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Rabbi Yissocher Frand :: Parshas Lech Lecha

A Tale of Two Journeys

The parsha begins with Hashem telling Avram, "Go to the Land that I will show you." [Bereshis 12:1] Rabbi Yochanan teaches (in the Medrash) the reason Hashem did not tell Avram where he was supposed to be going ahead of time was "to give him reward for each and every step." [Since the mitzvah was Lech Lecha (go), for every step he received a new mitzvah!]

Rav Baruch Baer, the great Rosh Yeshiva from Kaminetz, gives a "lomdishe teretz" [an explanation based on sophisticated Talmudic analysis] to this teaching of Rabbi Yochanan. He explains that if the Ribono shel Olam would have told Avram simply, "Go to the Land of Canaan" then that would have been the definition of the command and each step he took along the way would merely be a hechsher mitzvah [preparation for accomplishing the mitzvah i.e. – arrival in Eretz Yisrael]. However, now that the mitzvah was formulated as "Go" without being told where to go, then each step of the way was a new mitzvah fulfillment.

If this is true, then we must ask ourselves the following question: There are two times in the Torah where we find the expression "Lech Lecha". The first is our parsha [Bereshis 12:1] and the second is the parsha of the Akeida [the Binding of Yitzchak] [Bereshis 22:2] where Avram was directed specifically to go to the Land of Moriah (the location of the future Beis HaMikdash). So let us ask ourselves – why by the Akeida did Hashem not also say to Avraham, "Take Yitzchak and go to the place that I will show you"? Just like the Ribono shel Olam is interested in giving Avram reward for every single step on the way to the Land of Canaan and therefore did not specify the destination, let the same formula be utilized regarding the command to go to the Akeida?

The Bei Chiya cites an interesting Maharal in his Nesivos Olam. The Maharal there says that if you have a Succah that is half a mile away and another Succah

that is a mile away, it is not a bigger mitzvah to walk to the Succah that is a mile away. The mitzvah is to eat in the Succah. How you get there is independent of the mitzvah and therefore there is no extra mitzvah to go to the Succah that is farther away. However, the Maharal says, if there is a shul a half mile away and a second shul a mile away it IS a bigger mitzvah to go to the further shul (all other things being equal) because every single step is a separate mitzvah. What is the difference between the Succah and the shul? The Maharal explains: Hashem's presence is in the shul. A Beis HaKnesses is a miniature Beis HaMikdash and therefore when a person is walking to shul, he is being drawn to Hashem and the very walking is a type of joining (chibbur) and clinging (deveikus) to Him." When you are going to shul, you are going to be with the Ribono shel Olam. The walking is in itself a mitzvah.

If this is true, we can understand the difference between the two Lech Lecha commands. In our parsha, Hashem wanted to give Avram reward for every single step, so He told him, "Go to the Land I will show you (hiding the destination)." Why then by the Akaida, did He tell Avraham, "Go to the Land of the Moriah (specifying the destination)?" The answer is that there Avraham also received reward for every single step because the Divine Presence of G-d was dwelling on Har HaMoriah. Therefore, since Avraham was going to Hashem, by definition, every single step was a separate mitzvah. Therefore, there was no need to hide the goal of where he was supposed to go.

Descendants Who Will Be Like The Stars – Each One Unique

At the beginning of Bereshis Chapter 15, the Torah says: "After these events, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying 'Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.' And Avram said 'My L-rd, Hashem/Elokim: What can You give me being that I go childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer from Damascus?' Then Avram said, 'See to me You have given no offspring and see, my steward inherits me...' Suddenly the word of Hashem came to him, saying 'That one will not inherit you; only the one who shall come forth from within you shall inherit you.' And He took him outside and said, 'Gaze, now, towards the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!' And He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be!'" [Bereshis 15:1-5]

The Gemara [Yoma 28b] has an interesting homiletic teaching based on the expression "Eliezer of Damascus." The Gemara interprets the Hebrew word for Damascus (DaMeSeK) as an acronym for Doleh uMaShKeh m'Toras Rabbo l'acherim (he draws out water and gives drink [i.e. – he would learn and teach] from the Torah of his master [i.e. – Avram] to others

Eliezer was a faithful disciple of the Patriarch Avraham who said over for others the teachings and practices of his teacher. He was not just a porter. He was Avram's publicist and right hand man, a stand-in for the teacher!

If that is the case, the above quoted pasuk seems strange. Avram asks desperately "What is going to become of me? I have no heir only the steward of my house who will (apparently) inherit me." Then he throws in "He is Eliezer of Damascus" which the Talmud interprets homiletically as if to say "He knows every piece of Torah that I ever said; he transmits it faithfully to others; he is my personal stand-in." How does that fit in with Avram's desperate plea for an heir?

The Rabbeinu Bechaya on the pasuk "Gaze now toward the Heavens and count the stars... so shall your offspring be." says a beautiful idea. He writes that just as every star is unique in color and shape, so too will be the case with the Sages of Israel. They will be individuals, not clones of one another. They will each be unique in spirituality and unique in terms of their insight. The Sages of Israel, writes Rabbeinu Bechaya are not going to be monolithic. They are not going to have all the same ideas and all the same components of wisdom.

The Chozech (Seer) of Lublin said, that now we can understand what Avraham Avinu meant. Avraham said, I have no children, I have only Eliezer. Eliezer knows my Torah, but he is merely a parrot. He is just a clone of me. I do not want that from my descendants. I want my descendants to be different, to add something. I want each one to be an individual. I do not want a "one size fits all" Yiddishkeit. There need to be "different strokes for different folks" – just as no two faces are exactly alike so too no two opinions are exactly alike.

Yes, Eliezer knows all my Torah, but that is not what I am seeking. If I am going to build a Nation, I need offspring that will be more than just exact replicas of their ancestor. When Yitzchak was born, his mode of Service to the Almighty was totally different from that of his father. Avraham's approach was Chessed

[Outward directed Kindness]; Yitzchak's approach was Gevurah [Inner directed Strength]. When Yaakov Avinu was born, he too was totally different and each of his twelve sons had their own unique path and method of Divine Service. We have 12 windows in our synagogues – representing these 12 approaches to Judaism, represented by the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

This was Avraham's request when he complained that he did not have an heir – only Eliezer of Damascus. He wanted diversity among his offspring, not just clones. To that, Hashem responded, "Go outside and look at the stars. Thus will your offspring be." Do not worry. You will have children and they will be different from one another. Oh, will they be different! You will have Gedolei Yisrael [great men of Israel] who will have differing opinions. This one will stress this aspect and this one will stress that aspect. Do not worry, Avraham, you will have descendants whose differences will span as broad a spectrum as the light of the stars.

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Four Dimensions of the Journey

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Within the first words that God addresses to the bearer of a new covenant, there are already hints as to the nature of the heroism he would come to embody. The multi-layered command "Lech lecha – go forth" contains the seeds of Abraham's ultimate vocation.

Rashi, following an ancient exegetic tradition, translates the phrase as "Journey for yourself."^[1] According to him, God is saying "Travel for your own benefit and good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not have the merit of having children." Sometimes we have to give up our past in order to acquire a future. In his first words to Abraham, God was already intimating that what seems like a sacrifice is, in the long run, not so. Abraham was about to say goodbye to the things that mean most to us – land, birthplace and parental home, the places where we belong. He was about to make a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a leap into the unknown. To be able to make that leap involves trust – in Abraham's case, trust not in visible power but in the voice of the invisible God. At the end of it, however, Abraham would discover that he had achieved something he could not have done otherwise. He would give birth to a new nation whose greatness consisted precisely in the ability to live by that voice and create something new in the history of mankind. "Go for yourself" – believe in what you can become.

