

## Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

### שבֿת פרשת לך לך

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**BIBLICAL LESSONS :: Rabbi Berel Wein**

There are different traditions regarding the length of the career of our father Avraham. There is a well known Midrash that states that his epiphany of discovering the one universal God occurred while he was yet a child – three years old. Other traditions, among them Maimonides, place this event when he was forty eight or fifty two years old. However and whenever the correct date may be it is clear that Avraham accomplished much when he was already hoary with years.

Isaac is born unto him when he is already a century old and the Akeidah – his supreme test in life – occurs when he is one hundred thirty-seven years old. The Torah tells us that Avraham lived for one hundred seventy-five years. Thus, much of his accomplishments and influence on his generation occurred during the later, mature years of his life.

The rabbis always recognized age and maturity of years as an advantage in life. Though physically our bodies weaken with advancing years, spiritually and certainly experience-wise we are able to grow stronger and wiser. The Talmud phrased it succinctly: “Even if great wisdom is not apparently present in one, but age and experience is certainly here.”

Respect for the elderly is a basic tenet of Judaism. The Torah commands us to rise in honor of the aged and to give allegiance and respect to elders. Even if God forbid they are no longer mentally acute, they are nevertheless deserving of this honor and respect. The rabbis used a metaphor to illustrate this point - that even the broken and shattered shards of the tablets of Sinai (that were broken by Moshe) also resided within the Holy Ark.

We live in an age that worships youth. Most product and consumer advertising is directed towards the youthful market. Fortunes are spent to somehow disguise the fact that we are growing older. I know from my rabbinic experience that every congregation wants to have a thirty year old rabbi, preferably with twenty years of experience on the job.

It is widely known that people in their fifties will not be deemed to be employable by most corporations and business concerns. Thus a vast pool of experience and talent, accumulated wisdom and practicality, lies unexploited and disregarded. There are many forces, both economic and social in play here that lead to these types of policies but the end sum is the same – being older is a detriment in our society’s workplace and milieu and it is definitely a disadvantage.

What would our father Avraham say to such a situation? I cannot speak for him but it is clear that even until his last days he did not see himself retired from guiding, advising and inspiring his generation. Even in his later decades he was recognized as the “prince of God who resides in the midst of our society.”

The Torah says of him that at his demise he arrived with all of his days in hand. All of his days were exploited and dedicated towards the fulfillment of the Godly mission that he had set for himself. Age becomes an asset and an ornament to great figures such as Avraham.

Since I am no longer young myself, some may view this article as being a self serving one. Be that as it may truly be, it does not diminish in my opinion the truth of the message that age brings with it experience, guidance and is therefore most worthy of respect, honor and care.

Care for aging parents is not an easy challenge to overcome. The senior citizen and nursing homes that now abound and are such a part of our economies and lives provide a partial answer to this challenge. But they are certainly not the complete solution to the problem and difficulties raised in caring for aged people. It is clear that the advances in medical treatments and the lengthening of expected life spans have made the problem much more acute now than it was even fifty years ago.

There are families that see the caring for their aged members a privilege and an honor. Not everyone rises to that level of selflessness. We constantly read of family tragedies that are occasioned by the problems of caring for the aged members of the family.

Somehow it is a matter of attitude towards the elderly that can change a burden into a privilege. And it is this attitude that the Torah comes to emphasize and inform. May we all be blessed to come to the fullness of our lives with all of our days attached to us in serenity and achievement. Shabat shalom.

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**Weekly Parsha :: LECH LECHA :: Rabbi Berel Wein**

The obvious question that troubles us when we read this parsha, or when we think of our father Avraham in general terms, is why was Avraham successful in influencing his generation and all subsequent generations while the great pious Noach who preceded him was apparently incapable of being such a force? The obvious answer to that obvious question is, in my opinion, that Avraham was a people person.

He did not build arks nor did he warn of impending disasters. His methodology for spreading monotheism and goodness in the world was by example, by being a powerfully good person. People respond to people.

All of us who have engaged in fundraising for worthwhile causes are aware that people give mainly because of the relationship of the individual representing the institution or cause than to the objective merit of the cause or institution itself. Again, people respond to people.

Avraham and Sarah were exemplary people and people listened to them and responded to their ideas and message. All great movements in Jewish history were created by people and became popular because of the people who founded and led them. For example, one need only look at the Chasidic movement of the eighteenth century and the Mussar movement of the nineteenth century. The ideas and goals of these movements were far reaching and appealing but their popularity was based solely on the relationship of its leading people to other people.

The Baal Shem Tov and his followers and Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant and his followers made those movements successful in their time because of their ability to relate to people, both one on one and generally as well.

Avraham had boundless faith in the innate ability of people to do good. Even in dealing with the wicked populations of Sodom and Amorah in next week’s parsha, he is convinced that there is a hard core of goodness even in that evil population. Maybe that is unrealistic on his part in practical result but that is his nature and inclination.

And, it is his natural ebullience and care for others that eventually causes even those lukewarm to his ideas to proclaim that “you are a prince of the Lord who lives in our midst.” Avraham faced many disappointments and frustrations in his long life. Family problems abounded and wars and conflicts were his lot in his earthly existence. The rabbis taught us in Avot that Avraham was tested ten times. Nevertheless his faith and good nature, developed over his lifetime, carried him through all of those tests, severe as they may have been.

He was able to encompass in his thoughts and efforts all peoples and nations - and he became the father of a multitude of peoples and societies. Though the Jewish people are a particular and even parochial group of human individuals, our Torah demands of us a universal outlook as well. This is an inheritance from our father Avraham and reflects God’s concern, so to speak, for all of His creatures. That is why the Torah demands that we in our personal lives measure ourselves according to the yardstick established by Avraham and Sarah, the founders of our people. Shabat shalom.

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**TORAH WEEKLY :: Parshat Lech Lecha**

**For the week ending 5 November 2011 / 7 Heshvan 5772**

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**by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - [www.seasonsofthemoon.com](http://www.seasonsofthemoon.com)**

**OVERVIEW**

**To Be a Blessing**

“And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”

One of the more interesting reactions to Gilad Shalit’s release from more than five years of incarceration in Gaza was a ‘tweet’ from an Arab in Syria who said that the Israelis were prepared to give up 1,000 people to save one life, but their government treated its citizens’ lives as though they were worthless.

The Jewish People are very often held to a higher and double standard.

In this case, we ourselves held ourselves to a higher standard. And so it should be. If nothing else, Shalit’s release showed the world the sanctity with which the Jewish People prize human life and freedom.

“And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”

The above sentence is part of the first recorded communication between G-d and man. The beginning of the relationship. As it is the beginning, these words must also contain the essence of that relationship. For all beginning contains essence. A seed is not just the beginning of an oak, it is also its essence.

When G-d spoke to Avraham, He promised him many things: that he would be a great nation; that he would be blessed and that his name would be made great. However all of this was predicated on a single condition — that Avraham would be a reason for people to bless G-d. This was to be the essence of the relationship between G-d and man. That through his every action, man would sanctify G-d’s name. That he would bring a blessing to the lips of the world.

Our actions are scrutinized by the world. If we are held to a higher —and sometimes double — standard, whether as individuals or as a nation, it is because the world recognizes subconsciously that our job in this world is ‘to be a blessing’, to sanctify G-d’s name.

Written and compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair  
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### **Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum Parshas Lech Lechav**

#### **Go forth from your land, from your relatives and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (12:1)**

Clearly, Hashem's command to Avraham Avinu to uproot himself from his home and travel to a yet undesignated land serves as a metaphor for his descendants. Maaseh Avos siman l'banim, "The deeds of the fathers serve as a sign /portent for their sons/descendants." We must learn to understand Avraham's move and its purpose as a mold for our own need to move on, move up, move out - at the appropriate times.

