrohom wealthy (Bereishis, 14:21-24). Avrohom's response needs explanation, both in regard to his failure to take the people, and his refusal to take any possessions. In fact, the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) brings an

opinion that Avrohom was punished for not taking the offered people, because he could have influenced them to recognize God and accept His sovereignty over the world. Why, then, didn't he do so? After all, he was constantly teaching people about God and bringing them under the wings of the divine presence. What made this instance different?

Rav Hensch Leibowitz, in his *Chiddushei HaLev*, explains that Avrohom felt that by refusing to take anything from the king he would sanctify God's name in public, and that this consideration took precedence over converting the captives. However, he was wrong, and should have taken the people and converted them. Rav Leibowitz does not really spell out why Avrohom was wrong, but I believe that the answer is implicit in the question. As Rav Leibowitz pointed out, Avrohom was constantly involved in influencing people to recognize God. It was, then this very activity, of teaching people to recognize God, that constituted Avrohom's essence, the contribution that he made to the world, and therefore, he should have taken every opportunity available to continue this work. We find something similar to this idea in Megillas Esther, as well; in regard to Mordechai. The Megillah tells us that when Haman would appear in public, all the servants of the king and people around the seat of power would bow and prostrate themselves to him, but that Mordechai would not bow and prostrate himself (Esther 3:21). The form of the verb to bow and prostrate, with regard to Mordechai, are written in the future, rather than in the present, indicating that Mordechai made a point of appearing before Haman and not prostrating to him, despite the danger that it would generate. Rav Yochanan Zweig explained that this was because Mordechai came from Binyomin who was the only tribe that did not bow down to Eisav when he visited Yaakov, and thus, it was part of his essence not to bow down to him. This being so, he took every opportunity possible to bring out this point, even when it involved danger. Similarly, Avrohom, should have availed himself

of the opportunity offered by the king of Sodom, and was punished for not doing so.

We also need to understand why Avrohom refused to take any possessions from the king of Sodom. After all, when Avrohom was in Egypt and Pharaoh gave him gifts, he accepted them. What was the difference between the two cases? Rav Eliyohu Meir Bloch, in his *Pninei Da'as*, offers several answers. First, he says that when Avrohom was in Egypt, he had the status of a poor person, and, therefore, had to accept whatever he needed to stay alive. In addition, Pharaoh was the king of the land that Avrohom had chosen to live in at that time, and, therefore, out of honor for the king, he could not refuse him. The king of Sodom, on the other hand, having just been defeated in battle, was in a much weaker position, and Avrohom could therefore refuse him. Most significantly, Rav Bloch says that Avrohom did not want to negate whatever thoughts of repentance that the king of Sodom may have had. By giving the spoils of war to Avrohom, even though they were his by right, anyway, the king may have assuaged any feelings of guilt he may have had over his past actions and refrained from a possible repentance. A somewhat similar idea is offered by Rav Elimelech bar Shaul in his *Ma'archei Lev*, in discouraging the practice of vegetarianism. People, he said, have a certain amount of sympathetic feelings, and these should, first and foremost, be used in helping human beings. If they are expended on animals, humans may be neglected. This argument echoes that of the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who observed that attendance to the theater may, rather than arousing one's emotions and making one sensitive to the plight of others, have the opposite effect, and waste whatever humanitarian feelings a person may have on fictional characters depicted on stage, leaving nothing left for real people. Avrohom, then, by refusing to take the spoils of war from the king of Sodom, was trying to facilitate his repentance, and, thus, in this aspect of his response, was following the essence of his personality, by trying to bring people closer to God.

Because Everything is from Hashem

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on November 07, 2019)

In this week's Parsha, after the war against the four Malachim, the pasuk says: *Va-yomer Melech Sedom el Avram, ten li ha-nefesh, ve-harechush kach lach*. The King of Sedom offers Avram all the money and the property that he acquired as booty from the war. And Avram

says: *Harimosi yadi el Hashem, Kel Elyon, konei shomayim ve-ha'aretz, im mi-chut ve-ad seroch naal ve-im ekach mikol asher lach ve-lo somar ani he-esharti es Avram*. I'm not taking anything from you, from a string to a shoelace. But he prefaced this with *harimosi yadi el Hashem Kel*

Elyon—I lift my hands to Hashem. What does this lifting my hands to Hashem mean? Most of the meforshim, including Rashi, say that *harimosi yadi* is a lashon shevuah. And even though *harimosi* is in the past tense, it means present tense. Avraham said, I swear to God, to show that he was serious about it. The Ramban suggests a different pshat. He understands *harimosi yadi* as the lashon of *ve-nidrosecha u-terumas yodecha*, which we see later in the Chumash. *Harimosi* is from the same root word as *truma*, which refers to being makdish something. Avram says, whatever I take is *hekdesch*. So, it's a neder, not a shevuah. I'm not taking anything for myself from here. It's what the Rambam calls *hafla'a*—some sort-of oath or vow that he would not take from the spoils.

Onkelos says something very challenging. He translates *Harimosi yadi el Hashem as aremis yaday bitzlo kodam Hashem*—I raise my hands in prayer before Hashem. We understand how he gets *harimosi yadi* to mean tefillah. We know that in the war against Amaleik Moses raised his hands in tefillah. Many times, in the Nach, tefillah is called lifting your hands to Hashem. It's a nice pshat in Onkelos, but what does that have to do with the context? Avram says: I won't take anything from you—I daven to Hashem. But what does that have to do with whether he will take something from the king of Sedom or not? It's very tricky. (See Ramban, who tries to explain it.)

I saw a nice drash by Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson, the author of *Shu"t Sho'el U'meishiv*. He has a perush on the Torah titled *Divrei Shaul*, where he says Avram is referring to the past tense—*harimosi* is technically past tense—I davened. Avram said to the king of Sedom: I davened to Hashem. I davened to Hashem for success, to help me win this war, to help me get whatever I get. Avram says to the king of Sedom: You think that I'm going to make the wrong decision? You think I'm going to let you say you made me rich? Do you think I'm going to be a shutaf with you? Do you think I'm going to compromise my principles so that I can make a lot of money and associate myself with Sedom? Avram says: No! I am a davener. Before anything I do, I daven. I acknowledge that everything that I have comes to me not just because of my efforts or because that's just the way it worked out. I recognize that everything is really from Hashem—that Hashem runs the world. I do my hishtadlus, but ultimately, Hashem gives me everything I have. And therefore, I'm not going to compromise my principles and take this dirty money just because I want to get rich. Hashem will give me however

much money I need, and I'm going to rely only on Him. And this reminded me of the very beautiful hesber by the Ramchal in *Derech Hashem*. He asks, why do we daven? First, he says: Well, davening is a way to get what we want from Hashem. But that's not the true purpose of davening. That's just a practical eitzah to acquire gashmius. Then what's the real reason we daven? The real reason we daven, says Ramchal, is because Hashem put us in a world where He wanted us to do *hishtadlus be-derech ha-teva*. Hashem wants us to go out every morning and work for a living. There are many deep spiritual reasons why we need to do that. But the danger is, we might get lost in the rat race of making more and more money and looking at everything with the perspective of gashmius. And that makes us forget what life is really all about. So he says, Hashem gave us a solution for that. Every morning, we know it's asur to be *osek ba-chafatzecha* until you daven. Every morning before we go to work, we daven and say: Hashem, I know everything comes from you. Once you know everything comes from Hashem, then when you go to work, you will not get lost in the rat race and you will not get corrupted by the values of the work world. Therefore, he says: Davening is the context in which you put everything else in your life so that you remember the proper values—the point and the goal of everything you're doing and trying to achieve. And I think maybe, according to *Divrei Shaul*, that's what Onkelos is hinting at here. How do you keep your values throughout the day? How do you make sure not to compromise what you believe and to make all your decisions based on your Emunah in Hashem and not what everyone else in the world thinks? So that's what davening is all about. That's why we go to shul first thing in the morning before we go anywhere else. Because davening is not just to get what we want from Hashem—that is a secondary, very coarse, very immature reason to daven. We are doing our hishtadlus, and we're asking Hashem to give us a brachah. And Hashem will make us succeed to the extent that He wants to. But ultimately, everything comes from Hashem. And if we know everything comes from Hashem, when we come to the moment of the test, to the moment of truth, and decide whether to do the right thing or the wrong thing, whether to compromise for the sake of profit or not, we'll be able to do what Hashem wants us to do. We will do everything the right way, without moral or halachic compromise, and we will not fall prey to the temptations of the outside world. Shabbat Shalom.