Another interpretation, more midrashic, takes the phrase to mean "Go with yourself" – meaning, by travelling from place to place you will extend your influence not over one land but many:

When the Holy One said to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house..." what did Abraham resemble? A jar of scent with a tight-fitting lid put away in a corner so that its fragrance could not go forth. As soon as it was moved from that place and opened, its fragrance began to spread. So the Holy One said to Abraham, "Abraham, many good deeds are in you. Travel about from place to place, so that the greatness of your name will go forth in My world."^[2]

Abraham was commanded to leave his place in order to testify to the existence of a God not bounded by place – Creator and Sovereign of the entire universe. Abraham and Sarah were to be like perfume, leaving a trace of their presence wherever they went. Implicit in this midrash is the idea that the fate of the first Jews already prefigured that of their descendants^[3] who would be scattered throughout the world in order to spread knowledge of God throughout the world. Unusually, exile is seen here not as punishment but as a necessary corollary of a faith that sees God everywhere. Lech lecha means "Go with yourself" – your beliefs, your way of life, your faith.

A third interpretation, this time more mystical, takes the phrase to mean, "Go to yourself." The Jewish journey, said R. David of Lelov, is a journey to the root of the soul.^[4] In the words of R. Zushya of Hanipol, "When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, why were you not Moses? They will ask me, Zushya, why

were you not Zushya?"^[5] Abraham was being asked to leave behind all the things that make us someone else – for it is only by taking a long and lonely journey that we discover who we truly are. "Go to yourself."

There is, however, a fourth interpretation: "Go by yourself." Only a person willing to stand alone, singular and unique, can worship the God who is alone, singular and unique. Only one able to leave behind the natural sources of identity – home, family, culture and society – can encounter God who stands above and beyond nature. A journey into the unknown is one of the greatest possible expressions of freedom. God wanted Abraham and his children to be a living example of what it is to serve the God of freedom, in freedom, for the sake of freedom.

Lech Lecha means: Leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable, unfree, delimited. Leave behind the social forces, the familial pressures, the circumstances of your birth. Abraham's children were summoned to be the people that defied the laws of nature because they refused to define themselves as the products of nature. That is not to say that economic or biological or psychological forces have no part to play in human behaviour. They do. But with sufficient imagination, determination, discipline and courage we can rise above them. Abraham did. So, at most times, did his children.

Those who live within the laws of history are subject to the laws of history. Whatever is natural, said Maimonides, is subject to disintegration and decline. That is what has happened to virtually every civilisation that has appeared on the world's stage. Abraham, however, was to become the father of an am olam, an eternal people, that would neither decay nor decline, a people willing to stand outside the laws of nature. What for other nations are innate – land, home, family – in Judaism are subjects of religious command. They have to be striven for. They involve a journey. They are not given at the outset, nor can they be taken for granted. Abraham was to leave behind the things that make most people and peoples what they are, and lay the foundations for a land, a Jewish home and a family structure, responsive not to economic forces, biological drives and psychological conflicts but to the word and will of God.

Lech Lecha in this sense means being prepared to take an often lonely journey: "Go by yourself." To be a child of Abraham is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age. In an era of polytheism, it meant seeing the universe as the product of a single creative will – and therefore not meaningless but coherent and meaningful. In an era of slavery it meant refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, but instead challenging it in the name of God. When power was worshipped, it meant constructing a society that cared for the powerless, the widow, orphan and stranger. During centuries in which the mass of mankind was sunk in ignorance, it meant honouring education as the key to human dignity and creating schools to provide universal literacy. When war was the test of manhood, it meant striving for peace. In ages of radical individualism like today, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what we share; not what we buy but what we give; that there is something higher than appetite and desire – namely the call that comes to us, as it came to Abraham, from outside ourselves, summoning us to make a contribution to the world.

"Jews," wrote Andrew Marr, "really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it."^[6] It is that courage to travel alone if necessary, to be different, to swim against the tide, to speak in an age of relativism of the absolutes of human dignity under the sovereignty of God, that was born in the words Lech Lecha. To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Abraham's journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope.

Shabbat Shalom

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Rabbi Yisreol Reisman – Parshas Lech Lecha 5777

1. As we prepare for Parshas Lech Lecha, a Parsha which is actually the beginning of Avraham Avinu and Klal Yisrael. I would like to begin with just an insight into Lech Lecha. Lech Lecha – Rashi tells us that the Derech of somebody who travels is that it is M'ma'ait, it makes him have less success in

all areas of life. That is why when Avraham Avinu traveled, the Ribono Shel Olam compensated by giving him a Beracha despite the fact that he would leave. That is what Rashi says on 12:2 (**לפי שהדרך גומת לשלשה דברים, ממעטה פה ובה, ממעטה את הממו, וממעטה את השם**). This idea that where a person is all of his life he is most comfortable, is the place where he has the greatest Hatzlacha is an important lesson for our generation.

There was an incident many years ago, where a man in Eretz Yisrael needed serious surgery and he was advised by the Chazon Ish to travel to Belgium for the surgery as there was an excellent surgeon there. This is despite the fact that in Eretz Yisrael his surgery would be free as he was covered by the Kupat L'eumi and if he would go to Belgium he would have to pay a lot of money for the surgery. Nevertheless, the Chazon Ish said to go to the better doctor.

A few days later this man came back to the Chazon Ish very excited and wanted a Beracha. He said Hashgacha Pratis. That surgeon will be in Eretz Yisrael in the coming week and he has agreed to do the surgery for me here in Eretz Yisrael. The Chazon Ish said to him no don't do the surgery here. Wait until he gets back to Belgium. He should do it in the place that he normally does the surgery. A person in his usual surroundings does a better job. Therefore, the Chazon Ish told him despite the cost, this is Pikuach Nefesh, let him do the surgery in the place that he is most comfortable. The Chazon Ish is actually a Gemara in Bava Kamma which says that when one person damages another he cannot compel him to go to a doctor out of his normal place. A doctor in his normal place performs better.

This is true in general about all of us. When we are in our normal surroundings and content in our normal surroundings we perform the best. The custom today of Bachurim to travel to different Yeshivas and switch from one place to another on a constant basis is not something that is really conducive to a person having Hatzlacha in learning. Sometimes a person has to change, I am not categorically ruling it out. But the fact that people are constantly changing and switching, it takes away this idea of where a person is comfortable and where a person belongs.

It's a psychology, it's the mentality of Americans to not be content where they are. To move and go from one place to look for things better. Rav Pam used to say, by Ana Hashem Hoshia Na we Shukkle the Lulav. By Ana Hashem Hatzlicha Na we don't Shukkle the Lulav. He said that is a metaphor for life. If you are in trouble and you need a Yeshua, move, Shukkle.

Ana Hashem Hatzlicha Na, you want more Hatzlacha? Stay where you are. Don't start Shukkling and moving just for more Hatzlacha. The fact that you stay in one place is itself a tremendous Yeshua. Rav Pam would often say you're looking for the city of happiness? The city of happiness is in the state of mind. Where you are, be content. Be happy with what you have. Your eyes shouldn't be looking all over the place. It is not Mussar, it is good advice. Haderech Mima'etes. It is the lesson of the first Nisayon that Avraham Avinu had to move from where he was. Moving is not simple.

2. Let's move on to a second thought. In the Navi Shiur, today we are learning Sefer Yehoshua in Perek 24 which is Yehoshua's last gathering of Klal Yisrael. He is Kores Bris, he makes a final farewell Bris with them and where does he do it? In Shechem. Not in Shilo where the Mishkan was, but in Shechem. Why in Shechem?

The Radak writes in the beginning of Perek 24 from our Parsha that can be found in 12:6 (**ונגן עבר אברם, בארץ, עד מקום שכם**). The first place that a Jew (Avraham Avinu) resided was in Shechem, that is the place of Haschala, that is a place of beginning and so therefore, Yehoshua who was being Kores Bris with the Jews as the first generation Jews came to Eretz Yisrael he made the Krisus Bris in the same place in Shechem.

The Radak adds that we find later that Yaakov Avinu, the first place that he purchases land was in Shechem. Ad Kan the Radak. But this is a question. Shechem is called a city Hamuchan L'puronios. Shechem is called a city that is very challenging to live in. Why should Shechem be the first place that Avraham Avinu and later Yaakov Avinu are located in Eretz Yisrael. The first place Avraham resides, the first place that Yaakov purchases. I don't know, but Ulai this is a source for the Chazal that Eretz Yisrael is Nikneh B'yissurin. That someone who goes to Eretz Yisrael is Nikneh B'yissurin, he comes there and he is challenged. Avraham Avinu came and he was challenged with a hunger. Eretz

Yisrael is Nikneh B'yissurin. It starts in Shechem in a place that doesn't always have the best results.