In his sefer, Nitzotzos, Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita, relates a shmuess, ethical discourse, given by Horav Chizkiyahu Mishkovsky, Shlita, to a gathering of Lev L'Achim volunteers. His words are timely; his lesson is significant. The Rosh Yeshivah shared the following poignant story with the gathering: In one of the mainstream yeshivos in Eretz Yisrael, a young student was studying who unquestionably was destined to achieve great prominence in the Torah world. His life was one long Torah endeavor. He was eating and sleeping his Gemorah. Wherever he went, his Gemorah was with him. Every free minute that he had was spent immersed in Torah study. He literally did not waste a minute from his precious Torah. It went without saying that the regular yeshiva sedorim, study sessions, during which everyone was expected to learn, his personal study was outstanding and consummate, his devotion - absolutely unreal.

In addition, this promising young man stood out in his service of Hashem, his tefillah reflecting a profound sense of commitment and deep understanding of what it means to speak to Hashem. His kavanah, intention/devotion was intense; his fervor passionate and expressed from the inner recesses of his heart. His yiraas shamoyim, fear of Heaven, was extraordinary, serving Hashem with both love and awe. In short, this was a primary example of a young gadol baTorah. At this rate, he would one day be an exceptional Torah scholar who would impact the Torah world.

This student's demeanor amazed the hanhalah, administration of the yeshivah, and its entire student body. From where did such a unique student originate? How? What? Why? These were questions that stymied everyone until one day, when the student asked for an appointment to meet with the Rosh Yeshivah. Perhaps, he would reveal his secret.

The Rosh Yeshivah invited the bachur into his office and asked that glasses of tea be placed before them. He was not going to rush this. Let the young man feel as comfortable as possible. It was important that he be relaxed, so that whatever was on his mind could finally surface.

The student began, "I have a question to ask of the Rosh Yeshivah. First, however, I feel that it is incumbent that I relate my life story and what brought me to this moment." The Rosh Yeshivah responded, "By all means. Take your time and feel free to share with me whatever you like."

"I was born in America to parents who were unfortunately irreligious. This is the environment in which I was raised during my formative years. Shortly after I entered public school, my mother heard an inspirational lecture from a powerful speaker. This rabbi underscored the impact a life devoted to Torah would make on a family. These words brought about a transformation within my mother, arousing within her an inner-yearning to return to Hashem's embrace by living a Torah-oriented life.

"Needless to say, this brought about a certain amount of discord within my family. My father was too far removed from Torah Judaism to effect a drastic change. He had no interest in becoming religious, and he said so emphatically. He did agree, however, to allow my mother to practice what she wanted as long as it did not interfere with his lifestyle. Slowly, my mother's relationship with an observant lifestyle increased and strengthened, until she decided her next move: Shabbos. She presented herself before my father with two candles and said, "I am lighting candles tonight as the beginning of Shabbos observance. Will you join me on this journey?" My father's reply was a loud and resounding "no". Basically, this move was the precursor to the end of their marriage, because my father moved out shortly thereafter.

"It was now my mother and I, alone in the world. I left public school and was enrolled in a Hebrew Day School, where I absorbed whatever Torah they had to offer. I thrived in the environment, finally feeling a sense of purpose, a sense of value. I had come home. As my eighth-grade year was rapidly coming to a close, my principal spoke to me concerning opportunities for the future. Where would I go for high school? The principal suggested that, due to my situation, background and great desire for upward movement, I should consider going to a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael. It would be most conducive to my learning. I was willing. The next hurdle was my mother. How would she react? It would mean leaving her all alone.

"The principal met with my mother and me, and, after praising me, he made his suggestion. My mother listened carefully and then asked, "Is there no yeshivah in our city, in all of America, where my son could study?" "Yes, there are a number of fine yeshivos," the principal responded. "It is just that I feel he will do better studying in the Holy Land." My mother asked for some time to make a decision. A few days of intense soul-searching elapsed. There were many issues at stake - her being left alone in the world, certainly not one of the least significant. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, played his role in the drama: "Why should he leave for Eretz Yisrael, if he can learn just as well in America? Why should you be left all alone if your son could be here with you? Who can replace a mother's care?"

"Sleepless nights and tearful days went by before my mother decided that no sacrifice was too great when it involves Torah. My success was more important than all of the other issues. Torah was to dominate my life. I was going! Recognizing my mother's sacrifice and always remembering her parting words, I set myself to learning b'hasmadah, with great diligence. I could not waste even one minute. My mother had given up so much for me. Torah study would become my life.

"Just about one year after I arrived in the yeshivah, my mother called with frightening news: she had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. I immediately declared that I was coming home. Her reaction was expressed with her usual strong will: No! No sacrifice is too large for Torah. I am prepared for whatever Hashem sends my way, but I will not bring you home from the yeshivah. It is your learning b'hasmadah that makes it all worth it! You are not interrupting your learning for me! End of conversation.

"The Rosh Yeshivah can imagine what went through my mind. I threw myself with a sense of urgency into my learning. My davening and interpersonal relationships took on a renewed objective, as I realized that

my mother badly needed z'chusim, merits. I would provide whatever I could. This went on for a number of months. My weekly calls to my mother were filled with pain, as I sensed her attempt to cover up her loneliness, fear and despair. Each time I begged her, "Can I come home?" Each time the reply was the same, "No! Nothing is too much for Torah. Do all that you can to study and grow in Torah"

"Then the dread phone call came. My mother told me that her disease had metastasized beyond any form of cure. She was declining rapidly. I again begged, insisting on coming home to be with her in her last weeks, days. She refused. Torah was to dominate.

"Rebbe, that was the last phone call. She passed away that week." At that point, the young student broke down in tears. The Rosh Yeshivah waited for him to cry himself out, then he continued: "Rebbe, I have related my life story and my overriding commitment to my mother for her overwhelming sacrifice. From the moment I left home, I have dedicated every part of my body to Hashem, His Torah and mitzvos." He paused and began to weep bitterly as he looked up at the Rosh Yeshivah and asked, "Does the Rosh Yeshivah feel that I am doing enough to carry out my mother's request?"

His penetrating question pierces through the veils of ambiguity and uncertainty. How many of us think that we are "there," that we have made it, we have achieved that which is expected of us? This bachur teaches us the key to spiritual growth: Have we done enough? We are never "there." It is a constant uphill climb. At every milestone, when we think that we have achieved, when we think that we have made it, we must ask ourselves: "Have we done enough?"

It was this question that catalyzed this young man's spiritual growth. He was never complacent. He was never finished. Whatever he did, it was not enough. Time is a compelling and unforgiving taskmaster. We never have enough time. We never know how long our lives will last, when we will be called to task for not doing enough.

Hashem told Avraham, Lech lecha, "Go for yourself, from the land, the artzius, earthliness/materialism represented by the land; mi'moladetecha, from your birthplace, your character which you derive from your birthplace; mi'bais avicha, from your father's home, from your passive reliance on familial support. Go out on your own! Where? To the land which I will show you."

Lech lecha was not a one-time command given to Avraham. It is a never-ending exhortation to each and every Jew to awaken within himself the upward drive to succeed, to move forward, to pursue Torah and mitzvos relentlessly, and to grow in them. Each Jew has a G-d-given mission, a Heavenly mandate. Have we achieved our calling; have we fulfilled our duty; have we done enough? A Jew must be lech lecha, constantly moving. There is no rest. There are no vacations. Rest is stagnation. Status quo is death. Are we ever doing enough? No - we can always do more.