Themes in the First Pasuk of Lech Licha

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The opening lines of Parshas Lech Licha represent one of the ten tests of Avraham Avinu, although rishonim differ as to how it is numbered among them. What is particularly surprising is a comment in the Midrash that suggests that this test may have been even more challenging than the other one that included the words “*Lech Licha*”, i.e. the akeidah of Yitzchak. This seems baffling; the very nature of this instruction as a test is already difficult to understand, as Rashi fills in the words “*l’hanas’cha u’lovas’cha*”, the journey will be for Avraham’s benefit. Certainly, the notion that it could be challenging on a level to rival the near-sacrifice of Avraham’s beloved son is very difficult to understand.

To some commentaries, the challenge lay in the very fact of the personal benefit it contained; the test was to see if Avraham could carry out the instruction for the sake of Hashem’s message, rather than any ulterior motive. Similarly, others felt that the mundane nature of this challenge raises it above the more dramatic akeidah; the true test of faith is in day-to-day challenges, more than isolated moments of extreme performance (it is, for this reason, the Maharal explains, the Torah does not include the extraordinary story of Avraham’s rescue from the fiery furnace).

One approach to understanding this particular nisayon may come from a possible perspective on the akeidah itself. As some understand (see *Darash Moshe, Meoros Yitzchak*), the purpose of the nisyonos were not to test Avraham, as certainly Hashem needed no extra information; rather they were to elevate Avraham to new levels of faith. In the case of the Akeidah, Avraham had been promised a large nation would come from him, specifically through Yitzchak. Now, that seemed impossible, as he was destined to be sacrificed before having any children, apparently. Can Hashem’s promise still possibly be true in any way?

In such a sense, the challenge of Lech Licha can be framed as well. Often, we have preconceived notions of what

success looks like and what the path to happiness entails. If we are promised that we will be granted great blessings, but we are told that requires uprooting ourselves from our “land, birthplace, home of our fathers” and to pursue a vision completely different from that we had always expected, it takes great faith to believe that success actually can assume a different form. The investment we have made in the path we have taken this far is one that is very difficult to abandon, and to accept that happiness can be very found in a very different fashion requires great emunah indeed.

R. Eliezer Geldzehler (*Sichos R. Eliezer*) notes that much can be discerned from the language that gives the parshah its name. *Lech* – go – “*Licha*”, to yourself; the purpose of a nisayon is make the potential actual; it is only thus that one’s abilities can actually be claimed as their own (a theme often emphasized as well by R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht). “*Licha*”, to yourself, because every individual has unique challenges and abilities; to be jealous of another’s resources is folly, once it is realized that one’s personal challenges can only be addressed with their unique toolset, and what seems like the superior assets of another may actually be inadequate to the task. “*Lech*”, go, because it is a constant journey, as that is the purpose of life, to continuously develop one’s potential. “*M’Artzecha*”, as often doing so requires creating the proper conducive environment, even if that requires a difficult process of relocation.

The language may have halachic significance as well; the Medrash Rabbah (39:7) notes “*Licha*” you, Avraham, are released from the obligation of kibud Av in this case, while others would not be. This is invoked in the ongoing debate about whether one is permitted to make Aliyah, or stay in Eretz Yisrael, when parents object (see *Panim Yafos; Resp. Mabib*, 1:139; *Resp. Maharam Rotenberg* 28 and 79; *Pe’as HaShulchan* 2:21; *Resp. Tashbetz* 3:288; *Chayei Adam* in *Shaarei Tzedek* 11:5; *Resp. Yechaveh Da’as* 3:69; *Resp. Dvar Yehoshua* 2:71.)

The Search for Spirituality

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

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?

The Floating Earth

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.

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 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.

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 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'asios*, 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.

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 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!

The Influence of Location upon This Conflict

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.

Why Avraham Was Commanded to Travel Farther

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.

Applications for Ourselves

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.

Spirituality and Holiness on Shabbos

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.

Concluding Encouragement

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!

Rav Soloveitchik on Lech Lecha: Dowsing for God

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

In God's first call to Avraham, He charges him with the words *lech lecha* (Genesis 12:1), conventionally translated as "go for yourself." It would have been enough to communicate to Avraham that he should go to the land that God would show him by simply ordering *lech*, "go." What did God intend by adding *lecha*?

A Clean Break

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik understands *lecha* to add an air of finality to the command *lech*. "Go for yourself" meant that Avraham had "to leave the past, to blot out

his memory, to emigrate from his country to a new country."¹ If God had only said *lech*, "go," Avraham might have understood that he was to journey to one place but then could continue on his way. *Lech lecha* makes it final: stake your place in the world. As Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor phrases it: "Abandon your land entirely; do not entertain the notion of ever returning to it!"²

The Rav finds support for this from the lover's charge to his hesitant beloved: "Rise up (*kumi lach*), my love and fair one" (Song of Songs 2:10). *Lach* in this context emphasizes

the finality of the action. “Enough, let’s go already” he says to her. And thus did God say to Avraham.³

Complementing this reading is the Rav’s observation that *lecha*, “for yourself” in the singular, connotes “by yourself.” Avraham had to leave everything familiar behind, anything that rooted him in his old life. This is made clear from the specification: “from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house” (Genesis 12:1).⁴

This notion fits the well-known designation of Avraham as *ha-ivri*, the Hebrew. Literally, the epithet *ivri* (עִבְרִי) means from the other side (עֵבֶר) of the river. Originating in Mesopotamia, Avraham was from the eastern side of the Jordan. But does it just mean “Avraham the immigrant”? The Rav believes that it marked Avraham as different, as someone who charted a distinctive lifestyle that stood in stark contrast to everyone else. That is why the Jews will forever be called *Ivrim*, for we are a people of unique beliefs, behavior, and goals.⁵

To the Land of Promise

Rashi interprets *lecha*, “for yourself,” to mean that the journey would be for Avraham’s own benefit. “There I will make you a great nation; here, you will not merit children.”⁶ The Talmud explicitly states that the special merit of the Holy Land benefited Avraham.⁷ But why did Avraham need to be in the Land to receive this blessing?