Rav Yonason Eibeshutz writes that when Avraham Avinu came, he was ridiculed. He was told you are coming here and telling everyone to serve G-d, Hashem told you to come here? Look there is a famine. You don't have what to eat!

Zagt Rav Yonason Eibeshutz, the Ribono Shel Olam is not looking for fair weather friends. The people who go to Eretz Yisrael because things are wonderful there, things are easy there. If you are going because you are a fair weather friend and when it gets rough you give up. A friend is someone who sticks with you through thick and thin, through difficulty. Eretz Yisrael is Nikneh B'yissurin. People who go to Eretz Yisrael, Hashem Yishmor Osam. It starts with difficulty, that is the Yissurin of the Haschala and like Avraham Avinu, he had the Nisyonos and he passed them and afterwards he had a wonderful life. Kain Hein Hadevarim. And so, one lesson from Lech Lecha and one lesson from (**ויעבר אברם, בארץ, עד מקום שכם**) and now a global lesson on this week's Parsha.

3. This comes from a Sefer B'air Ra'i in which he collects that in this week's Parsha we find for the first time numerous places where the Posuk says something Al Sheim Ha'asid. The Posuk talks about things that happen using terminology of things that happen in the future.

We had occasionally in Beraishis a reference to a place that had a name that was given later. But here is the first time that we have things that actually happen Al Sheim Ha'asid. I could enumerate seven such places in this week's Parsha.

In 12:6 the Posuk I just mentioned (**ויעבר אברם, בארץ, עד מקום שכם**). Rashi says why did he go there? (**הזהר פל על בני יעקב?**). Because of something in the future. It also says in the same Posuk (**עד אלון מזקה**). Again Rashi tells us Al Sheim Ha'asid that Har Grizim and Har Eival are there. When you go to Shechem you can see Har Grizim and Har Eival in the distance. So once again the Posuk that describes Avraham's travel is Al Sheim Ha'asid.

In 12:8 (**ונתנו שעתידין בניו להכשל שם על עון עכו**). Rashi says It was again something that would happen in the future that caused Avraham's behavior.

In 14:3 (**לאחר זמן ונמשך הים לתוכו ונעשה ים המלח**). Rashi says referring to something in the future.

In 14:7 (**ויבאו אל-עין מישפט, הוא קדר**). Rashi says Al Sheim Ha'asid. Why is this place called Mai Shafat? (**עמץ מישפט**). That is the place of Mai Miriva.

In 14:14 (**עד-דן**). He ran until Dan. Rashi says (**שם תשכח שארה שעתידין בניי**). He saw in the future that that would be a place called Dan where there would be an Eigel Ha'zahav.

In 14:15 (**עד-חוּר**). Again Rashi says (**חוּר**) is a place because it would have Din. My point is that we have numerous Pesukim when we first meet Avraham Avinu of things that happened Al Sheim Ha'asid. Of something that will happen in the future.

The Gemara in Maseches Kesuvos 10b (15 lines from the bottom) says (**ומי כתב קרא לא לעתיד**) does it say Pesukim Al Sheim Ha'asid? The Gemara brings a Posuk. Why is the Gemara Matmia (**ומי כתב קרא לעתיד**)? We find by Avraham Avinu plenty of references of things that he does Al Sheim Ha'asid?

For this I would like to share with you a thought which may explain why it happens frequently by Avraham Avinu and why the Gemara in Kesuvos doesn't go to Avraham Avinu as the source and it goes to a Posuk in Beraishis as the source (**כלתיב ושם הנהר השלישי חדקל הוא ההולך לדמת אשור**). Because by Avraham Avinu and Klal Yisrael it is not a Chiddush that things happen Al Sheim Ha'asid.

Over Sukkos I heard of a Yesod that Rav Hutner said often. As far as I know it is not found in the Pachad Yitzchok although it is in the Mamarim of his son in law Rav Yonason David. The Yesod is the concept of Ohr Hachozeh. Ohr Hachozeh literally means a reflecting light. Rav Hutner said that Klal Yisrael is Chativa Achas, one big unit. Not only in space, not only different people, but the past, present and the future is all one story of Klal Yisrael. The future, the things that will happen later shine back on the past, affect the past. Outside of the normal boundaries of time, something that will take place in the future has its own importance, its own references, its own Shaychus to something that is in the present. It is called Ohr Hachozeh.

The best example is in Chazal where a certain location has a Zechus or a challenge because of something that will happen in the future. In our lives we know that there are times where future events, after they happen are seen as something that was led up to with a tremendous Siyata Dishmaya. Ohr Hachozair is an ability of future events to affect past events. Exactly how that applies in a person's life I don't know because we live in the present and not in the future. But in learning Divrei Chazal and Divrei Hanavi and Chumash, and seeing the story of Avraham Avinu and how intertwined it was with things that would happen to his descendants years later, we see an extraordinary plan of the existence of Klal Yisrael through the generations, through all of the years that go by. We hope that there will be Siyata Dishmaya where we will come to see the ultimate plan.

The ultimate plan, Rav Chaim Volozhiner said that the last station will be America. There has to be Torah in America for Moshiach to come. These are things we hope to see as one big picture.

4. Let me end with a question of the week. At the beginning of the Parsha in 12:3 (**אֶתְנָאָרְכָה, מִבְּרִכָּךְ, וְמַלְאֲכֵיךְ, אָאָרְךָ**). Hashem says to Avraham Avinu I will bless those that bless you and curse those who curse you. The Posuk ends (, בְּבָרְכֵי כָּל־שָׁפֹת הָאָרֶץ). Rashi says that people will say to their children you should be like Avraham Avinu. (**וְבָרְכוּ בָּם, כִּי כָל־שָׁפֹת הָאָרֶץ**).

The question is if all (**כָל־שָׁפֹת הָאָרֶץ**) will say to their children you should be like Avraham then who are the (**אֲשֶׁר־בְּלִקְבָּן**) who are the people who curse that Hashem will curse. If everyone is saying to this child be like Avraham? It is really a trick question. Maybe someone will come up with the answer. It sounds like a good question.

Wishing absolutely everybody a wonderful Shabbos and a meaningful Shabbos!

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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The pace of the narrative of the Torah abruptly changes with the events described in this week's reading. Until now the Torah has dealt with large periods of time and many many generations and different numbers of human beings and nations. It concerns itself apparently with a broad overview of the origins of human civilization and of the formation of societies, tribes and nations. Its narrative confirmed the idea expressed so vividly in the story of the building of the tower of Babel, that the individual human being was relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of things and that individuals mattered little in the development of the course of civilization and nation building. All of this dramatically changes with the appearance of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah.

The Torah now dwells on details and the lives of individuals, their hopes and disappointments, their struggles and achievements. The story of the individual thus becomes the story of the world in its entirety. Judaism teaches us that the life of an individual is really to be considered the life of the world itself. We become privy to the innermost thoughts and aspirations of Abraham and Sarah. We read of their great trials and the vicissitudes they endure in following the path of goodness and holiness in a world that was corrupted by idolatry and poisoned by violence and greed.

The story of mankind becomes a stand-alone narrative. Even though the big picture is certainly in the background, it is the actions and beliefs of individuals that truly set the course for the further development of civilization and human kind.

How often do we feel insignificant and of little consequence in the overall scheme of society, government and world affairs. After all, in a world where millions of votes are required to win a major election in democratic societies or where the rule of police and government crushes individualism in totalitarian societies, of what value is there to what an individual may think or believe. But all of history has shown us that it is the individual that sets the course for human civilization and that literally a handful of people are responsible for the great changes, defeats and definitive struggles that have marked human history

from its onset until today. I think this is the strongest lesson of the narrative of the lives of our father and mother, Abraham and Sarah, as recorded for us in the immortal words of the Torah.

The prophet Isaiah will characterize our father Abraham as being an individual, one, alone and different from all others. In this way his greatness has made him the founder of the people who are smaller in numbers but enormous in influence and who have fueled the progress of human civilization over the many millennia. The rabbis have taught us that we are to attempt to be Abraham and Sarah in each generation of human society. We are to represent what is right and moral, lasting and valuable, to be righteous individuals in a world that often loses its moral compass and godly direction.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

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Rav Kook Torah

Lech Lecha: "Be Complete!"