There are times when all avenues have been exhausted. The following vignette teaches us the response of Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl, to a pressing situation. One of Eretz Yisrael's eminent mechanchim, Torah educators, came before Rav Shach one Erev Shabbos in the afternoon. A situation had developed that was rapidly becoming a crisis and could not be ignored. Rav Shach immediately telephoned one of the prominent rabbanim in the Holy Land and asked him to do whatever possible to circumvent the issue. The rav listened, promised to do what he could, but gave no assurances. Rav Shach listened and said goodbye, placed the phone back on the table and began to weep uncontrollably. He raised his hands upward and said, "Ribono shel olam. I did my part Now, You do Yours."

In his preface to the Avi Ezri Hilchos Mada, the Rosh Yeshivah writes: "Hashem's help comes only after man has exhausted all efforts to do what is imposed upon him. Who can say, 'I have done everything. Now, it is up to Hashem.'?" Apparently, when Rav Shach made his statement on that fateful Erev Shabbos, it was after much introspection that led to the conclusion: "I have done enough."

**So Avram went...and Lot went with him; Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan. (12:4)**

Lot was the orphaned nephew of Avraham Avinu's brother, Haran, who had died in the flames of Ur Kasdim, in his support. Our Patriarch felt a filial responsibility for his nephew. Therefore, he took him along when he

moved. This explains why the Torah mentions that Avraham took Lot, even though it was not part of Hashem's command. Why, however, does the Torah inform us of Avraham's age at the time of departure? Does it really matter?

Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl, distinguishes between ito and imo - two words which are used to imply "with" someone. There is a difference with regard to "with" - in what manner one is going "with" someone. Imo means "with" in the full sense of the word, together physically and for the same purpose. Ito, however, means that two people travel together, but not necessarily for a similar purpose.

When the Torah writes that Lot travelled with Avraham, it says ito, implying that while Lot accompanied Avraham, he did not go for the same purpose. Avraham was going in response to Hashem's command. Lot had another reason for joining his uncle on this journey. He sought Avraham's wealth. After all, his uncle was seventy-five years old; he had no children, no heirs. If he played his cards right, Lot was in line to have it all. He better stick with Avraham so that, when the time comes, he will be in place to inherit his wealth.

Motive is a powerful illuminator, elucidating and defining the true character of an individual. Attendance at a spiritual experience does not determine the real standing of a person, his true feelings concerning the mission statement of the experience. Just being there has very little consequence. The motive and purpose that bring him ascertain his unfeigned essence. The Torah does not want us to perceive Lot as anything other than who he really was: a money-hungry, materialistic opportunist, who was willing to join with the saintly Avraham, as long as a pot of gold was located somewhere in the equation.

**And He said, "Gaze, now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you able to count them. "And He said to him, "So shall your offspring be!" (15:5)**

The Divrei Chaim explains the analogy to stars. Seen from the distance of the earth, stars appear miniscule. Seen in close proximity from above, their true size is remarkable. Likewise, Klal Yisrael might be viewed as being diminutive and inconsequential in comparison to the nations of the world. Upon Heavenly examination, their image changes immensely. Their true size increases as they are viewed through a Heavenly perspective.

Horav Meir Shapiro, zl, offers a practical explanation for our being compared to stars. Hashem instructed Avraham Avinu to gaze upon the Heavens and count the stars - something which is impossible to do. They are too numerous to count. Yet, despite the futility of this endeavor, Avraham made the attempt. Why? Because feasibility, or lack thereof, concerning any endeavor is not the determining factor in its successful completion. A Jew must endeavor, regardless of the fact that success is not within his reach. It is all dependent upon one's ratzon, will, determination. To paraphrase the Lubliner Rav, "We do not measure inclination based upon ability; rather, we measure ability based upon inclination." When a person really wants something with all his heart and soul, he can accomplish great things which, otherwise, have been totally unrealistic.

Ko yiheyeh zaracha, "So shall your offspring be." As you push forward, despite the impracticality of the endeavor, so, too, will your descendants continue in their service of Hashem, even under the most difficult circumstances. They will never allow lack of ability to stand in their way.

Hashem does not demand more of us than we are able to handle. Man has to open that small hole, the size of a pinhead. Hashem will do the rest, granting him Heavenly assistance. There are two primary challenges to upward growth in Torah: emotional/philosophical and physical/acumen/attitude. There are those who have been challenged by problems of faith, situations that weigh down on them emotionally, philosophically and theologically. To put it simply: they have been turned off for some reason. In such an instance, there is very little ratzon, will, desire to succeed. If one can survive the challenge, climb the mountain, triumph over adversity, Hashem will carry him the rest of the way.

The other challenge is acuity. Not everyone has a Gemorah kop, a head for understanding some of the difficult dialogues and logical analysis involved in learning the Talmud. There are those who, although blessed with a sharp mind, are either lazy, have poor study habits, or just want to have a good time. Once they make up their mind, they, too, will grow in Torah.

The following two vignettes reflect these situations and illuminate the attitude one must maintain. One Seder night in one of the concentration camps during World War II, a father and his young son - the only surviving members of their once sizeable family - were sitting together "celebrating" Pesach. Even under the dreadful conditions that marked that period in time, they were able to obtain a Haggadah. They read it together and, when they reached the Mah Nishtanah, at which time the young son was to ask his father the famous Four Questions, the boy stopped. He looked at his father and said, "Tatty, I have six questions to ask you, the usual four and two extra questions. They are: Do you think that I will sit with you next year at the Seder and ask the Four Questions? Also, can you promise me that next year you will sit next to me and reply to my Four Questions?" In other words, the boy sought assurances that he will be around to ask, and that his father would be there to reply.

His father stared at his young son for a few moments and replied, "My son, I have no idea what will be in five minutes. How can I assure you what will be in a year? I do not know if either of us will be alive, or if we will be able or willing to conduct the Seder next year. One thing, however, I can promise you with my whole heart and soul: Next year and every year until Moshiach Tziddkeinu arrives, thousands of Jews will gather around the Seder table on Pesach night, and young children will ask the Four Questions, and fathers will reply. Our nation has been assured by Hashem, ki lo sishkach mi'pi zaro, 'The Torah will never be forgotten from His children.' Regardless of the situation, the troubles notwithstanding, someone, somewhere, will continue learning Torah. We never give up - regardless of the circumstances"

The second episode was related by Horav Baruch Shimon Schneerson, zl, Rosh Yeshivas Tchebin. The Tchebiner Rosh Yeshivah was a child prodigy. Thus, he was accepted in the premier European yeshivah of Chachmei Lublin under the guidance of the Lubliner Rebbe, Horav Meir Shapiro, zl. He was a student there for some time. As a young man, he was selected by the Rosh Yeshivah to be a bochen, tester, for those students who were entering the Yeshivah for the very first time. The bechinah, entrance exam, included a thorough test on the prospective student's knowledge of Shas, his analytical skills, acumen, and a complete appreciation of his observance, yiraas Shomayim, Fear of Heaven, ethical and moral conduct. They sought only the best, and this meant that each student excelled in every aspect of the defining character of a ben Torah.

One day a young man presented himself to the Yeshivah administration seeking to gain entrance into the Yeshivah. It was evident that he was a special student, his yiraas Shomayim and middos, character traits, were outstanding. After being tested by the different Roshei Yeshivah, it was evident that he was not the brightest student. His knowledge and understanding of the material were far from exceptional. His analytical skills were quite lacking. Regrettably, this extraordinary young man was not Chachmei Lublin material. The first group of testers signed off on him with a rejection slip.