The seminal medieval philosopher and poet Rabbi Yehudah Halevi explains in his *Kuzari* that the Land of Israel is uniquely suited for the encounter between God and man, given its special metaphysical properties.⁸ In his famous dirge “*Tziyon Ha-lo Tishali*,” Halevi writes: “The air of your land is the breath of life for our souls,” and many other medieval rabbinic figures adopted this line of thinking about the land’s holiness.⁹

In his eulogy for Rabbi Wolf (Ze’ev) Gold, a leading figure in Religious Zionism and a signatory of the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the Rav said:

I will never forget the evening in 5695 1935 when I visited Rabbi Gold in Ramat Gan in Eretz Yisrael. He took me out to the orange groves near his house. It was a beautiful night, the sky was a perfect blue and there were endless stars. The bright moon of Eretz Yisrael shone all over the enchanted beauty. From afar we could see the lights of the new all-Jewish city of Tel Aviv glistening in the dark. The lights were telling us the thrilling and intoxicating news of the rebuilding of the Holy Land. Overwhelmed with emotion, Rabbi Gold gazed toward the horizon and then turned to me and said: “Whoever does not feel the presence of God in Eretz Yisrael on this beautiful night while looking at the magnificent moon and at these

beckoning stars, breathing the clear and pure air filled with the fragrance of blossoming growth, and above all when looking at the glistening lights of the city that was built entirely by Jews, is simply blind.”

Rabbi Gold continued, “Rav Yehudah Halevi was right when he said that prophecy flows unhindered in Eretz Yisrael and we need only a proper vessel to receive its message.”

As we stood there, Rabbi Gold picked up a small pebble and kissed it, to fulfill Rav Abba’s dictum in the Talmud that he would kiss the rocks of Akko.¹⁰ That night, I thought to myself how insignificant I was compared to this special Jew who was able to experience the glory of God through the grandeur of the landscape of the Land of Israel.¹¹

The atmosphere of the Land of Israel is redolent of and with God.

A Natural Divining Rod

This explains why God said “to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1), usually understood to mean that Avraham was not informed of his destination.¹² Rashi says its identity was withheld “to make it beloved in his eyes.”¹³ The Ramban explores this a bit more deeply. He theorizes that Avraham was not told where to go and wandered until he settled on Canaan, “not knowing that this was the land about which he was commanded.” Rabbi Soloveitchik elaborates that the journey was not linear, so that Avraham explored many countries, wondering if he had found the place that God had intended. At that point, God confirmed that he had found it by promising him, “I shall give this land to your offspring” (Genesis 12:7).¹⁴

The Rav points to a strikingly similar scenario later in Avraham’s life. When God commanded Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, He said to do so “on one of the mountains which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:2). Apparently, Avraham would need to identify it intuitively.

What is the significance of Avraham locating these holy sites on his own? The Rav thinks the notion that *kedushah*, holiness, is an attracting force might be “the greatest discovery made by Avraham.”¹⁵ The fact that Avraham could find his way to the holy sites without guidance suggests that “the Almighty has implanted in the Jew a sensitivity to *kedushah*, to the holy.”¹⁶ In other words, the Jew naturally yearns for holiness and seeks to uncover and recognize it even when on the surface it is not apparent. This further indicates that knowledge of God is not merely abstract and intellectual but passionate and experiential.¹⁷

This explains why Jews have a special place in their hearts for the Land of Israel and leave reason at the door in all that concerns it. It is our special place, a place where

Avraham would go to birth our nation:

[O]ur relationship to Eretz Yisrael is that of *segulah*. Whenever *segulah* comes to the forefront, to the foreground, ratiocination resigns. You cannot rationalize events which revolve around *segulah*. There is an element of *diminuendos*, of the frighteningly strange, and of the hidden ineffable in the *segulah's* charisma.¹⁸

Exploring the Rav's Insight

What are we to make of this somewhat mysterious notion that a Jew has an internal divining rod that leads him to holiness? The Rav asserts that “there is an eternal commitment in the Jew to the Almighty,” whether conscious or not, which he identified as what Chabad-Lubavitch chassidut calls *ahavah tiv'it*: “a natural instinctual drive and urge in the Jew to find God.”¹⁹

In *Tanya*, Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liady, the Alter Rebbe, explains that every Jew has an inherent drive to seek God and holiness by virtue of being a descendant of our forefathers. This longing is not logical or rational because it emanates from the part of our soul that in kabbalistic thought is beyond reason. It is “wisdom” (חֵכֶּמָה) of our soul, the “power of the what” (כֹּחַ הַמָּה), that is to say, that which one cannot even ask “what” about. It is a simple desire embedded in each and every Jew to unite with God. In the same way the flame of a candle seeks to jump off the wick to unite with the source of elemental fire above, the Jewish soul yearns to leave the body and unite with God.²⁰

Like a nomad in the desert who can find his way to water, Avraham was able to discover holiness in the spiritually desolate world of polytheism. We, his descendants, have been gifted this skill for discerning

holiness, but it often remains underutilized. Like Avraham, we need to be called to use it in our lives. And so *lech lecha* is not only a command to Avraham, but to every one of us. It is imperative that each and every one of us seek out what is holy, even when there is no one providing us with map, and surely no X's marking any spots.

Two simple words, *lech lecha*, have resonated in the minds and hearts of our people for thousands of years. As the famed Kotzker Rebbe once taught, not only did Avraham hear this call from heaven, but in every generation we are summoned to hear these words and allow them to pierce our hearts.

[1] Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 50.

[2] Bechor Shor on Genesis 12:1, s.v. מארצך וממולדתך.

[3] Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 50.

[4] *Ibid.*, 50–51.

[5] Soloveitchik, *Five Addresses*, 115–116.

[6] Rashi on Genesis 12:1.

[7] Rosh Hashanah 16b.

[8] See Kuzari, II:9–14, 22–24.

[9] See Soloveitchik, *Emergence of Ethical Man*, 149–150.

[10] Ketubot 112a.

[11] Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:118.

[12] Cf. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12:1, who claims that the report “they left to go to the land of Canaan” (Genesis 12:5) indicates that God did identify the land for Avraham.

[13] Rashi on Genesis 12:2, s.v. אל הארץ אשר אראך.

[14] Ramban on Genesis 12:1, s.v. אל הארץ אשר אראך.

[15] Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 62.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, 63.

[18] Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:105.

[19] *Ibid.*, 2:99.

[20] *Tanya*, 1:18–19.

Ramban on Our Parshah: The Deeds of our Ancestors

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

One of Ramban's best-known comments on the Torah comes at the start of our parshah, as Avraham begins to walk about the land: “I will give you a rule, and you will perceive it in all of the coming sections regarding Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. It is a great matter, mentioned briefly by our masters, saying (Tanchuma 9), ‘All that happened to the ancestors, is a sign for the descendants.’ Therefore, the text goes on at length in telling of journeys and digging wells and other events, and one might think that they are extra and without benefit, but all of them come to tell of the future, for when an event happens to a prophet from among the three patriarchs,

he will deduce from it that which is decreed upon his children.” (Commentary to Bereishit 12:6) In Hebrew, this is summed up with the words *maaseh avot siman labonim*.

Why did Hashem arrange for us to reenact the events of our ancestors' lives? Here are three ideas:

This Demonstrates our Bond with Them

Midrashim contend that Yitzchak resembled Avraham (Bava Metzia 87a). In mitzvot like Hakhel we reenact events from our national experience. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chagigah 3:6) These resemblances highlight our relationship with our ancestors, demonstrating that we are truly their children. Similarly, Hashem arranges for us to

relive events from the lives of our ancestors.