Chanan Morrison (ravkooklist@gmail.com)

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)

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Should I daven for rain when we need it?

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Whereas in *chutz la'retz* we do not recite *vesein tal umatar* (the prayer for rain added to the bracha of *Boreich Aleinu* in the weekday *shmonah esrei*) until the evening of December fourth (the exact date varies upon the particular year), people in Eretz Yisroel begin reciting this prayer on the Seventh of Marcheshvan. This difference in practice leads to

many interesting shaylos. One, which is discussed in an article that is posted on the website RabbiKaganoff.com, concerns someone who is traveling during this time period from Eretz Yisroel to chutz la'aretz or vice versa.

There is halachic discussion regarding the question whether the two passages that we recite in the shemoneh esrei, mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar, should be recited according to local conditions. This week's article discusses the general topic and emphasizes the questions germane to it in the northern hemisphere. Next week, I will discuss the history and question concerning what one does in the southern hemisphere.

Question:

If a city's residents need rain at a different time in the year, when do they recite vesein tal umatar?

Introduction

Although we are all aware that we begin reciting mashiv haruach umorid hagashem on Shemini Atzeres and vesein tal umatar either on the evening of December fourth in chutz la'aretz) or on the Seventh of Marcheshvan in Eretz Yisroel, and that we cease reciting both mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar on the first day of Pesach, most people are surprised to discover that there is an extensive halachic controversy whether this is the correct procedure in most of the world. Specifically, as we will soon see, there are some early authorities who rule that one should pray for rain whenever it is usual to have rain in the region where one is located. Although we do not rule this way, there are ramifications for someone who errs and recites the wrong prayer in such locations.

Local needs

If a city's residents need rain at a different time in the year, when do they recite vesein tal umatar? The Gemara (Taanis 14b) raises this question, citing the following story:

"The people of the city of Nineveh (in contemporary Iraq) sent a shaylah to Rebbe: Our city requires rain, even in the middle of the summer. Should we be treated like individuals and recite vesein tal umatar in the brocha of Shma Koleinu, or like a community, and recite it during the brocha of Boreich Aleinu (birchos hashanim)? Rebbe responded that they are considered individuals and should request rain during the brocha of Shma Koleinu."

The Gemara subsequently demonstrates that the tanna Rabbi Yehudah disagreed with Rebbe, and contended that they should recite vesein tal umatar in the brocha of birchos hashanim. This controversy recurred in the times of the early amora'im, approximately one hundred years later, when the disputants were Rav Nachman and Rav Sheishes. Rav Sheishes contended, like Rebbe, that the Nineveh residents should recite vesein tal umatar in shomei'a tefillah, whereas Rav Nachman ruled that they should recite it in birchos hashanim, following Rabbi Yehudah. The question is then resolved finally by the Gemara, which concludes that it should be recited in shomei'a tefillah, and this is the conclusion of all halachic authorities.

Why not add?

Germane to understanding this passage of Gemara, a concern is raised by the rishonim. There is a halacha that one can add to the supplication brochos of the shemoneh esrei personal requests appropriate to the theme of that brocha. For example, one may include a prayer for the recovery of an individual during the brocha of refa'einu, or a request for assistance in one's Torah study in the brocha of chonein hadaas. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 8a) rules that someone who needs livelihood may add a personal supplication for this to the brocha of birchos hashanim. The question is that if one may add his personal request for parnasa, why can the people of Nineveh not add their own personal requests for rain at this point in the davening?

The rishonim present two answers to this question:

1. Since rain can be harmful in other places, one may not pray for rain in birchos hashanim for one's own needs when rain may be detrimental in a different locale. A request for livelihood is different, since fulfilling it is never harmful to someone else.
2. This is the version of the prayer that Chazal instituted for the winter months, and they established a different text for the summer months. Therefore, reciting vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim during the summer conflicts with the text that Chazal established for this brocha, which is called matbei'a she'tav'uh chachamim. One is not permitted to change the text of Chazal's established prayers, although one may add personal supplications to them.

The Rambam

When the Rambam cites the halachic conclusion of the story of the people of Nineveh, he modifies the story by replacing the reference to Nineveh with "distant islands of the sea." Let us see the entire context of his ruling: "The entire rainy season (autumn and winter), one recites morid hagashem in the second brocha, and in the sunny season (spring and summer) one recites morid hatal. When does he begin reciting morid hagashem? From the musaf prayer of the last day of Sukkos until shacharis of the first day of Pesach. From musaf of the first day of Pesach one begins to recite morid hatal. From the seventh of Marcheshvan, we begin to ask for rain in birchos hashanim for as long a time as one still says mashiv haruach umorid hagashem. This is true in Eretz Yisroel, but in Shinar (Mesopotamia), Syria, Egypt and nearby places whose climate is similar, one should ask for rain from sixty days after the equinox. Places that require rain in the summer, such as distant islands of the sea, ask for rain -- when they require it -- in shomei'a tefillah" (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 2:15-17).

Germany and Spain

Why the Rambam mentions "distant islands of the sea" became an important factor in a related issue a bit more than one hundred years after his passing, during the lifetime of the Rosh. The Rosh was born in Germany and spent most of his life there. As an adult with grown children, he fled Germany because of persecutions, first spending a few months in Montpelier, in the area of southern France bordering on the Mediterranean Sea known as the Provence. He subsequently decided that he was not happy with the level of Jewish observance in the Provence, and he traveled onward to Barcelona, Spain, where he became the personal houseguest of the Rashba. Later, the rav of Toledo, the largest community of its time in central Spain, passed on, and the rabbinate of that prominent community, in which lived, apparently, many prominent talmidei chachamim, was offered to the Rosh, who accepted it. Shortly after his arrival in Toledo, the following event transpired:

"And it was in the year 5073 after the creation of the world (corresponding to the Common Era year 1313), that it rained very little the entire winter, and the community declared a fast day to beseech Hashem for rain. On the first night of Pesach after maariv, the Rosh was sitting in the entrance to his house with some of his disciples standing about him, when he declared: "Now is the time to raise a matter that has always bothered me: Why don't we continue reciting vesein tal umatar until Shavuos?" What bothered the Rosh is that, although in Eretz Yisroel rain is disadvantageous in the summer, in Europe, where he lived his entire life, rain was not only helpful in the summer, but it was essential. Since rain was important after Pesach, they should recite mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar even in the summer months.

Subsequently, the Rosh penned a lengthy responsum advocating this position. He rallied the following proof: When analyzing a dispute quoted in the Gemara, we ordinarily assume that the two differing authorities disputed concerning a relatively minor issue and held as closely as possible to one another's position. The specific application of this principle is as follows: Both Rabbi Yehudah (the tanna) and Rav Nachman (the amora) held that the city of Nineveh should recite vesein tal umatar in the brocha of birchos hashanim. On the other hand, Rebbe and Rav Sheishes contended that the city of Nineveh should recite vesein tal umatar in shomei'a tefillah, because a city should not have its own practice of reciting vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim when everyone else is not requesting rain in their tefilos. However, reasoned the Rosh, the dispute among these great scholars regards only a city. A large region or country should recite vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim according to all opinions, just as we see that the practices of Eretz Yisroel and Bavel were not the same, but each country followed its own needs. Therefore, since Nineveh's needs were analogous to those of central Spain, everyone would agree that in Spain, one should recite mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar according to the regional climate conditions.

At the end of his responsum, the Rosh notes that he was unsuccessful in changing the practice of his community, and that he, himself, eventually stopped reciting these prayers after Pesach. We see clearly that he had not changed his opinion. However, since he was not successful in changing the accepted practice, he did not want there to be divergent approaches in the same community.