When Rav Baruch Shimon's turn to test the prospective student came around, he was visibly impressed with the young man's demeanor, his fear of Heaven and his overwhelming desire to learn Torah. Alas, the other Roshei Yeshivah had already rejected him. Rav Baruch Shimon was very upset. What could he do? Clearly, Chachmei Lublin was founded for the purpose of providing a high standard of Torah education, specifically for such students as this young man. How could they reject him? He was a unique student with incredible potential. True, he had a long, difficult road ahead of him to achieve his goal.

Rav Baruch Shimon could not sleep. He decided to walk to the bais hamedrash and perhaps spend some time learning in its welcoming environment. It was two o'clock in the morning, and no one was in the bais hamedrash - or so he thought. He entered the sanctuary of Torah and heard a commotion. What was the source of the noise? He thought that no one was there. He began to follow the sound of the noise until he worked his way to the back of the building, where, in the corner of the bais hamedrash, he discovered the young man who had that day been rejected, weeping uncontrollably. He was repeating over to himself how much he had wanted to attend this yeshivah, bemoaning his lack of ability, entreating the Almighty to please help him. He wanted so much to learn Torah in Lublin.

Rav Baruch Shimon could no longer contain himself, and he, too, burst into tears. How could they say "no" to such a ben Torah? He decided that although the hour was late, he was going to the home of one of the Roshei Yeshivah whose decision carried great weight and demand that this bachur be accepted in Lublin. He woke up the Rosh Yeshivah, and, with great emotion, made his pitch, demanding that the Rosh Yeshivah accompany him to the bais hamedrash to see for himself a bachur's yearning for the opportunity to grow in Torah scholarship.

The Rosh Yeshivah went to the bais hamedrash and saw for himself the spectacle that had so captivated Rav Baruch Shimon. His heart melted at the sight of this young man pouring out his heart to Hashem. They very next day, the Roshei Yeshivah convened and elected to accept the student. He did not let them down. Indeed, within a short time, he was counted among the Yeshivah's outstanding students. Nothing stands in the way of ratzon.

**And he trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15:6)**

Rashi notes that concerning Hashem's promise that Avraham Avinu would have offspring, the Patriarch did not question, while regarding the promise of the Land, he questioned Hashem, Bamah eida, "How shall I know?" Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl, explains this based upon a deeper understanding of the meaning of emunah, loosely translated as faith in Hashem. I say "loosely translated," because faith and emunah are not identical. Faith is belief without proof, more of a strong hypothesis, while emunah is much more profound. It is experiential. Emunah is derived from the word emes, which means truth. Truth is an absolute - so is emunah. Emunah stands in direct opposition to human logic. Indeed, as Horav Yitzchak Moshe Erlanger, Shlita, explains, it is a deliberate, conscious rejection of logical reasoning. Emunah ranks above and beyond the logical plane; the concept can only be explored and understood on a spiritual level. Emunah, according to the Maharal, is the key to our closeness with Hashem. The Baal Shem Tov likewise said that, "Emunah is deveikus, clinging to Hashem." It is the ultimate link between the Creator and His creations.

Rav Yeruchem views emunah as k'munach b'kufsa, "it is laying in the box." The maamin, believer, views his belief as a fait accompli, already done and carried out. So certain is he of Hashem's taking care of the issues which demand belief - i.e. everything! When Hashem assured Avraham of offspring, he did not question Him. Hashem's promise means that it is a done deal. He is already a father. Mazel tov! Concerning Eretz Yisrael, however, there were external variables, conditions that had to be met. It was conditional on his righteousness and that of his offspring. He feared his own unworthiness and the possibility of his descendants falling into sin, which would make him unworthy to retain the Land. This is why his emunah had a question attached to it. Too many things could go wrong. He sought assurance.

**Va'ani Tefillah**

**Yotzeir ohr u'borei choshech. Oseh shalom u'borei es ha'kol.**

**He forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates everything.**

While the brachah speaks of the creation of "everything," it focuses primarily on the creation of light. Horav Avigdor Miller, zl, suggests three reasons for this alteration. Light was the first creation concerning which the words, "It was good," were said. Light is the chief physical kindness of the Creation, since it is the source of the world's sustenance. Last, Chazal say that the world was created through the vehicle of ten commands. When we peruse the text, we see only nine expressions of Creation. In the Talmud Rosh Hashanah 32a, Chazal say that the words, Bereishis bara Elokim es ha'Shomayim v'es ha'aretz, implying that Hashem's creation of the Heavens and the earth is the tenth and missing command. This is strange, since it is the greatest creation ex nihilo, yeish mei'ayin, something from nothing. It should not be "concealed." Rav Miller explains that Hashem wanted the command, "Let there be light," to be the first command written in the Torah, even though it was actually the second of the Ten Dicta. Hashem was thereby teaching us a practical and valuable lesson: The world, the Creation of Heaven and earth, is valueless without the creation of light. Light is the equivalent of seeing. Without man's ability to see Heaven and earth, reflect and understand that he was

created by Hashem, what value does he have? Light enables man to recognize the Creation. This earns it the status of being the first written command in the Torah.

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### **Rabbi Yissocher Frand on Parshas Lech Lecha**

The Mishna tells us [Avos 5:3] that Avraham Avinu was tested 10 times and that he passed all 10 tests. There are varying opinions as to exactly what the 10 tests were. However virtually all commentaries enumerate the command to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's home to go off to the Land he would be shown by G-d ("Lech lecha m'artzecha...") as one of the ten tests. According to many commentaries, however, this was not the first test.

According to this approach, the first test Avraham faced was the test of "Ur Kasdim". Rashi points out that the name Ur Kasdim alludes to the miraculous salvation of Avram when thrown into a fiery pit for refusal to pay homage to the prevailing idols of his society. The pasuk alludes to this when it says, "And He said to him: I am the L-rd who took you out from Ur Kasdim..." [Bereshis 15:7]

Avram was an iconoclast. Despite the deep-seated beliefs of the civilization in which he grew up, he broke their idols and even broke his father's idols. The entire society of Ur Kasdim shunted him to the extent that they gave him the choice of worshipping their idols or being thrown into a fire together with his monotheistic beliefs. He chose the latter and miraculously emerged unharmed. The Torah alludes to this story when it mentions that "G-d took Avram out from Ur Kasdim".

The commentaries are troubled by the fact that the miracle of Ur Kasdim is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The test of "Lech Lecha m'artzecha..." -- which on the face of it does not seem as great as the test to leave his childhood home with the promise that things will work out for his benefit -- is spelled out in detail. Why does the Torah omit the miracle of Ur Kasdim?

Over the years, we have discussed this question many times. We once quoted an answer from Rav Weinberg, zt"l, who said that Ur Kasdim was something Avram did out of his own convictions; it was not a response to a Divine Command. Lech Lecha -- leaving his home -- was a Divine Command and hence the fact that Avram obeyed this Command was of greater significance than the fact that he was prepared to act under his own convictions. In the eyes of the Torah, obeying the Master of the Universe is really the greatest test. This is articulated by our Rabbis in the comment "Greater is one who is commanded and does, more so than one who is not commanded and does" [Kidushin 31a]. Doing something that you are supposed to do is greater than doing something that you want to do. Therefore, the test of Ur Kasdim is not as great as the test of Lech Lecha.

On this occasion, I would like to present a different answer to this question from Rav Simcha Zissel Brody, in his volume *Sam Derech*. Rav Brody says that people face two types of tests in their lifetimes. One type is those things that may be categorized as "glamorous tests" -- defining moments in a person's lifetime. At such times, when a person is well aware that he is at a junction in his lifetime when he must make a crucial decision -- even one involving great self-sacrifice -- he may be able to muster the courage and determination to make the proper decision.