On the Shoulders of Giants

Perhaps we could suggest that reliving the events of our ancestors' lives is a first step toward building upon them in greater ways. For example, our mitzvah of aliyah laregel, to abandon our property and ascend to the Beit HaMikdash for Yom Tov, reenacts the Lech Lecha journey of Avraham and Sarah, as noted by Rabbi Menachem Genack (*Gan Shoshanim* 55). But it is greater than their journey, in that they were guided by Hashem's voice, and we do it entirely on faith. They came to a Canaanite land, we go to the Beit

Moral Intuitions

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

How do we know what is morally correct? In Parshat Lech Lecha, Abraham courageously rescued his nephew Lot from captivity. In a fascinating analysis, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky creates the following anachronistic thought-experiment. If Abraham would have asked whether he was obligated to risk his life to save Lot according to Jewish law, the answer would have been no. Since a person does not have to put his own life in danger to save another, he would have been legally exempt. Rabbi Kamenetsky argues, however, that Abraham's actions were not motivated by Torah law, but by moral intuitions. The patriarchs were attuned to internal moral knowledge, which God endowed as part of human nature (*Emet LeYaakov*, p. 91).

Making a similar point, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, often referred to by his acronym, Netziv, writes that the stories of the patriarchs are included in the Torah because the patriarchs serve as moral exemplars for us. As Rabbi Walter Wurzburger notes regarding the Netziv's opinion, "Implicit in this view is the belief that the legal part of the Torah would not have sufficed for proper moral guidance. Despite the fact that the Law constitutes the very foundation of Jewish ethics, these "stories" were indispensable, if the Torah was to provide adequate direction for ethical decision-making, especially with respect to intricate and complex moral issues" (*Covenantal Imperatives: Essays by Walter S. Wurzburger on Jewish Law, Thought, and Community*, 2008, p. 30).

Developing his idea one step further, Netziv writes that our forefathers were described by the Sages as "yesharim," morally upstanding individuals. Besides being righteous and pious, this term indicates that they extended care

HaMikdash. We start from their experience, and develop it further.

Making it Real

Ramban takes a third approach: We are not reliving what our ancestors did. Rather, our ancestors were enabling what we will do in our day. Hashem wanted us to receive the land, and so Hashem started it with Avraham, so that the Divine decree should already begin to come true. So too with all of the parallels between their lives and our own, our ancestors lived the first step, and then it continues with us.

and concern for outsiders. This is especially apparent in Parshat Lech Lecha when Abraham attempts to identify the innocent people in Sodom. Netziv points to another exemplary moral behavior of Abraham in the parsha, namely, his graciousness and civility in his treatment of Lot, even though Lot did not follow in the righteous path of Abraham.

Professor David Shatz notes that the Netziv is one of several Jewish authors who believes, "in an ethical standard that (1) is valid independently of Halakhah and also (2) can be known independently of Halakhah, a kind of 'natural law' or rational ethic" (*Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories*, 2009, p. 307). These thinkers acknowledge that we look to Jewish law to guide our moral decisions and that there is an independent moral imperative that serves to supplement Jewish law.

The question as to whether morality is an innate feature of human nature has long been debated in philosophy. Empiricists argue that there is no built-in moral knowledge, rather it is learned through experience. Nativists disagree and assume that moral beliefs are inborn and would develop even if they were not taught or learned. Based on his research, moral psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Haidt suggests that across cultures, people do have innate moral intuitions, causing them to react with thoughts and feelings when they perceive certain social scenarios, including: "When they see others (particularly young others) suffering, and others causing that suffering; when they see others cheat or fail to repay favors; and when they see others who are disrespectful or who do not behave in a manner befitting their status in the group" (Haidt, J., &

Joseph, C., “*Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues*,” 2004). While cultures may vary on how they react to these moral intuitions or in how they navigate moral conflicts, these moral intuitions seem to be naturally embedded in human nature.

Returning to Abraham and using the language of Haidt, we can point to the natural moral intuition Abraham must have felt when he witnessed the suffering of others, which was particularly potent when other humans caused that suffering. In addition, Rabbi Kamenetsky notes Abraham’s intuitive sense of fairness. According to one midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13), Nimrod burned Abraham’s

brother and Lot’s father, Haran, because Haran sided with Abraham’s monotheistic ideas. Consequently, Abraham felt the moral obligation of reciprocity to ensure Lot’s safety.

In the past weeks, Hamas has perpetrated acts of moral maliciousness that surpass the evilness of Sodom. Those who perpetuate violence and suffering are somehow condoned or even championed. Now we must follow the moral lead of our patriarchs, tuning in to our God-given innate moral intuitions, channeled through the moral principles of Jewish law and be a beacon of moral clarity for the world.

Religion Yes, But Not The Land of Israel

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Though the revealed word of Torah had yet to be delivered, Avraham was still able to discover Hashem. Chazal compare his discovery to a person who witnesses a radiant city of light thereby inferring that there must be an architect to this metropolis. Noticing that someone had finally discerned His creative presence the Architect or Hashem called Avraham to His land.

Moral Spirit

Evidently Avraham did not discover Hashem through the wonders of nature or through the calculus of science. He saw Hashem in a city of light and a city of life. Studying our world, Avraham detected an inner moral spirit which had engineered it and continued to govern it. He observed a world delicately balanced to support life and reasoned that evidently, the creator of this finely tuned system desired human well being. Planet Earth is located in what is known as the Goldilocks zone: 5 miles closer to the sun or 5 miles further from it and our planet would be almost uninhabitable. Discerning this delicate calibration of life, or a city of light and life, Avraham concluded that there must be a Creator with moral spirit. He saw the world through moral lenses and not through cold spectacles of science.

Having detected a moral spirit “behind” the city of life, Avraham yearned to model himself after that moral Being. Sensing a compassionate and merciful God he craved to himself become an agent of moral delivery. His philanthropy and altruism weren’t incidental to his religious awakening. He didn’t wear two hats, one as a philosopher and one as a humanitarian. His entire theology was predicated upon simulating the kindness and morality he sensed in Hashem. Without serving as an

agent for moral welfare his philosophical treatise would be deficient.

Avraham’s revolution constituted a dramatic break with past religious thinking. For the first two thousand years of history Man had incorrectly assumed that Hashem was angry and vengeful. After all they had suffered successive waves of divine punishment: first humanity was expelled from Eden, subsequently Kayin’s descendants were condemned to roam the land as nomads. These struggles culminated in a great flood which wiped out the human race. Finally rebuilding after the flood, large populations were scattered across the planet. Humanity assumed, and for good reason, that gods were angry and spiteful and that they toyed with human playthings for entertainment.

As the first human being to comprehend that Hashem is kind and compassionate, Avraham revolutionized religious thought. Though Hashem desires human welfare, there are consequences for criminal behavior.

The Tradition of Moral Monotheism

Through his discovery, Avraham launched the great monotheistic tradition. Hashem is merciful and compassionate and craves human prosperity. The highest form of human welfare is to live by the will of Hashem and in His presence. Any improvement to the human condition, whether spiritual or material, is consistent with His will. For Avraham’s descendants, the march of science and progress is driven by a divine impulse. Those who have adopted this approach of compassionate monotheism- the Judeo-Christian world in particular- have evolved into progressive and advanced societies, enjoying advanced education, sophisticated medical treatment, enlightened

forms of government and equitable economic systems. Those who have not adopted this tradition have remained backward and regressive, stuck in the ancient quagmire of paganism and in the confused world of gods who care little about human welfare.