The Rosh contended that he could prove that the Rambam also held as he did, that one should recite the prayers mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar according to the need of the local region. In the Rambam's commentary to the Mishnah Taanis, while explaining the laws that we have shared above, he adds: "All these laws apply in Eretz Yisroel and the lands that are similar to it... However, in other lands, one should recite vesein tal umatar at the time that rain is beneficial for that place, and, in that time, one should follow the practice of (Eretz Yisroel on) the 7th of Marcheshvan (meaning that one should begin reciting vesein tal umatar when local conditions warrant it). This is because there are lands in which it does not begin to rain until Nissan. In lands in which the summer is in Marcheshvan and rain, then, is not good for them, but it is deadly and destructive, how can the people of such a place ask for rain in Marcheshvan? -- this is a lie!" (Since rain is now detrimental for them, why are they asking for it?)

Rambam points

In reverse order, the Rambam made two halachic points:

1. One should not pray for rain when it is detrimental to the local needs.

Note that I have not found any halachic authority who disputes this ruling, although, in truth, virtually every other rishon is mum on this topic.

2. In places where rain is beneficial at a different time of the year, one should recite vesein tal umatar at the time that it is beneficial for the local needs.

Contradiction in Rambam

At this point, we will examine how the Rosh explains the Rambam in a way that sustains his opinion. The Rosh notes that the Rambam's statement in his commentary to the Mishnah in Taanis appears to conflict with what he wrote in Hilchos Tefillah, "Places that require rain in the summer, such as distant islands of the sea, ask for rain -- when they require it -- in shomei'a tefillah" (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 2:15-17). Yet, the Rambam in the Mishnah commentary states that they should treat their rainy season as Eretz Yisroel treats the 7th of Marcheshvan, which means that they should recite vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim, not in shomei'a tefillah.

The Rosh resolves this contradiction in the Rambam's position by explaining that there is a difference between a city and a region. A city with exceptional needs should recite vesein tal

umatar only in shomei'a tefillah. However, an entire region or country, such as Spain or Germany, should recite vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim, during the part of the year that this region requires rain.

Kesef Mishneh and Toras Chayim

Not all authorities accept the Rosh's approach to explaining the Rambam. Several point out that if the Rambam meant to distinguish between a city and a region, he should have said so. Rather, they contend that the Rambam meant that if, in your location, there is now a need for rain, one should include vesein tal umatar in your daily weekday davening. Where in the prayer one recites this depends on what part of the year it is: Between the 7th of Marcheshvan and Pesach, one should say it in birchos hashanim. If it is after Pesach, one should recite it in shomei'a tefillah.

Disagree with Rosh

Several rishonim disagree with the Rosh, contending that it is not permitted to recite vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim at times that Chazal ruled we should not. They rule, further, that someone who does recite vesein tal umatar in birchos hashanim at those times did not fulfill his mitzvah to daven and is required to repeat the shemoneh esrei (Rabbeinu Yonah, Brochos 19b; Ritva, Taanis 3b). Thus, we understand why the Rosh's position, that mashiv haruach umorid hagashem and vesein tal umatar should be recited after Pesach in Europe, was not accepted. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 117:2) rules that the halacha does not follow the Rosh. He records that all communities begin reciting mashiv haruach umorid hagashem on Shemini Atzeres, and records only two practices regarding vesein tal umatar, the same two expressly mentioned in the Gemara. No other regional distinctions are recognized.

Out of season

Notwithstanding that he rejects the halachic conclusion of the Rosh, the Shulchan Aruch discusses the following question. Someone who recites mashiv haruach umorid hagashem or vesein tal umatar when he should not must repeat the davening. This presents us with an intriguing question: Someone in Germany or Spain recites mashiv haruach umorid hagashem or vesein tal umatar during or after Pesach. According to the Shulchan Aruch, they have recited something that they should not have, whereas the Rosh contends that they have followed the correct procedure. The question is whether we accept the opinion of the Rosh to the extent of not repeating the shemoneh esrei in this situation. Indeed, Rav Yitzchak Abuhav, a highly respected authority, contended that one should not repeat the shemoneh esrei, out of respect for the Rosh's position.

In his Beis Yosef commentary on the Tur, the author of the Shulchan Aruch was inclined to reject the Rosh's ruling completely, to the extent of requiring the repetition of shemoneh esrei. However, because of the position of Rav Yitzchak Abuhav, the Beis Yosef modified his position, contending that someone who recited mashiv haruach umorid hagashem or vesein tal umatar in Spain or Germany on or after Pesach should repeat the shemoneh esrei as a donated prayer, called a tefillas nedavah, which may be recited when it is uncertain whether repeating the prayer is required. The Rema concludes, like Rav Yitzchak Abuhav, that one should not repeat the shemoneh esrei in this situation.

The Bach

There is yet another complication to this issue, based on a comment of the Bach. A different passage of Gemara is concerned about a concept called "bothering Heaven," meaning asking for a miraculous deliverance when unnecessary, noting that people who have davened under these unusual circumstances have been punished as a result. The Bach mentions a longstanding practice not to add vesein tal umatar to the davening on dates not included in what Chazal established, even when there was a local need for rain. He writes that the custom was to include selichos and other prayers but not to add the specific words of vesein tal umatar. He further records that two great Torah leaders once added vesein tal umatar, and both passed away within the year, which was attributed to the fact that they had inserted vesein tal umatar into prayers when they should not have.

There is a major difficulty posed by these comments of the Bach. We learned above that the residents of Nineveh asked in which brochathey should recite vesein tal umatar, because of their local need for rain. No one questioned that they could recite vesein tal umatar, which seems to run counter to what the Bach stated.

The Taz explains that the Bach's concerns are only about reciting vesein tal umatar in the repetition of the shemoneh esrei, but not in the private tefillah, and that the people of Nineveh recited vesein tal umatar only in their private tefillos, but not during the chazzan's repetition. The Elya Rabbah, an early acharon, takes issue with the Taz's approach, contending that the people of Nineveh certainly recited vesein tal umatar both in their private prayers and in the public ones. The Elya Rabbah suggests an alternative approach: The concern raised by the Bach is only when the need for rain is not that great. When there is a major need for rain, as no doubt existed for the people of Nineveh, there is no concern about bothering Heaven.

Conclusion

Rashi (Breishis 2:5) points out that until Adam Harishon appeared, there was no rain in the world. Rain fell and grasses sprouted only after Adam was created, understood that rain was necessary for the world, and prayed to Hashem for rain. Whenever we pray for rain, we must always remember that the essence of prayer is drawing ourselves closer to Hashem.

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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Lech Lecha
For the week ending 20 October 2018 / 11 Heshvan 5779
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

A Present of the Future

"I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you most exceedingly." (17:2)

In London during the War, a young Jewish mother whose husband was a fighter pilot gave birth to a baby boy. She lived many miles from London and she couldn't find a mohel (circumciser). She called Dayan Yechezkel Abramsky of the London Beit Din for help. And so it was that Dayan Abramsky and a well-known mohel, who was also a Chassidic Rebbe, set off one fine morning to bring this little neshama into the covenant of Avraham Avinu.

They were walking up the path to the mother's house when the Rebbe said to Dayan Abramsky, "O! I forgot my mila pouch with everything in it! What are we going to do now?" "Well," said Dayan Abramsky, "there must be a chemist (drugstore) here in town. Let's go and buy some razor blades."

They walked into the chemist shop, highly identifiable as Jews. Dayan Abramsky had a splendid beard halfway down his chest and the Rebbe's almost reached to waist.

"Excuse me," said Dayan Abramsky to the man behind the counter, "do you have any razor blades?"

"Blimey!" said the shop keeper, "I've got razor blades, but not for beards the likes of what you've got!"

The Vilna Gaon points out that karet means "to cut", to separate, while karet brit means "covenant" — something that brings together. (Interestingly we have the same idiom in English: 'To cut a pact.' Perhaps this stems from the Hebrew idiom.)

The Vilna Gaon explains that when two friends are to be separated and they want to be close despite the distance that will separate them, they each give to each other something very dear, and this cutting from oneself perpetuates their closeness.

Which begs the question, why is the cutting from that part of the body?

In the pact between G-d and the Avraham, Avraham gives G-d his most dear possession, his future. He pledges that he and his progeny will be dedicated to Him, and thus the mark of the covenant is on the place of the body that represents that future. (Interestingly the word for "womb" in Hebrew, rechem, can be rearranged to form the word, machar, meaning "tomorrow," for it is that part of the body that contains the 'tomorrow' of a person.) Reciprocally, G-d took His "future" in this world and pledged to Avraham that everything He, G-d, would be in this world, would be through the people of Avraham.