However, there are other tests in life -- the daily type of challenges that come our way, day in, day out -- that each and every one of us face. These tests are not glamorous. They are not exciting. They are very run of the mill, but they are challenges nonetheless.

The test of "Ur Kasdim" was one of those glamorous defining-moment types of tests. The test of "Lech Lecha" is typical of the "daily grind" type of test. People sometimes have a capacity to rise above what they really are and to achieve spiritual levels above their normal capacities, but that is not who they really are.

There was recently [this shiur was given several years ago] an incident in Eretz Yisrael where a terrorist attempted to board a bus filled with soldiers and other Israeli citizens. Somehow, the terrorist tripped while getting onto the bus, fell over backwards and banged his head on the sidewalk,

temporarily dazing himself. The bus driver and a medic who happened to be on board ran out to help him, thinking he was an innocent passenger trying to board the bus. In order to resuscitate him they ripped open his shirt and they saw he had a bomb strapped to his body.

This terrorist was literally a ticking time bomb. The bomb could be detonated at any minute and the two fellows trying to save him would have been blown to pieces. The bus driver and the medic held the fellow down to the ground and yelled to everyone to get out of the bus and run for their lives. Everyone except an elderly lady who could not move fast enough and another person trying to help her escaped injury. The elderly lady was killed and her aid was injured when the bomb went off a few moments later, however, miraculously the other passengers were saved.

There was an interview with the bus driver. The journalist asked how he had the bravery to do what he did. The interviewer told the bus driver, "You are a hero!" The bus driver responded, "I am a cowardly type of person. If I would have been asked ahead of time whether I would do such a thing, I definitely would have responded in the negative. I do not know what it was, but something overcame me at the moment and I held the guy down to save the other people."

This is a test of the "Ur Kasdim variety". I don't know whether this is adrenalin or whether it is some latent power in people that makes them rise to the occasion. We all can have such moments of heroism and self-sacrifice, moments where we escape our natural emotions of fear or cowardice or selfishness. For a moment, we may become selfless heroes.

Ur Kasdim moments are fleeting. They do not necessarily represent the real person who emerges heroically from such situations. Lech Lecha is the ordinary test of "do I get up tomorrow for minyan?" Lech Lecha is do I come home from work at night and learn with my child and help him do his homework or do I say "do it yourself and let me read the paper." Nobody thinks about the challenge of "should I learn with my child right now or not?" as being a defining moment in life! No one considers such actions to be the essence of heroism. Lech Lecha moments are moments when we face financial difficulties and we do not question G-d's Providence. Lech Lecha moments are facing all the trials and tribulations that life sends us -- health issues, financial issues, children issues. They are daily grind issues: same old, same old. This is "Lech Lecha".

This is what Avram did. He went to Eretz Yisrael. G-d promised him things would be great, but they were tough. There was a famine in the land. Where is the greatness? This is life. Avram Avinu did not question, did not challenge, and did not lose faith. There is nothing glamorous or exciting here, just the day in day out routine of life.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that the Torah only alludes to Ur Kasdim. Such heroism is great. It is admirable. However, in the eyes of the Torah, the day in, day out, tests, represented by "Lech Lecha," are what really count. Everyone can rise to the occasion occasionally. However, to do what you are supposed to do every day -- day in, and day out -- without questioning, this is a real test.

Books are not written about such tests and people are not honored at banquets for being such heroes, but this is life and in the eyes of the Torah, this is where heroism really emerges. That is why the test of Lech Lecha "rates" as the greater of the two tests.

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD

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### **Orthodox Union / [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org)**

#### **Person in the Parsha**

#### **Rabbi Weinreb's Torah Column, Parshat Lech Lecha**

*Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h*

#### **His Own Man**

"Individuation!" That was Leon's opening statement of the evening.

"No! To me, it was more like an adolescent's rebellion," countered Richard.

Simon had a far different take on the matter. "The man was a nonconformist, by nature. He just had to do his own thing."

If you have been following this column for the past several weeks, you know exactly what's going on here. It is the third session of the mini-course I gave long ago on the subject of the basics of the Jewish religion. Three young adults showed up for the course: Richard, Simon, and Leon. The text was the book of Genesis, Bereshit.

The assignment was to read this week's Torah portion, Genesis 12:1-17:27. For the first two sessions, I had merely asked the class to read the biblical text. This week, however, I added a little extra. At the end of last week's session, I told them that our Sages had long ago noted that the story of Abraham contained ten trials, or tests, to which he was put. "Abraham our father was tested with ten trials, and he withstood all of them to make known how deep was our father Abraham's love of God." (Pirkei Avot 5:4).

I asked the class to read both this week's and next week's assignments with an eye toward identifying and enumerating these ten trials.

Despite their very different personal styles, which we have already encountered in our previous columns, all three agreed that the first trial was contained in the very first verse of this week's readings.

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.' They unanimously declared that this was a difficult demand indeed. Leaving the surroundings with which one was familiar from birth to set out to an unknown destination was a challenge worthy of being called a trial.

I pointed out to them that not every commentator agreed with this point of view. Some have argued that one or two trials, only implicitly hinted at the end of last week's portion, constitute the first trial or two. However, I told them, they could take comfort in the fact that their assessment coincided with that of Maimonides. Abram's first test was to leave home.

But what basic concept of Judaism is being taught here? Richard and Simon felt that this test was just a reflection of Abram's natural tendencies. He was innately antisocial, argued Simon, and was merely acting out his instinct.

Richard had somehow calculated, erroneously, that Abram was a teenager and no more than the first example of an adolescent runaway. He found his home environment oppressing and, so, struck out to find his own destiny.

In neither view was a basic Jewish concept being taught.

However, Leon was again, characteristically, on to something. "We are being taught here," he said, "that Abraham's task was to individuate, to see himself as having a unique task in life, to transcend the limitations of his cultural background. He was being assigned the task of self-discovery, as it were, although he was being given the promise of Divine blessing to help him find his special path in life."

The basic Jewish concept here is that we are not to be blind conformists. We are not to identify ourselves in terms of those around us. There is a place, a necessary place, for authentic individual differences.

Leon gave me an opening to share with my little group a fascinating epigram attributed to the mid-19th century Hassidic sage, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk:

"If I am I because you are you,  
And you are you because I am I,  
Then, I am not I  
And you are not you.

But, if I am I because I am I  
And you are you because you are you  
Then I am I  
And you are you."

"I cannot be myself if I am merely imitating you. That's just blind conformity. I have to find what is unique in me, what are my God-given gifts and talents, and I must express them. Then, I am I and can achieve my life's mission."

This is not a teaching with which all Jewish leaders would agree. But this was the view of the very creative Rabbi of Kotzk, and he was neither the first nor the last to assert this teaching.

A short while after the demise of the Rabbi of Kotzk, a very different sort of Rabbi echoed this thought and found a basis for it in our very text, the opening verse of Parshat Lech Lecha.

He was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and this is a quotation drawn from his extensive and erudite commentary on the Five Books of Moses:

"Lech Lecha literally means, 'Go to yourself.' Find your own path. Be ready to choose the lonely path which will separate you from your land, your birthplace, your father's home. Be ready to separate yourself from all the connections that you have formed to this point. Lech Lecha, go at it alone. If the ideology of the multitude is not true, be prepared to worship God alone. How would we, the Jewish people, have been able to exist, and how can we possibly continue to exist, had we not inherited from Abraham our father the courage to be in the minority, even in a minority of one?" Judaism teaches that one must question truths that have long gone unquestioned. It also teaches that one must trust the answers he discovers and be ready to live by those answers even in the face of the opposition of the vast majority. Abraham was but the first to exemplify this basic Jewish concept. Leon came upon it himself.