Sadly, Islamic fundamentalism, once part of the monotheistic tradition, has lost its course. By basing religion upon militantism and the capture and conversion of others, it disfigured the image of G-d. G-d was now imagined as Himself angry and militant, vengeful and capricious. Islamic fundamentalists, though they masquerade as religious people, are, essentially, atheists. Though they speak in the name of religion they describe a G-d who does not exist. There is no joy in Heaven when innocents suffer. They have vandalized the face of Hashem in our world and have abandoned the legacy of Avraham.

Surging Popularity

Avraham's religious revolution began to gather steam. Slowly but surely, this unknown itinerant, who had relocated from a distant land, received widespread accreditation. In particular, his popularity surged after his successful intervention and triumph in a bloody war which had plagued the region for a quarter of a century. Those he saved from the vicious axis of five evil emperors gathered in an area known as the "valley of kings" or המלך עמק to celebrate Avraham's courageous intervention.

The monarch of Sedom offers him financial reward and population transfer, each of which Avraham politely refuses. Even Malki Tzedek, a legendary religious leader ruling a community in the ancient city of Shalem, or proto-Yerushalayim, journeys to meet Avraham and to pay him due homage.

The entire world witnessed the potential of Avraham's new religious doctrine. Serving a G-d of peace and welfare, Avraham himself became an agent of peace and welfare.

Avraham's Concern

Yet despite his surging popularity, Avraham is extraordinarily concerned. Though he receives reassurances from Hashem about his own security, he is still anxious. He wonders how he and his descendants will inherit the land. Despite his popularity and the acceptance of his new moral monotheism, and despite repeated divine promises about receiving the land of Israel, Avraham remains deeply worried.

Though the world eagerly embraced his ideological revolution they were less excited about the idea of granting him the land of G-d, and Avraham knew this. The locals would obviously oppose any Jewish presence in Israel. Even those who resided elsewhere would not easily grant Avraham's new nation a place under G-d's eye. Subconsciously, humanity realizes that Israel is the land where humanity was born and where history will end. Jewish presence in this land resonates with historical inevitability, and, for this reason, they opposed Avraham, and they continually battle us. This battle will only end when history ends and not a moment sooner. Avraham had good reason to worry.

Addressing Avraham's fears, Hashem formed an eternal brit, delivering us full license to His land. As promising as the brit was it was also conducted under ominous conditions. As the brit was finalized a dark and great fear fell upon Avraham - עליו נפלה גדולה חשיכה אימה. The process of settling the land of history would not be easy for the people of history. For thousands of years Avraham's children would wander this planet, unable to return home because of past religious breakdowns.

When we finally did return home, we would face violent opposition by the dark forces of humanity. Amidst all this darkness, a billowing oven and a blazing torch appeared, assuring Avraham that, despite the darkness, the brit formed between himself and Hashem was inalienable and that enemies of G-d, who oppose our people would be consumed.

We are living though a dark period of modern Jewish history. Don't forget the brit. It hovers above history, and it will shape its trajectory.

Korbanot

The brit was formed by selecting an assortment of animals which would, one day, be offered in the Beit Hamikdash as korbanot sacrifices. Hashem notified Avraham that his children would merit the land based on their ritual sacrifices in the Mikdash and the moral and religious lives which would underpin those sacrifices.

Sadly, on the dark day, three weeks ago Hashem took many sacrifices from our people. We don't know why. We ask Hashem to quickly redeem our people, restore our Mikdash, so that we can offer him the korbanot He desires.

The Heavy Burden of Wealth

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

During Avraham's brief sojourn in Egypt, where he had gone to escape the famine in Eretz Yisrael, he became very wealthy. The Torah says that when he returned to Eretz Yisrael, ובארם כבוד מאד במקנה בכסף ובוזהב – “Avram was very ‘heavy,’ with cattle, silver and gold” (13:2).

Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk, in *Noam Elimelech*, raises the question of why the Torah describes Avraham's wealth with the term כבוד – “heavy.” In what way was Avraham's fortune “heavy”?

Rav Elimelech answers that the word כבוד in this pasuk expresses the “weight” of the responsibility that wealth imposes upon a person. People of course dream of wealth, and wish they had wealth, but few understand the challenges that it presents. Wealthy people must struggle not to allow their fortune to define them, to be the sum total of their essence. As the saying goes, “Some people are so poor that all they have is money.” I, unfortunately, know such people, people who are exceedingly wealthy,

but have failed in relationships, have problems with their children, are frequently embroiled in conflicts, or suffer with emotional struggles. Those who have been blessed with wealth bear the responsibility to use this blessing responsibly, for the constructive purposes for which God had entrusted them with large amounts of money, and not to neglect their values and their relationships because of their preoccupation with their fortune. They must ensure that their wealth does not cause them to overlook everything else, to the point where they become impoverished, left with only their money.

ואברם כבוד מאד. Avraham regarded his newfound fortune as a “heavy” burden of responsibility, and the concern of how to properly use his wealth weighed heavily on his mind. He understood that the attainment of wealth is not just a blessing, but a responsibility, a “heavy” burden that one bears, and he was determined to fulfill the obligations that now fell upon him.

To Journey Home

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Lech Licha, we begin the journey with Avraham Avinu. From the first call of G-d in his life, at the age of seventy-five, till his death at one hundred and seventy-five, Avraham walked with G-d. Hence the gematria of *lech licha*, “go for yourself,” is 100 (the numeric value of the Hebrew letters); because for 100 years, patiently, consistently, courageously and faithfully, Avraham walked with G-d (cf. *Baal HaTurim, Bereishis 12:1*).

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, zt'l, teaches, “And the L-rd said to Avraham: Go forth...’ Avraham, the knight of faith, according to our tradition, searched and discovered G-d in the starlit heavens of Mesopotamia. Yet, he felt an intense loneliness and could not find solace in the silent companionship of G-d whose image was reflected in the boundless stretches of the cosmos. Only when he met G-d on earth as Father, Brother and Friend - not only along the uncharted astral routes - did he feel redeemed. Our sages said that before Avraham appeared, majestas dei (Divine Majesty) was reflected only by the distant heavens and it was a mute nature which ‘spoke’ of the glory of G-d. It was Avraham who ‘crowned’ Him the G-d of earth, i.e., the G-d of men” (*Chumash Masores HaRav, Bereishis, p.72*).

According to the Rambam (in his commentary to Pirkei

Avos 5:3), the first of Avraham's ten tests was the one with which our parsha opens: לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך: אֵל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָרָאךָ, *Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you* (Bereishis 12:1).

To leave one's homeland, one's family, one's history and one's past, in order to journey to the unknown, is a heroic test. And yet, the mishnah (Avos 5:3) teaches us that Avraham passed each of the ten trials. G-d said to leave, and Avraham picked up and he left his land, family and past behind, all in order to sanctify the name of G-d in the world and to claim Eretz Yisrael as the heritage and homeland of Am Yisrael l'netzach, for eternity.

Rav Soloveitchik zt'l teaches, לך לך מארצך וממולדתך - The Torah speaks of three departures: physical departure, behavioral departure and kinship departure. Departure from your land connotes physical departure. Departure from your birthplace can be understood as leaving the mother who teaches the child the basics of behavior; the early years of one's life in one's birthplace shape and determine one's behavior patterns. Departure from your father's house refers to clannish estrangement, alienation from one's kin. Avraham was called upon to

form a new fellowship, in which the teacher becomes the parent and the student becomes the child. A new concept of fatherhood emerged, one based upon communication and common devotion rather than upon biological factors. Parent-teacher and child-disciple relations replace the progenitor-offspring relationship.