*Source: story heard from Dayan Baruch Rappaport
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OU Torah

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Lech Lecha: A Checklist for Heroes

Having a hero is part of natural human development. In childhood, these heroes are often movie stars and athletes. For evidence, just look at the posters on the bedrooms walls of today's average teenager. Many of us find our heroes among the people with whom we have daily contact. These include parents and grandparents, teachers, and religious leaders.

Sometimes, our heroes are historical figures, individuals about whom we have read in books. Not infrequently, our heroes are fictional, characters in novels and short stories.

In religious circles, Jewish or otherwise, heroes are chosen from sacred literature. Among Jewish people, heroes are chosen not only from Bible and Talmud, but from recent or even current gedolim, or religious “greats.” The corridors of many Jewish schools are decorated with pictures of rabbinic figures of the recent past. Perceptive visitors to such schools can often determine the school’s ideological orientation by the choice of heroes who bedeck the corridor walls.

What is the function of heroes in human development? We often hear the term “hero worship,” but “worship” is not the most appropriate use to which to put one’s hero, certainly not from a Jewish theological perspective. In my lectures on comparative religion, I often point out that the central hero of the Christian narrative is “worshipped,” but such “worship” is tantamount to idolatry for a believing Jew.

We too have heroes in our Biblical narrative, many heroes. But we do not “worship” them. Worshipping a human being is sacrilege in our faith. This is one of the basic distinctions between Christianity and Judaism. We do not “worship” Moses, for example. One of the reasons for the fact that the location of his grave remains unknown is to assure that visitors to his grave will not “worship” him.

Don’t get me wrong. Judaism is not against people having heroes. It is against people worshipping them. What, then, is the proper attitude to have towards heroes?

I would argue that our heroes are individuals after whom we can model ourselves. They can be emulated, but not worshipped. They must be individuals whom we so admire that we are motivated to learn from them and strive to adopt their beliefs and behaviors. They are not meant to be our idols. They are meant to be our ideals.

The Rabbis put it this way: “A person must always say, ‘When will my actions reach the level of the actions of my forefathers?’” Or, as some translate this teaching, “When will my actions even touch the level of the actions of my forefathers?”

This Shabbat, we read the third in this year’s cycle of Torah portions, Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1 – 17:27). You may have had a reaction similar to mine when you read the parsha last week and the week before. Heroes were absent from those parshiyot! Adam and Eve were not heroic. They fell short of the Almighty’s expectations. Noah was a fine man, a pious man, but hardly a hero. His moral flaws included drunkenness, so that we can well comprehend the views of those Talmudic sages who insisted that he was “righteous” only when compared with his hopelessly wicked contemporaries.

In this week’s Torah portion, however, we encounter an individual worthy of emulation at last. We finally have our first Biblical hero, Abraham our Forefather.

I have often thought, and often sermonized, that in this week’s parsha, we not only are introduced to our hero Abraham, but we learn enough about him to develop a list of criteria for hero status. We can develop a checklist of ten qualities which typify a true hero. Here’s my list:

A hero takes risks. He is not complacent. He relishes challenging assignments, even when their outcomes are uncertain. Abraham meets those criteria. He leaves his birthplace, home, and family to journey as a stranger to an unknown land.

A hero is sensitive to the needs of the unfortunate. He steps in and does whatever is necessary, often at great personal cost, to meet those needs. Abraham’s brother Haran dies young and leaves an orphan, Lot. Abraham adopts Lot and becomes his foster father, taking him wherever he went, so that Lot eventually shares in Abraham’s success.

A hero engages in outreach. He does not keep his spiritual achievements to himself. When Abraham sets out on his journey, he takes with him not only his wife and orphaned nephew, but also “the souls that he and Sarai made in Haran.” Note that he not only “made souls.” He invited them to join his family entourage.

A hero builds “altars.” He helps people learn about the Almighty by changing the physical reality of their environment. In this parsha alone, we learn of three such

altars in Elon Moreh, in Beth El, and in Hebron. Abraham left those altars standing for others to use even after he himself had departed from those places. A hero pays his debts. He is thankful to those who helped him, and he demonstrates his gratitude effectively. After Abraham descends to Egypt to escape famine, he is careful, upon his return to Canaan, to stop at all the stations he passed on his way down to Egypt. As Rashi teaches us, he stops at each station to show his gratitude and to repay the debts he incurred on his way. A hero strenuously avoids conflict and strife. When Abraham realizes that the competition between his shepherds and those of Lot will inevitably lead to conflict, he tells Lot, “Let there be no strife between us, let us go our separate ways.”

A hero makes friends and alliances. He respects those who differ from him culturally and religiously. He seeks their counsel. Abraham has three such friends and allies: Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. They are baalei berit Avram, they set up a covenant among themselves. The Rabbis tell us that Abraham seeks their advice concerning circumcision.

A hero fights for his friends. Lot and his family are taken captive in a great war. When Abraham hears of the plight of his nephew, despite the fact that Lot has long abandoned him, he instantly assembles a small army and successfully frees the captives. Abraham wages war, courageously and competently.

A hero is not in the game for personal gain. The King of Sodom, who lost the war until Abraham came upon the scene, offers Abraham all the booty. But Abraham will have none of it. He refuses to even take “a thread or a shoelace.” A hero takes care of his subordinates. Abraham declines reward for his military intervention on behalf of the King of Sodom but insists that all of his underlings are duly rewarded. “Hem yikchu chelkam, they must get what they deserve!” We’ve developed quite a checklist. This list should help us all determine the criteria that make for suitable heroes.

This list omits several of Abraham’s heroic virtues from this week’s parsha, and includes none from next week’s parsha. I leave it to you, dear reader, to study both parshiyot carefully. I challenge you to come up with ten more criteria for our list.

Permit me a closing personal word in the interest of full disclosure. Abraham is certainly one of my heroes. So is my own father, of blessed memory, whose name was also Abraham. I pray that the three of my grandsons who are named Abraham after him, as well as several nephews and cousins, will lead heroic lives as well and bring honor to their namesake, and to Avraham Avinu—our Forefather Abraham.

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Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Lech Lecha

פרק ל' ל' תשעט

אות הנפש אשר צו בחרן

And the souls they made in Charan. (12:5)

Avraham Avinu made souls – so did Sarah *Imeinu* – each focusing on members of his or her own specific gender. Developing the spiritual qualities of their students and leading them to belief in the Almighty was much more than spiritual refinement. It was a process by which Avraham and Sarah transformed their students, actually made them anew. They developed the potential of each student, bringing it to the surface. They accomplished this through the medium of *mitzvah* performance, which teaches us that every act of *mitzvah* performance is transformative, capable of altering a Jew’s overall essence.

In *Pirkei Avos* (5:22), *Chazal* distinguish between the students of Avraham and those of Bilaam *harasha*, the evil one. Avraham’s *talmidim*, students, were identifiable by their good eye, humble spirit and meek soul. Those who possessed the opposite – a greedy soul, an arrogant spirit and an evil eye – were students of Bilaam. In his commentary to *Parashas Balak*, the *Sfas Emes* wonders why one requires the services of a *rebbe* to teach bad/negative *middos*, character traits. No pedagogical process is necessary. All one needs to do is remain in the proximity of an unrefined, uncouth, self-centered, evil person – and those traits will eventually rub off. It sounds almost as if one must “learn” these negative *middos*, when, in reality, it should be understood that one who

does not strive to develop good/positive character traits will invariably develop negative ones!

Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, teaches us a critical lesson in Torah *chinuch*. *Chazal* are not addressing the teaching of *middos*, but rather, the learning of *chochmah*, wisdom, from a *rebbe*. One must be acutely aware that separating the educational material from the personality of the *rebbe* is impossible. Thus, when one studies wisdom from a mentor whose *middos* are vulgar, insensitive, discourteous, iniquitous and revolting (just to mention a few), his mentor's deficiencies will rub off on him.