And so our third class session on the basic concepts of Judaism came to a close.

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### Rav Kook List

#### Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

#### Lech Lecha

"Be Complete!"

When Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him, announcing the mitzvah of brit milah (circumcision).

"I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and be complete. I will make a covenant (brit) between Me and you." (Gen. 17:1-2)

What was Abraham's immediate reaction? He literally fell on his face. The Talmud (Nedarim 32b) writes that when Abraham heard God command him, "walk before Me and be complete," his entire body began to shake. Abraham was confused and mortified. "Perhaps there is something improper in my actions?" But Abraham calmed down when God began to command him to circumcise himself and his household.

Why was Abraham comforted to hear that God was referring to brit milah?

#### A Higher Prophetic Level

We perceive the outside world through various gateways. These include the five physical senses, and our powers of intellect and reason. And there exists an additional portal - the faculty of prophecy. We cannot truly fathom this unique gift, the product of a hidden connection between the soul and the body. For this reason, prophecy, unlike pure intellectual activity, involves the powers of imagination, desire, and other baser aspects of the mind.

When God charged Abraham, "Be complete," Abraham feared that he was lacking in his intellectual dedication in serving God. This would be a fault for which a righteous individual like Abraham would certainly be held accountable.

But when Abraham heard that God was referring to the mitzvah of circumcision, his concerns were put to rest. Brit milah serves to refine the special connection between body and soul. It deals with a sphere that is beyond human comprehension - and accountability. God's command was not that Abraham needed to rectify some error or character flaw, but rather to bestow upon him a unique covenant, one which would enable him to attain a purer, higher level of prophecy.

With this gift, Abraham would be able to "walk before God." The word hit'halech ("walk") is in the reflexive tense; Abraham would be able to "walk himself" as it were, and progress on his own, before God.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 37-38. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 396-397)

Comments and inquiries may be sent to: <mailto:RavKookList@gmail.com>

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**Weekly Halacha**  
**by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt**

**Passing By a Person Davening Shemoneh Esrei**

In order not to disturb the concentration of a person<sup>1</sup> davening Shemoneh Esrei, Shulchan Aruch forbids anyone from passing by (walking) in front—within four amos [approx. 7 feet]—of a person who is davening.<sup>2</sup> Even if there is a table, shtender, another person or any other partition in front of the person who is davening it is still forbidden to pass in front of him, unless the partition is tall and wide enough to block the vision of the person who is davening.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, a person davening Shemoneh Esrei should be careful to daven in areas designated for davening, preferably in his proper seat and near a table or a shtender. One must not daven near the doorway or in middle of an aisle where people are always coming and going, since that will not permit people to walk in front of him as long as he is davening Shemoneh Esrei. If one disregarded this advisory and has now created a bottleneck or a disturbance in the Shul as people cannot pass in front of him, he should be told to move to another place, even though he has not yet finished davening Shemoneh Esrei. If he refuses to move, it is permitted to walk in front of him, when it is necessary to do so.<sup>4</sup>

**Question:** Is it ever permitted to pass directly in front of a person davening Shemoneh Esrei in his designated place?

**Discussion:** Under certain extenuating circumstances, such as for the sake of a “passing mitzvah,” which is a mitzvah that cannot be fulfilled at a later time, or to avoid an embarrassing situation, it is permitted to pass in front of a person davening Shemoneh Esrei if no other option or alternative is available. Some examples:

- \* A child or baby who is disturbing the davening needs to be removed from Shul.
  - \* An acute need to use the bathroom.
  - \* To deliver a public Torah lecture.
  - \* To daven Shemoneh Esrei with a minyan, to answer Kaddish, Barechu or Kedushah, to listen to birkas kohanim or Kerias ha-Torah, but only when these mitzvos will not be able to be fulfilled later.
  - \* To complete or join a minyan.
  - \* To receive an aliyah (after being called up).
  - \* To serve as a sheliach tzibbur or baal koreh when no else is available to do so.
  - \* To avoid a substantial monetary loss or a long delay that may lead to an argument. This leniency should only be relied upon if the person davening Shemoneh Esrei either covers his face with a tallis or davens with his eyes shut, and would therefore not be disturbed.
- In all of the cases listed above one should make every effort to find a way to get to his destination without passing directly in front of the person davening Shemoneh Esrei. It is only when no other alternative exists that he may disregard the prohibition to pass in front of a person davening Shemoneh Esrei.

**Question:** Are there any restriction concerning passing by on the sides or behind a person davening Shemoneh Esrei?

**Discussion:** Some poskim forbid that as well. Their ruling is based on the Kabbalistic concept, quoted by the Zohar, that the Divine Presence (Shechinah) surrounds a person who is davening Shemoneh Esrei; one who enters that holy area is “interfering” (creating a hefsek) between the person davening and the Divine Presence, which is forbidden.<sup>5</sup> L’chatchilah we follow the opinion of these poskim and refrain from entering the four amos of one who is davening, even behind him, and certainly not on either side of him. Still, in case of any pressing need or for the performance of any mitzvah, such as collecting charity, we are lenient and permit passing on the sides or behind a person who is davening Shemoneh Esrei.<sup>6</sup>

**Question:** Is it permitted to take three steps back if the person directly behind is still in midst of davening Shemoneh Esrei?

**Discussion:** Based on the above, it follows that it is forbidden for one who finished davening Shemoneh Esrei to step back three steps if the person

directly behind is still in midst of davening and he will enter his four amos when stepping back.<sup>7</sup> Even if the person still davening is taking an extra long time to finish, and even if he began his Shemoneh Esrei after the congregation began davening, it is still forbidden to step into his four amos.<sup>8</sup>

If one finished his Shemoneh Esrei but must leave and cannot wait for the person directly behind him to finish his Shemoneh Esrei so that he could step back a full three steps, or if he needs to fulfill a mitzvah and cannot wait, he should step back diagonally or sideways or take three small steps, thus avoiding entering the four amos of the person behind them.<sup>9</sup> If those options are not available, he should recite Oseh Shalom without stepping back three steps and then walk away.<sup>10</sup>

Preferably, one should not step back three steps until the person behind him has concluded the entire Shemoneh Esrei and stepped back three steps. But if for some reason he cannot wait, or if he needs to perform a mitzvah, then he may take three steps back as long as person behind him finished his Shemoneh Esrei, including Elokai Netzor, even though he has not yet taken three steps back [either because he is waiting for the person behind him to finish or for any reason].<sup>11</sup> Some poskim go further and permit taking three steps back if the person behind finished Shemoneh Esrei but is still in midst of reciting Elokai Netzor.<sup>12</sup>

**Sitting Near a Person Davening Shemoneh Esrei**

It is forbidden to sit<sup>13</sup> idly within four amos of a person davening Shemoneh Esrei, including on either side of him or behind him. Sitting around doing nothing in such close proximity to a person davening Shemoneh Esrei, appears disrespectful – it is as if he is declaring that he is not joining his fellow in his Service of Hashem.<sup>14</sup>

A minority opinion maintains that sitting directly in front of a person davening Shemoneh Esrei is forbidden even outside of his four amos “as far as the eye could see” (approximately 465 feet). This is because it appears as if the person davening is bowing down to the one sitting directly in front of him. Although the basic Halachah does not follow this opinion,<sup>15</sup> many poskim suggest that it is appropriate to be stringent whenever possible.<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned, the prohibition is to sit idly by while one is davening. Thus a person who is davening any part of the daily tefillah, including “extras” such as korbanos or Pirkei Avos on Shabbos Minchah, may sit down to the side or rear of one who is davening Shemoneh Esrei.<sup>17</sup> Sitting directly in front, however, should be avoided, in deference to the minority opinion mentioned earlier.