“The charismatic personality must dissociate himself from his national connections and completely free himself from the environment he was born and reared in. The spiritual straying is the gist of the command here; the physical journey is of secondary importance. Avraham must forsake his past and transplant himself into a new historical dimension. His synonym is an Ivri (14:13), a wanderer

A Scriptural Assessment of Lot

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Analyzing Torah texts can be quite exciting! By paying close attention to specific words and verses in a Biblical narrative, much may be learned concerning the Bible’s assessment of a particular biblical personality. For example, in the story of Lot and Sodom, much is revealed about a particular person’s character by comparing that person’s behavior to the behavior of others in similar situations. The manner in which guests are welcomed, people’s reaction upon learning about the impending destruction of the city of Sodom, the respect they show, or fail to show, to other people’s property, can be most revealing and edifying. At times, there are subtle textual hints, such as a minor change in the wording, or changes in the syntax of a verse. Often, by studying the writings of the biblical commentators who were inordinately sensitive to textual nuances, we can more correctly ascertain the Torah’s assessment of a particular individual.

Such an analysis of the persona of Lot is to be found in a wonderful school guidebook entitled *Shabbat B’Shabbato* edited by Avraham Shtall.

The initial scriptural encounter with Lot takes place at the conclusion of last week’s parasha, parashat Noah (Genesis 11:31). We learn there that Terach, takes his son, Abram (his name had not yet been changed to Abraham), and his grandson, Lot, the son of Haran, and Sarai, Terach’s daughter-in-law (Abram’s wife), and departs from Ur Kasdim to journey to the land of Canaan. The rabbis of the Midrash are struck by the absence of Haran, Abram’s brother, in the list of those in Terach’s entourage, and conclude that Lot was an orphan, whose father Haran had

or a ‘yonderman’ who came from beyond the river, a man who does not belong here. G-d preferred the shepherd as His confidant; He selected a member of a stable society and converted him into a nomad. Severance of all ties with an urban, closed environment was an indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*) for the realization of the covenant” (*Chumash Masores HaRav, Bereishis*, p.73).

And so, headed into the unknown, faithfully following the command of G-d, Avraham heeded the call; he left the land of his birth and he courageously journeyed to the new land, the land of his destiny and the land of his future children - Am Yisrael - that would be born to him.

been killed when he was cast into a fiery furnace by King Amraphel in a test of faith. The fact that Lot was orphaned at such a young age, may account for Lot’s apparent vulnerability, and perhaps explain why, throughout his life, Lot seems to be easily influenced by his environment.

In this week’s parasha, parashat Lech Lecha, at the half-point in the journey to Canaan, we once again encounter Lot, just as Abram leaves Charan, to conclude the journey to Canaan. When Terach and Abram originally set out to Canaan, the Torah notes: (Genesis 12:4), וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט, that Lot journeyed with Abram. In fact, the verse mentions Lot even before Sarai. However, as they leave Charan, scripture (Genesis 12:5), reports a readjusted order, and records that Abram first takes Sarai and only then takes Lot his nephew, and all their property, and everything that they had made in Charan.

Soon after Abram’s arrival in Canaan, a famine forces him to seek food in Egypt. A famous encounter takes place there between Pharaoh and Sarai. Strangely, there is no mention of Lot. Perhaps, Lot was too young and too insignificant to be mentioned. Yet, we know that Lot surely went down to Egypt because when Abram and Sarai leave Egypt (Genesis 13:1), Lot is mentioned! Notably, upon departure, Lot is listed only after Abram’s property. Perhaps in order to underscore how wealthy Abram had become in Egypt, Lot is only mentioned after the property. But more likely, the reason for the delay in mentioning Lot’s name is due to the fact that Lot has become more distant from Abram, perhaps more independent, as they travel up toward the Negev. Scripture explicitly notes (Genesis 13:5), that upon leaving Egypt Lot has also become

wealthy. In fact, Lot is so wealthy, that the land could not support both Abram and Lot, and a quarrel breaks out (Genesis 13:7), between the shepherds of Abram and Lot's shepherds.

The rabbis, cited by Rashi, speculate about the nature of the quarrel. The Midrash, Genesis Rabbah, 41:5, suggests, that the quarrel was over the fact that Lot's shepherds would regularly graze their cattle on the fields of the Canaanites, without muzzling them. Lot's shepherds rationalize these actions by arguing that G-d had promised the entire land of Canaan to Abram, and since Abram had no children, Lot would be his sole heir. Abram's shepherds claim, however, that since the Canaanites and the Perizzites still dwell in the land (Genesis 13:7), the land still belongs to the Canaanites, and had not yet been given to Abram. Therefore, Lot's shepherds had no right to graze their cattle on what was really stolen land.

Attempting to deal with Lot and his wealth in a peaceful manner, Abram says to Lot, (Genesis 13:8-9): "Please let there be no strife between me and you, between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not all the land before you? Please separate from me. If you go to the left, I will go to the right, if you go to the right, I will go to the left." Lot does not appear to respond. The Torah records only that Lot lifts up his eyes and sees the entire lush plain of the Jordan. Upon beholding this fertile land, Lot's obsession with wealth becomes evident, as he chooses for himself the land of the Jordan valley, and Abram and Lot part one from another. In taking leave from Abram, Lot accords no respect to the old patriarch, who was already 75 years old when he left Charan. In fact, Lot appears to act quite indifferently toward the man who, since Lot's early years, served as his surrogate father, and was the person singularly responsible for Lot's great wealth.

In this encounter, as confirmed by scripture, we see that blatant materialism plays a defining role in Lot's life choices. The Torah, in Genesis 13:10, clearly underscores Lot's obsession, וַיִּשָּׂא לוֹט אֶת עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא אֶת כָּל כַּבְּר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי מִשְׁקָה בְּכֹלָהּ, *And Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of Jordan that it was well watered.* Despite the fact that Lot probably knows that the people of Sodom are the most wicked and sinful people on the face of the earth, Lot is smitten by the promise of economic opportunity and pays no heed to the ethical compromises he will have to make if he chooses to live among these wretched people.

Scripture also points to the differences between Abram and Lot with respect to the way they welcome guests. Abram (Genesis 18:1), is thoroughly involved with his

guests—his entire family actively serves them. He promises the guests little, then brings them a massive repast. And all this, despite the fact that he's still recovering from his painful adult circumcision.

Lot, in Sodom, welcomes his guests only half-heartedly. He calls out to them, (Genesis 19:2), סוּרוּ—*"Turn aside."* Despite his reluctance to have them join him, Lot persists, perhaps because of what he had learnt from Abram. Lot might be a bad guy, but because of his powerful ethical formative education by his gracious uncle, Abram, he is not totally wicked.

More of Lot's true colors emerge with Lot's ghastly ethical lapses when he suggests (Genesis 19:8), to the people of Sodom, who seek to attack him and his guests, that they instead take his two daughters. Most balanced parents would give up their lives to defend their daughters' or wife's lives, but Lot is plainly prepared to throw his daughters to the wolves.

Even when Lot learns from the angels that Sodom will be totally destroyed, Lot is reluctant to leave Sodom, (Genesis 19:16), to abandon his split-level home, his two-car garage, and his many high-tech electronic playthings. With the angels pulling him by the hand, Lot eventually escapes the destruction of Sodom.

Lot flees from Sodom in an apparently physically and emotionally weakened condition. Unable to run very far, he begs G-d (Genesis 19:19-20), for the right to flee to a little local loaction, and is granted his wish. Lot allows his daughters to get him drunk and has relations with them, in order to perpetuate the human race, which they thought, because of the destruction they had witnessed, had come to an end.