When one manifests good *middos*, it indicates that he has studied under a *rebbe* who possesses refined character traits. Someone who possesses negative character traits attests to the inferior ethical and moral quality of his mentor. Avraham's students were walking advertisements for the *Rebbe* and institution in which he mentored the students. Likewise, those who attended Bilaam's school of wisdom demonstrated by their very behavior who their mentor was. This is a powerful lesson to parents from a *Rosh Yeshivah* who transformed the lives of thousands of students: the establishment of an appropriate environment through the influence of a mentor, friends (who also mentor) is an essential aspect of the educational development of a child. It is not only all about learning. It is about who your child's mentor is that often determines the direction the child will take in life.

ויאמר אברהם אל לוט אל נא תהרי מריבבה בינו ובינך...

And Avram said to Lot, "Let there be no discord, please, between me and you...." (13:8)

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, teaches an important lesson concerning the grammatical syntax of the above *pasuk*. He explains that the word *beineinu*, between us, is used when the separation or union is not necessarily mutual. However, when the Torah repeats the *bein*, between, such as here, *beini u'beinecha*, between me and you, the union or separation is mutual. It is as if Avraham *Avinu* was intimating to Lot: "If we have discord, there can be no relationship between us. Our quarrel is mutual. There are things about you which do not please me, and I am certain that there are aspects of my life and endeavor which do not conform to your way of thinking. In other words, apparently neither of us sees eye to eye with the other. This is causing strife between us and our people. We should separate, because separation engenders peace."

In order to protect his people from the bad example of Lot's ménage, it was critical for Avraham to demand complete separation. Furthermore, Avraham could not just go anywhere in which there was a surplus of pasture. He required a sheltered, isolated environment, distant from the people who viewed corruption and moral profligacy as a way of life. Lot, however, having rejected Avraham's way of life, could live anywhere that grass was aplenty. His herds required feeding. This was Lot's sole criteria when he was seeking a neighborhood in which to live.

Understanding this distinction between a single *bein* and a repetitive *bein*, Rav Hirsch goes on to teach an important lesson with regard to the *mitzvah* of *Shabbos*. Concerning *Shabbos* observance, the Torah writes (*Shemos* 31:17), *Beini u'vein Bnei Yisrael*, "Between Me and (between) *Bnei Yisrael*" (it is a sign forever). This phrase uses a double repetition, a double sign of recognition. As long as *Klal Yisrael* adheres to this *mitzvah*, as long as we observe *Shabbos*, we thereby recognize and acknowledge that we belong to Hashem, and Hashem acknowledges us as His. It is a dual, reciprocal relationship. If *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, one desecrates *Shabbos*, he tears asunder this double bond in both directions! We break with Hashem and, concomitantly, He breaks with us. I have written about *Shabbos* numerous times, but never did a *p'shat*, exposition, strike home with such pertinent meaning. A Jew who profanes *Shabbos*, who does so knowingly, willingly, and with complete awareness of what *Shabbos* means to the Jewish People, ergo severs his relationship with Hashem – and Hashem does likewise. This is a most frightening lesson, which presents *shemiras Shabbos*, *Shabbos* observance, in a different light. *Shabbos* is not a "regular" *mitzvah*. It is the primary Jewish observance that rises above the rest. It is the only ritual mentioned in the *Aseres HaDibros*, Ten

Commandments. The penalty for violating the *Shabbos* (during the time of the *Bais Hamikdash* when capital punishment was administered) was stoning – the same punishment that is meted out to one who abandons Judaism for another religion. *Shabbos* is the most important institution of Judaism. It is the

touchstone of our faith. *Shabbos* is our identity. *Shabbos* affirms our belief in Hashem as the Creator of all things.

For the Jew, belief in Hashem is more than a mere creed or catechism. It is the foundation of all meaning in life. Without a Creator, there can be no possible meaning to existence. There is no purpose, no morality, no ethics, no life worth living. Thus, *Shabbos* is the focus of Jewish belief; for, without *Shabbos*, there is no Creator, and, without belief in Hashem, there is no life.

I could go on, but I think the reader conceptualizes the picture. We now understand the repetition of *bein*, between. When we make the conscious decision to violate the institution of *Shabbos*, we break our bond with Hashem. This is a dual relationship. Thus, one can expect Divine reciprocity. Need we say more? [I must add that this thesis applies to one who was raised with the institution of *Shabbos* – not a *tinok she'nishbah*, child captured by gentiles, a *halachic* term which applies to one who was raised in an unobservant milieu, with little or no education in Torah and *mitzvos*.]

ויאמר אברהם אל לוט אל נא תהרי מריבבה בינו ובינך... כי אנשימים אחיהם אנחנו... הפרד נא מעלי

And Avram said to Lot, "Please let there be no discord, please, between me and you... for we are kinsmen (men who are brothers)... Please separate from me." (13:8,9)

It appears that the reason for them to separate from one another was their kinship. If they were not kinsmen, would discord have been more acceptable? Strife is strife – discord devastates – controversy destroys. Does it make a difference if the fight is between brothers or two unrelated individuals? *Chazal* (cited by *Rashi*) teach that Avraham *Avinu* and Lot had similar countenances. Does it make a difference whether or not they looked alike?

The simple explanation is that Avraham was concerned with the fact that he and Lot looked the same. Imagine, one day Avraham is seen in the *bais hamedrash*, davening with fervor, learning diligently with great passion. When he leaves the *bais hamedrash*, he can be found carrying out acts of *chesed* for all people. Avraham appears to be an unceasing powerhouse of spiritual activity – until the next day, when he is seen wobbly leaving the bar, paying a visit to the local house of idol worship, etc. People begin to wonder: Is Avraham for real? Is he a chameleon who changes his image to suit himself? Avraham told Lot: "I have a lofty, spiritual mission to reach out to humanity and teach the world about Hashem. If my reputation is sullied as a result of our matching appearances, people will view me in a negative light and, consequently, ignore anything that I might have to say."

Our Patriarch was simply being realistic. Alternatively, *Pardes Yosef* explains that when two opponents argue and one is an undisputed *tzaddik*, righteous person, and the other is unquestionably a *rasha*, wicked, a *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's Name, is unlikely to occur. People will simply assume that the *tzaddik* represents all that is good and just, while the *rasha* represents evil, those who would destroy anything spiritually positive in Jewish life. When the positions are clear, people assume that the *tzaddik* was compelled to take a stand against those who would usurp Torah and *mitzvos*. When the lines of demarcation are blurred, however, when both sides present themselves as exponents of Orthodoxy, fighting for what is right and just, a strong possibility exists that a desecration of Hashem's Name will result. Clearly, both of them cannot be righteous. One must be a fraud. Such talk, although possibly incorrect, is damaging and plants the seeds for a *chillul Hashem*.

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl, suggests another approach toward understanding why the fact that Avraham and Lot were family, that brotherly sentiments existed between them, was, in and of itself, sufficient reason for separating from one another. When Hashem instructed Avraham to uproot himself, leave his home, his birthplace, his community and his family, Avraham took Lot along with him. Why? Was Lot not part of his family? Was he not supposed to leave his family? Lot was a nephew. That is family. Apparently, he took Lot because Lot, as a student, was so subservient to him that Avraham viewed Lot to be a part of his own household – not a member of his father's household. Hashem told Avraham to leave his father's household. Lot was a member of his family.

All this was good and true as long as Lot remained Avraham's student. When an issue arose, Lot did not offer an opinion. Whatever Avraham, his *Rebbe*, said was sufficient. He did not have his own opinion. Everything went in accordance with Avraham's ruling. Once Lot became his own spokesman, when he no longer refrained from offering his personal opinion, even differing with

Avraham, as was the case in their present discord, Lot reverted to becoming part of Avraham's father's household. He was no longer family. *Anashim achim anachnu*, "We are kinsmen," both members of my father's household. We are on an equal basis. That is sufficient reason for separation.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי ד' אֲשֶׁר הָזְבַתְךָ מֵאָוֹר כְּשָׂדִים

And He (Hashem) said to him, "I am G-d Who brought you out of Uhr Kasdim." (15:7)

The fact that the Torah does not mention the miracle of Avraham *Avinu* being spared from death in Uhr Kasdim, except in passing, begs elucidation. Hashem just says, "I am G-d Who brought you out of Uhr Kasdim" – nothing at all about saving him from certain death. Apparently, as far as our Patriarch was concerned, Uhr Kasdim was not much of a *nisayon*, test, for him. Why? *Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop*, zl, explains that Avraham *Avinu* lived his life on the ultimate spiritual plateau of *V'chai bahem*, "By which he shall live" (*Vayikra* 18:5). This teaches that one's entire life should be dedicated to living for Torah and *mitzvos*. Nothing may stand in the way of *mitzvah* performance. Without *kiyum haTorah*, Torah fulfillment, he has no life.