Some poskim go even further and permit a person who is studying Torah, or who is writing Torah thoughts, to sit behind a person who is davening Shemoneh Esrei. Under extenuating circumstances they permit him to sit at his side as well.<sup>18</sup>

If it is clearly evident that the person sitting down is doing so because he is ill or elderly, or even if he is otherwise healthy but is presently weak and needs to sit down, e.g., on a public fast day, it is permitted to sit to the rear and sides of one who is davening Shemoneh Esrei.<sup>19</sup> Under extenuating circumstances it is permitted to sit in front of him as well.<sup>20</sup>

It is permitted to sit within four amos of one davening Shemoneh Esrei, even directly in front of him, if there is a partition which is attached to the ground and is at least 35 inches high and 14 inches wide between them.<sup>21</sup>

- 1 Man or woman, adult or child, including a minor who is mature enough to daven with concentration.
- 2 O.C. 102:4. Similar rules apply also to a person reciting the first verse of Shema Yisrael (Beir Halachah, s.v. assur) and one who is reciting Kaddish (Sha’arei Teshuvah 56:1).
- 3 Mishnah Berurah 102:2. Some poskim are more lenient and permit passing in front as long as the partition is attached to the ground, at least 35 inches high and 14 inches wide; Chayei Adam 26:4; Eishel Avraham, O.C. 102; Aruch ha-Shulchan 102:13.
- 4 See Eishel Avraham and Da’as Torah, O.C. 102:4; Halichos Shelomo 1:8-36; Btzeil ha-Chachmah 6:30-31.
- 5 See Mishnah Berurah 102:15, 17. In addition, some poskim are concerned that walking on the side or behind a person who is davening will disturb his concentration as well; see Meiri, Berachos 31b.
- 6 Kaf ha-Chayim 102:27; Minchas Yitzchak 8:10. Aruch ha-Shulchan 102:13 is even more lenient and permits passing behind or to the sides at all times.

- 7 O.C. 102:5. Similarly, it is forbidden to take three steps before one begins Shemoneh Esrei if the person behind him has already begun to daven his Shemoneh Esrei; Halichos Shelomo 1:8-33.
- 8 Mishnah Berurah 102:21.
- 9 Based on Mishnah Berurah 123:13, Aruch ha-Shulchan 123:5, and Kaf ha-Chayim 123:25.
- 10 Halichos Shelomo 1:9-1. See Mishnah Berurah 104:9.
- 11 Halichos Shelomo 1:8-34, based on Mishnah Berurah 97:3, 102:3 and 122:5. See also Ketzos ha-Shulchan 20:12 (Badei ha-Shulchan 26.)
- 12 Aruch ha-Shulchan 102:13; Da'as Torah, O.C. 102
- 13 Leaning heavily, i.e., the person leaning will fall if the item he is leaning on were to be taken away, is considered like sitting; Mishnah Berurah 102:1.
- 14 O.C. 102:1 and Mishnah Berurah 5, based on the Tur. The aforementioned Kabbalistic concept that the four amos surrounding a person who is davening is "holy" and may not be breached applies here as well; see Mishnah Berurah 102:14.
- 15 Peri Chadash, Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav, Tehilah l'Dovid 102:1; Ben Ish Chai, Yisro 6; Aruch ha-Shulchan 102
- 16 Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 18:18; Mishnah Berurah 102:9; Kaf ha-Chayim 102:10.
- 17 O.C. 102:1 and Mishnah Berurah 5. See Kaf ha-Chayim 102:9 who includes Chazaras ha-Shatz as well.
- 18 O.C. 102:1 and Mishnah Berurah 6.
- 19 Mishnah Berurah 102:10-11. See Beis Baruch 26:9.
- 20 Peri Megadim, quoted in Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 102:14.
- 21 Mishnah Berurah 102:2.

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Rabbi Neustadt is the Yoshev Rosh of the Vaad Harabbonim of Detroit and the Av Beis Din of the Beis Din Tzedek of Detroit. He could be reached at dneustadt@cordetroit.com

## How Are Tefillin Retzuos Made? By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

In this week's parsha, Avraham tells the King of Sodom that he (Avraham) will not keep "even a thread or even a shoelace" from the booty of Sodom, although all of Sodom and its populace are rightfully his property as spoils of war. The Gemara teaches that as a reward for this, Avraham's descendants were given two mitzvos, the techeiles thread of tzitzis and the strap of the tefillin. As I have written several articles on the topic of techeiles in the past, this article will discuss the halachos of tefillin straps, and what one should ask about when purchasing them. Although a good quality pair of tefillin should last a lifetime, the straps on the tefillin do wear out and need replacement periodically.

Of what are Tefillin made?

All parts of tefillin and all other devarim she'bi'kedusha (holy items) must come from kosher species, although not necessarily from an animal that was slaughtered in a kosher way (Shabbos 108a; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 32:12). The different parts of tefillin come from dissimilar parts of the hide of the animal, the variation being the thickness of the hide and how it is processed.

Tefillin have three major components:

1. The Parshiyos (singular, parsha). These are the parchments, which are the processed skin on which the sofer carefully writes the four sections of the Torah that are inserted into Tefillin. For the tefillin shel yad (arm tefillin), all four parshiyos are written on one piece of parchment, whereas for the tefillin shel rosh (head tefillin), each parsha is written on a separate piece of parchment.
2. The Batim (singular, bayis). These are the housing of the parshiyos and are made from thick hide. The bayis itself has three subcomponents. (a) The Ketzitzah, the cube-shaped box inside which the parshiyos are placed. (Note that it is perfectly kosher and sometimes preferred for the height of the ketzitzah to be greater than its other two dimensions; however, most pairs of tefillin are made with a cubic ketzitzah. I have written another article in which I explained this issue more thoroughly.) (b) The Titura, the square base on which the ketzitzah rests. (c) The Ma'avarta (Aramaic for "bridge"), the extension of the titura through which the straps are inserted. In good quality tefillin, the entire bayis, that is the ketzitzah, titura, and ma'avarta, are all made from one piece of hide.

3. The Retzuos (singular, retzua), the straps, which are made from softer leather than that used for the batim.

For the sake of Tefillin!

Tefillin must be manufactured "lishma," for the sake of the mitzvah. In practical terms, this means that an observant Jew begins each process and declares that the production is for the sake of the mitzvah of tefillin (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 32:8).

The contemporary process of tanning hide for parchment, batim and straps is a multi-stage process, similar to the method used to tan leather for mundane uses, such as belts, shoes and handbags. However, as I mentioned above, the parchment, batim and straps for tefillin must be tanned lishmah, for the sake of the mitzvah (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 32:37 and 33:3). For this reason, it is preferable that each step be performed, or at least begun, by an observant Jew lishma. Because of this, one of the questions to be ascertained when purchasing tefillin is to what extent an observant Jew was involved in the processing of the hide. This issue impacts on the question of machine-made vs. handmade retzuos, which I will discuss shortly, and on many other important questions of tefillin manufacture.

Painting

After the tanning of the retzuos is completed, they are painted jet-black to fulfill a halacha le'Moshe mi'Sinai (Menachos 35a). The paint used may contain only kosher ingredients, and the painting of the retzuos must also be performed lishmah (Mishnah Berurah 33:18).

Is there a halachic preference for handmade retzuos?

In earlier days, tanning retzuos and other leather items involved salting the hide and then soaking it in lime wash. Today, although both salt and lime are used in the tanning process, most of the tanning of retzuos is usually accomplished by the gradual, automatic adding of other chemicals to the soaking leather after the salt and lime have been rinsed out. Thus, although early poskim ruled that placing the lime into the water lishmah is sufficient to make retzuos lishmah, this may not be true today. For this reason, most contemporary poskim rule that one should use "avodas yad" retzuos, meaning that the extra chemicals added to the water were done lishmah by a Torah-observant person (Zichron Eliyahu). However, most retzuos sold for tefillin are not avodas yad.