All in all, the biblical portrait of Lot is not very redeeming, but there does seem to be reason for, at least, some sympathy. After all, Lot was orphaned at an early age. He spent a good part of his childhood relocating from one land to another: starting in Ur Kasdim, then to Charan, followed by Canaan, Egypt, and Sodom. Major journeys such as these are usually profoundly disruptive, and can easily throw a person's equilibrium off balance. Lot, who probably never felt rooted, was obviously easily influenced, at times for good—as when he welcomed guests into his home, but, most often, for bad—being strongly attracted to wealth and material possessions.

In essence, Lot is very much the world's "Everyman," neither very good nor very bad. On the one hand, the nations of Amon and Moav—nations totally devoid of gratitude, stem from Lot. On the other hand, Ruth the

Moabite, the paradigm of chessed and loving-kindness, as well as the righteous Naamah the Ammonite, are also his progeny.

In the final analysis, the Torah essentially fails to give us a definitive portrait of Lot. Perhaps it really can't, because

Lot is a person of so many colors and dimensions.

Lot, in a sense, is intended to serve as a model for all to learn from both his good deeds and his shortcomings, and to teach others essential life lessons from both these factors. After all, that is really what life is all about.

Haftarat Lech Lecha: Strength to the Weary

Rabbi Yona Reiss (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarat, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

The haftarah for Parashat Lekh Lekha (“*Lamah tomar*”) picks up where the haftarah for Parashat Va’etchanan (“*Nachamu, nachamu ami*”) leaves off, at Yeshayahu 40:27. It contains an unequivocally soft and reassuring passage from God to the nation of Israel, with a focus on how the people should neither fear nor fret because God will continuously provide strength to the weak and the weary. The haftarah is instructive both in terms of its tone and its substance.

The paternal tone of this haftarah is a gentle supplement to the preceding passage in Yeshayahu, which calls for the nation of Israel to be comforted based on a stirring description of the forceful strength of God, who, as Master and Creator of the universe, will mete out justice and reveal His glory to all living beings. In this sense, these two haftarah portions represent the two different components of the rabbinic teaching that “wherever you find a description of the power of God, you will also find a description of His humility” (Megillah 31a). In the haftarah of “*Nachamu, nachamu*,” the emphasis is on the supreme power and greatness of God in creating, maintaining, and declaring His sovereignty over the world and all of its creatures. After describing the greatness of God, the prophet is better equipped to convey the magnificence of His humility in strengthening the weak and the downtrodden from among His people – this message is manifest in the haftarah for Parashat Lekh Lekha.

But why is this section of Yeshayahu’s prophecy specifically associated with the portion of Lekh Lekha? Classic commentators cite a connection between the parashah and the verses in the haftarah contained in 41:2–3, “*Who inspired the one from the east ... delivered nations to him and subdued kings before him*” (ArtScroll translation). According to the Talmud in Ta’anit 21a, these verses refer to the protagonist of Parashat Lekh Lekha, Avraham Avinu (originally named Avram at the beginning of the parashah), the conqueror of the four mighty kings who had taken

his nephew, Lot, captive; according to the Talmud, the phrase “*yitein ka-afar raglo*” (41:2) denotes that Avraham was able to convert the dirt on the ground into swords to defeat his foes. It might also be added that the haftarah contains an even more direct reference to Avraham in verse 41:8, which describes the chosen nation of Israel as “*zera Avraham ohavi*” – the seed of Avraham, who demonstrated his love for God.

Based on our above analysis, there may be an additional connection to Parashat Lekh Lekha. The “humility” of God, as mentioned above, is described in the Talmud as pertaining to the benevolence of God towards the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the downtrodden. Similarly, the substantive content of the haftarah emphasizes God’s altruism towards a population drained of its strength, weary from misfortune and oppression. Hence, the haftarah, in noting that the nation of Israel descends from Avraham, serves as a reminder that it was Avraham who demonstrated a worthiness to receive such a bounteous benevolence towards his descendants because of his exquisite emulation of this very same trait. After all, as described in Parashat Lekh Lekha, Avraham risked his own life and sacrificed his personal security in order to rescue his nephew Lot from the four mighty kings. Upon defeating the kings, Avraham not only eschewed any gift from the king of Sodom whom he had rescued, but even gave tithes to Malki-Tzedek, the resident “priest.” In fact, Avraham is viewed as the paradigm of “chessed” (loving-kindness) (see Michah 7:20).

Moreover, on an individualized level, the haftarah may be referring to Avraham’s personal odyssey. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:3) speaks about the “ten trials” of Avraham that he passed with flying colors, indicating the great affection which Avraham demonstrated for God (consistent with the phrase “*Avraham ohavi*”). These trials, according to the commentators, include the command for Avram to leave his ancestral homeland, his descent into Egypt during a time of famine, the captivity of his

wife during that descent, the war against the four kings in order to rescue Lot, and the commandment for Avraham to become circumcised at the age of 99. According to most counts, between six and eight of the ten trials took place before the conclusion of Parashat Lekh Lekha. If there was anybody who might have been sapped of his strength and stamina, who needed the haftarah's promise of "*notein la-ya'eif koach u-le-ein onim atzmah yarbeh*" (40:29) – that God gives strength to the weary, it was surely Avraham Avinu himself.

Moreover, despite having persevered through so many tests, there were more trials for Avraham to endure, including the ultimate trial of the Akeidah – the command to offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice to God. Avraham could certainly have felt that he had more than adequately proven himself, that he had satisfied his quota of trials and tribulations. Nonetheless, he managed to summon the strength to surmount even greater challenges. This, according to the haftarah, may be the message to the nation of Israel concerning the human condition on earth – "*do not fear, worm of Yaakov, people of Israel, for I will assist you, says the Lord*" (41:14). Even when you feel that you have been sapped of your strength like a worm, God will help you overcome your challenges. Avraham Avinu serves as a perfect paradigm for this uplifting message.

This motif of perseverance is further expressed through the contrast in the haftarah between the heathen youths who become fatigued and ultimately stumble (40:30, see commentary of Mahari Kara), as opposed to those who trust in God ("יקוי ה'" – pronounced "*Ve-koyey*," as noted by the Radak) who shall always be replenished with strength (40:31). According to these verses, those committed to the service of God are assured that even though the normal human condition may consist of fatigue and even burn-out, they will be given strength to overcome their exhaustion in order to confront their challenges.

This idea may also underlie the theme elucidated by the Rambam in the *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:24) that God presents people, including Avraham Avinu, with "trials" in order to draw out the full potential of their spiritual capacity, so that they can serve as an inspiration for others to follow. Even the seemingly unattainable, such as Avraham's victory over the four powerful kings, becomes achievable when such a challenge is a person's particular mission from God.

We can thus understand why the Rabbis enacted as part of the standard morning blessings a benediction patterned after Yeshayahu 40:29, "*ha-noten la-ya'eif koach*" – "who

gives strength to the weary." Every person is susceptible of succumbing to exhaustion from life's many trials and tribulations. There comes a point in life when a person may feel that it is legitimate to be tired and may want to decline the invitation to confront new challenges that test his or her spiritual mettle. Therefore, the haftarah to Parashat Lekh Lekha charges one to reject that attitude. After all, Avraham passed one difficult test after another in Lekh Lekha, but did not hesitate to assume new and more formidable challenges when he was over 100 years old. Thus, man is bidden to ignore his fatigue and count on his Creator to revitalize him as necessary.

It is particularly noteworthy that the custom has developed in Jewish homes to sing the song (by R. Yehudah Ha-Levi) on Shabbat morning of "*Yonah Matza Bah Manoach*" – about how the dove, the symbol for the people of Israel, found a resting place after the flood on Shabbat. The second stanza ends with an allusion to the verse immediately preceding our haftarah – "*mei-rov onim ve-amitz koach*" (40:26), emphasizing the strength that pertains to God (consistent with the theme of the prior passage, as described above), while the third stanza ends with an allusion to our haftarah – "*barukh ha-notein la-ya'eif koach*" (40:29), emphasizing the strength that God provides to His people.

Interestingly, the Talmud in *Massekhet Shabbat* (49a) poses the question of why the congregation of Israel is indeed often compared to a dove (see, e.g., *Tehillim* 68:14, *Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:14). The Talmud responds that just as a dove's wings protect the dove, so too, mitzvot protect the congregation of Israel. *Tosafot* explain (s.v. *kenafekha*) that unlike other birds who rest their entire bodies on a stone when they are tired, a tired dove simply rests one wing but continues to fly with the other wing.

Thus, when we sing about the dove at the Shabbat table, we are reinforcing the notion that just like the dove, the people of Israel always find a way to persevere in the performance of mitzvot and devotion to God, even in times of fatigue, depression, or oppression. This notion is consistent with the theme of the haftarah. Do not fear, says God, even when you are tired and fatigued, even when your spirit is broken, even when you feel that you don't have the strength to carry on – "*ki ani Hashem Elokekha, machazik yeminekha, ha-omer lekha al tira, ani azartikha*" – for I will grasp your right hand and provide you with assistance (*Yeshayahu* 41:13).

Please allow me to share a personal postscript relating to this particular verse. A number of years ago, when I was

serving as Director of the Beth Din of America, I suffered a severe fracture on my right wrist as a result of a sports injury. A medical expert advised me to leave it alone and accept the fate of a perennially twisted right hand because of the risk that surgery on the hand could result in permanent nerve damage.

Around the same time, we were struggling at the Beth Din with one of our most vexing Agunah cases. We had attempted unsuccessfully dozens of times over the course of several years to convince the husband to give his wife a get in order to free her from the shackles of a non-functional marriage. Many times we were tempted to give up, but felt that we needed to persevere for the sake of helping to free this Agunah.

Fortuitously, I was eventually referred to a top physician who expressed his confidence, based on a new technique he had developed, that he could successfully perform the surgery to repair my right hand. As I entered the hospital for pre-surgery preparation on the day before the scheduled operation, my cell phone rang. It was a call from one of the facilitators of the aforementioned case who indicated there was a small possibility that the husband would be willing to give a get the next day. As I sat in the hospital waiting room, we worked out a detailed plan to prepare for such an eventuality. Unable to attend myself, I sent a team the next day to the husband's location with instructions relating to the possible execution and delivery of a get.

The next day, prior to receiving anesthesia for the operation, I was called by our sofer who informed me that unfortunately, the husband had changed his mind

Avraham the Warrior

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

When we speak of Avraham, the founder of our people and our faith, so many moments in his life stand out. The journey to the holy land, the welcoming of the angels, the defense of Sodom, the binding of Isaac – Avraham's story is rich with acts of devotion to God and commitment to human justice and loving kindness.

This week, as the Torah introduces us to our patriarch Avraham, one of the traits that stands out is Avraham the warrior.

Avraham who, upon viewing the harm that happened to certain innocent states as well as the fact that his nephew Lot has been taken hostage, immediately recognizes

at the last minute. However, as the anesthesia was being administered, the cell phone rang again, and somehow I was still awake enough to hear the sofer say that a miracle had occurred and the husband agreed to authorize the get after all. That was the last thing I remember before slipping into a deep but content sleep while the surgery was performed to repair my right wrist.

Several weeks later, the time came for my cast to come off and for physical therapy to begin. I remained somewhat nervous about my ability to recover from the surgery and to regain full strength and movement in my right hand. Upon reading the haftarah of that week's parashah, which was Lekh Lekha, I came across the pasuk quoted above, which could not have been more apt – *“for I am Hashem who will grasp your right hand (yeminekha), who says to you not to fear for I will help you.”* Thank God, the surgery was a success, my right wrist recovered fully, and the Agunah whom we never despaired from trying to help, despite our considerable fatigue, was a free woman according to Jewish law. A few months later, my wife and I were blessed with the birth of our third son. We decided to name him *“Yamin”* (literally, “right hand”), inspired in part by this verse and message.

Indeed, this haftarah is inspirational on many levels. It serves as an evocation of the Divine Providence that continuously strengthens the people of Israel both collectively and individually. However, just as importantly, the haftarah beckons us to follow the example of Avraham Avinu in strengthening those who are weakened, and having the faith to overcome internal fatigue in loving service to the Almighty.

the responsibility to wage war in order to right the evil perpetrated on society and secure the release of the captives.

Avraham's loyalty to society and to his kin, even to the point of battling into the depths of the night in order to free him and the kings, sets an example for us in this trying moment.

The war of the four and five kings marks the first account of warfare in Tanach, and Avraham's entry into the battle gives the Midrash and the commentators an early opportunity to address the Torah's view on military ethics, in anticipation of how such issues will be elaborated upon later in the Torah.

It is against this backdrop that the Pirkei d'Rabi Eliezer (#27) makes a striking point in its recounting of the events of the war. Avraham, looking back at the fighting that has taken place, is suddenly afraid. "Could it be," he asks, "that I have just killed these people without just cause?"

God, in turn, responds using language from this week's Haftara, interpreted by our Sages as being a reference to Avraham. Elegantly reinterpreting Yeshayahu 41:3, at face value a description of a warrior returning home unscathed, the Sages reread the verse as meaning that Avraham was saved not only from harm, but from wrongdoing.

While he feared that perhaps he had killed innocent people along the way, God assures Avraham that he has not wrought any unjustified pain or death in the context of his war effort.

Sometimes in a Just War collateral civilian casualties occur, an evil consequence that is permitted in war. One of the tragic costs of war. Yet Avraham is assured by God that he and his soldiers did not take deliberate aim at civilian targets.

That fear is real.

Just last week, in the moments leading up to the onset of Shabbat, a group of combat soldiers came together to pray. Going one by one, each soldier was asked to share one prayer they were carrying with them in these trying days.

Some quite reasonably asked for safety from harm through the ravages of war, and to be able to return home speedily and full in body and in spirit – a prayer we share with them in these difficult times.

But the overwhelming majority of the soldiers, in this moment of honesty and vulnerability, shared that their greatest fear was that they may cause unnecessary harm or death to innocent civilians during the fighting.

Our soldiers, of mighty arms and loving hearts, joined with Avraham in the deep worry regarding the unavoidable collateral damage that comes with warfare, hoping at the very least to minimize damage done.

In the face of the Hamas-ISIS cult of death, our soldiers continue to value life.

As we continue to pray for the welfare of our armed forces as they take on the Hamas menace in the aftermath of the Simchat Torah massacre, we should be moved by their example. Like that of our father Avraham, our role as Jews guided by morality – in complete contrast to that of our enemy – is that we not lose sight of what is humanity.

And even while we recognize that our goal must be complete victory, the safety of our soldiers and people – and nothing should stand in the way of that objective – we can still hold true to the tradition that innocent life has value.