According to my information, most retzuos are painted by transporting them on a conveyor belt through a large, electrically powered paint sprayer. This provides an additional reason to use only avodas yad retzuos. Most Torah-observant Jews use hand matzos for the seder because of concern that machine matzos are not considered lishmah. (I am not ruling that machine matzohs are a problem for Seder use. Most poskim contend that they are fine.) In all likelihood, the manufacture and painting of machine made retzuos has greater halachic concerns than the shaylos involved in machine matzos, because of several facts, including that the processing of retzuos is not one continuous process, as I explained above. (In addition, there are and were halachic authorities who preferred use of machine matzohs because they are baked much faster, and therefore might reduce the chance of chometz. This is not a factor in the manufacture of tefillin retzuos – there is only an advantage to use of handmade retzuos, and, to the best of my knowledge, no disadvantage.) When one realizes that the mitzvah of eating matzah is only once a year, yet most people use only hand matzohs rather than machine-made, whereas the tefillin will IY"Y be worn daily for decades, I believe the choice is obvious.

Checking one's retzuos

It is important to check periodically that the retzuos on one's tefillin are still completely black and are not cracked or faded. The Mishnah Berurah, whom many people consider the final halachic authority in these areas of halacha, rules that the entire length of the retzua must always be black (Biur Halacha 33:3 s.v. retzuos). (There are authorities who disagree, most notably Rav Yosef Chayim Sonnenfeld, who contend that it is adequate if most of the retzua is black.) Also check that the retzuos are black all the way to their tip. Be particular to check that they are black near where the knot is tightened, because at that point the paint often rubs out. One should also check that the retzua is still wide enough near the knot and that the knot of the shel yad is touching the ketzitzah of the tefillin. If it is not, this can be corrected by a knowledgeable sofer.

While checking the retzuos, check that the batim, titura, and stitches are all perfectly square. This means that the width and the length appear to be the same length to the naked eye, and that there are no dents, nicks, or projections along the sides or in the corners of the bayis. The back corners of the batim often become rounded because of hats or taleisim that are constantly rubbing against them. By the way, the edges of the Ma'avarta do not need to be square.

If the stitch of the titura is not taut or it loops in the middle, it is not kosher, and you should contact your batim expert. With time or damage, the stitches often loosen or move, or the batim get banged or nicked and are no longer properly square. Your local batim expert has the equipment and know-how to repair them.

Know a batim macher or batim repair expert. Every major Jewish community should have at least one person who is trained and has the equipment to repair batim. Just as the community has shatnez testers, a mohel, a butcher, a mikvah for dishes, sefarim stores, and talmidei chachamim who are trained to check mezuzos, a community must have a talmid chacham who is trained properly in the repair of batim.

If the retzuos are no longer fully black, blacken them with kosher tefillin paint. Everyone who wears tefillin should have access to kosher tefillin paint or markers.

Depending on where you live, this might be an easy item to purchase and usually comes either in a pen looking like a marker or in a small container reminiscent of correction fluid.

If someone's retzuos are cracking in several places, he should consider replacing them.

Before painting the retzuos, one must state that he is doing it l'sheim kedushas tefillin. I once wrote a halachic teshuvah (in Hebrew) in which I concluded that someone who painted the faded parts of their retzuos, but forgot to say that they were doing it lishma, has not invalidated the tefillin and they may be worn as they are. Still, one should lechatchilah (the preferred way) be careful to say that one is blackening them l'sheim kedushas tefillin.

Must the side of the retzua be black?

The side of the retzua that lies on the skin need not be dyed at all. There is an opinion that the edges of the retzuos should also be painted black (Keses HaSofer 23:2). However, this opinion is not accepted in halachic practice (see, for example, Mishnah Berurah 33:24 quoting Pri Megadim in Eishel Avraham 33:7).

Thoroughly black

Some manufacturers of tefillin retzuos soak the entire leather in a kosher black solution so that the entire thickness of the strap is now black. From my own observation, how black the inner part of the retzua gets when this is done varies tremendously from batch to batch. Although I see no halachic requirement in this additional process, there is a practical advantage that is up to the consumer to decide. As the retzuos age, they develop more cracks. If the retzua was originally soaked in black solution, then when the leather cracks, the retzua still appears black and does not require painting. However, if the retzua is not soaked, the cracked area now appears light colored and requires painting. I have found constantly checking to see whether my retzuos are still black to be annoying, and therefore, when I purchase retzuos, I ask for those that have been soaked black to avoid this issue. From a consumer perspective, I think the added price is worthwhile, because it is probable that these retzuos can be used for a longer period of time before they become so difficult to paint constantly that one replaces them.

How wide are my retzuos?

The retzuos should be about ½ inch wide. When purchasing new retzuos, they should be wider, so that they remain the proper width even after they become stretched out.

Where should I buy my tefillin?

The individual selling tefillin and tefillin accessories (such as replacement retzuos) should be a halachically reliable person, and preferably a talmid chacham. Furthermore, he should be fully familiar not only with the halachos of tefillin, but also with the details of tefillin manufacture. From my personal experience, it is not uncommon that a person selling tefillin, although extremely ehrlich, is totally unfamiliar with the halachic issues and concerns involved. Unfortunately, many sofrim and rabbanim lack sufficient training in the practical details of tefillin manufacture.

Where not to buy your tefillin!

I'll share with you one frightening story of my personal experience. I was once "tipped off" by someone about a manufacturer of tefillin batim who was personally not observant. Shortly thereafter, I realized that an errand would require me to be in the same city in which this manufacturer was located. I presented myself to the owner, who was clearly not observant, as a rabbi from America looking for a supplier for tefillin for his congregation, but who would like to familiarize himself with the process of how tefillin are made. One might think that the manufacturer might be interested in the possibility of making some sales, but, indeed, he would not even let me past his front door! When one realizes the myriad details involved in tefillin manufacture that require yiras shamayim, one grasps how unlikely it is that these tefillin were kosher. Yet, lots of people are purchasing these tefillin.

Ask for what you want

Assuming that one is purchasing tefillin from someone familiar with the halachos and practical aspects of tefillin manufacture, be specific what level of tefillin kashrus you are looking for. If you don't tell him that you want tefillin that are kosher lechatchilah, you might receive tefillin that only meet the very minimum standards of kashrus. A person who discriminately buys food with high kashrus standards should not settle for less when purchasing tefillin. Such a person should order "kosher mehudar tefillin," or "kosher tefillin with extra hiddurim." These descriptions may also affect other questions that we have not discussed in this article, such as the quality of the writing of the parshiyos or the source of the batim.

How to maintain your tefillin

Maintaining your tefillin is fairly easy. Never leave your tefillin in direct sunlight, in a very hot place, or inside your car during the daytime. As much as possible, your hair should be dry while wearing your tefillin. Protect the corners of the batim by leaving the cover on the shel yad. (It should be noted that some poskim contend that one should not place these covers on the shel yad while one is wearing them or while making the bracha. However, since most poskim permit leaving these covers on, one may be lenient.)

Tefillin are one of the special signs that Hashem gave the Jewish people, and we should certainly excel in treating this mitzvah with the appropriate dignity. When Yidden request that their tefillin be mehadrin only, they demonstrate their reverence for the sign that bonds us to Hashem.

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Please address all comments and requests to [Hamelaket@Gmail.com](mailto:Hamelaket@Gmail.com)