The *mitzvah* of *V'chai bahem* was not given with regard to idolatry. In other words, when one is confronted with the choice of worshipping an idol or relinquishing his life, it is not actually a choice. In either event the individual has no life. Worshipping an idol is equivalent to death. When Avraham was confronted with the choice of death or idolatry – it was no choice, no test. For Avraham, this was a choice akin to death by sword or firing squad. In any event, the result would be the same. Thus, the *nisayon* of Uhr Kasdim is not mentioned, since, for Avraham, it was no *nisayon*.

את בריתך אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין רעך אהරיך המול לך כל זכר

This is My Covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. (17:10)

In addressing the *mitzvah* of *Bris Milah*, the *Sefer HaChinuch* writes: "One root reason for this precept is that Hashem wished to affix in the people that He set apart to be called by His Name a permanent sign on their bodies to distinguish them physically from the other nations. Just as they are differentiated in their spiritual form, their purpose and way in the world not being the same, their physical differentiation sets them apart as it constitutes the perfection of their physical form. *Hashem Yisborach* desired to refine the physical character of His chosen people, and He wanted this perfection to be effected by man. He did not create man consummate and perfect from the womb in order to allude to him that, just as the perfection of his physical form is carried out by his own hand, so, too, is it in his hand (within his means and power) to complete his spiritual form by the worthiness of his actions."

How fortunate are we that Hashem, Creator of the Universe, chose us to be His nation and sealed this relationship with an indelible imprint on our bodies. Separation, distinctiveness, is an inherent component of our national DNA. We are different because Hashem wants us to be so. To ensure that we do not lose sight of our unique relationship with Hashem, He commanded us to have an insignia of distinction on our bodies forever. Is it any wonder that the early secularists whose primary goal was to assimilate with the gentile nations, chose *Bris Milah* as one of their first salvos, prohibiting it for its "barbaric" nature? How dare we mutilate a young child? They did not realize then – and continue to this very day with their delusion in thinking – that Jews deep down want something with which to identify. After all is said and done, every Jew, at one point or another, wakes up and realizes that he is, indeed, different. At that moment, the question of Jewish identity hits him squarely between the eyes. For some, it is the *chai* chain or *Magen David*; for others, it is their trip to the Holy Land with a quick guilt stop at the *Kosel*; yet, for others, it is a ride to the cemetery and a diversion down memory lane. All have one common bond: They know that they are Jewish, and they seek some manner through which they can identify.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the story of the man that came before him with another indelible sign on his skin – only this sign was prohibited by the Torah. For all appearances, this young man looked like an Arab, until he pulled up his shirt sleeve exposing a *Magen David* tattooed into his skin! Apparently, this "Arab" was from Egypt. His mother was a Jewish woman, who had been kidnapped by the Arabs as a young girl and forced to embrace Islam. When her son was old enough to understand, she tattooed the Jewish symbol (probably the only one she knew) on the inside of her son's arm. This would

serve as a constant reminder for him that he was Jewish and, thus, not permitted to marry a Muslim girl. If the villagers, in which he lived with his mother, were ever to discover that Jews lived in their midst, they would kill them. For a moment, let us delve into this woman's *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice. While this does not mitigate the transgression of tattooing, it does show how far a Jewish woman, albeit totally non-observant, would go to maintain her son's Jewish identity.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* writes, "Hashem wished that the physical perfection be effected by man... as an allusion to the idea that, just as the perfection of his physical form is carried out by man, so, too, is it in his power, within his means, to complete his spiritual worthiness by the positive actions that he performs." We often come up against a wall, a barrier which we are convinced has been erected to prevent us from achieving our perfection. *Rav Zilberstein* observes that Hashem has delegated a unique purpose specifically endemic to each individual. Just as each person has his own physical imperfection to be completed, likewise, he has a spiritual one for him alone, an act which only he can perform.

When the *Baal HaTanya* was incarcerated, the superintendent of the prison approached him with a question. (Apparently, this man had a working knowledge of *Chumash*, or, at least, enough to ask a question.) "How is it possible," the superintendent asked, "that G-d asked Adam what appears to be a rhetorical question: *Ayeca*, 'Where are you?' Does G-d not know where every person is located?" The *Rebbe* was acutely aware that the non-Jewish superintendent would not understand the explanations provided by *Rashi* and other commentaries. This gentile required an explanation that was practical and "gentile-friendly."

The *Baal HaTanya* replied, "When G-d asked this question, He was presenting Adam with a classic query, 'Why did you respond to your wife's request to eat of the fruit? Why did you eat it?' You should realize 'where you are,' your talents, strength, goals and objectives in life. In other words, Adam should have focused on from where he came, and why he was here."

Hashem created every individual with his own unique purpose in life – which only he can perform. By allowing someone to convince "me" to do something else, I am failing myself – my purpose, my perfection. How important is it for everyone to take the lesson of the *Baal HaTanya* personally to heart? *Rav Zilberstein* observes that a person might think that if he entertains his personal aspirations, it might have a negative effect on his spiritual goals. This does not mean that if someone dreams of becoming a football quarterback at the expense of his *ruchniyos*, spirituality, that he is free to make the choice. Certainly not! The question is: If someone is truly interested in carrying out the will of Hashem, with his goal being to achieve distinction in an area that might be realized at the expense of his Torah learning, may he do so? Or is it learning – or nothing?

Rav Zilberstein replies that first and foremost, one must be completely certain (following sincere introspection) that what he wants to do is *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of glorifying Heaven. Once he has determined that his goals are not for personal glory or a way to escape the *bais hamedrash*, then he should follow his proclivity.

Rav Zilberstein buttresses this thought with the following story that occurred concerning his grandfather, *Rav Aryeh Levine*, zl. The *Tzaddik* of *Yerushalayim*, as he was aptly called, was much more than his *nom de plume*. He was the essence of virtue and caring for the downtrodden – especially those whom others did not necessary take under their wing, such as prisoners and those who were critically ill, whose bodies had deteriorated to the point that left them in a constant state of agonizing pain. Obviously, visiting such people was, for most, quite difficult – but not for *Rav Aryeh*. He provided them with encouragement, comfort and love. Nonetheless, when *Rav Aryeh* realized the toll that his multifarious acts of *chesed*, kindness, took on his available time for learning, he went to ask the advice of a Torah giant of the caliber of the *Leshem*, grandfather of *Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv*, zl, and the primary mentor of *Kabbalah* to most of the great *Kabbalists* in the Holy Land.

The *Leshem* replied that the primary barometer to determine whether his goal was focused on the proper path and was, thus, permitted to infringe (so to speak) on his learning was: *simchah*; joy. Did he execute all of his acts of *chesed* with utmost joy? Furthermore, did he feel that the world needed *him* to do these acts of *chesed*. (Is there no one else? In most cases, there was not, nor

was there someone who would execute it with the same flair and passion.) If these criterions were met, then it was clear that this was his purpose in life! He should continue!

How important it is to do what one wants and about which he feels good. It is not always about money and prestige. It is about what one enjoys and what he does well.

חנה בת חיים ישבנו זות ע' ה נפטרה "א חשון - ל'כ ר' נשמה

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Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1-17:27)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “...and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

Our biblical tradition seems to live in a constant paradox of tension between the universal and the particular; our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family.

This tension is evident from the opening sentence of the Torah: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ While it seems these words are a clear proclamation of universality, Rashi’s opening comment turns the verse on its head. He argues that the fact that the Torah begins with Creation has nothing to do with a grand universal vision, but rather everything to do with establishing Jewish rights to the land of Israel. He cites a midrash that says since God created the world, He can parcel out specific areas to ‘whomever is righteous in His eyes.’

This tension between the particular and the universal also permeates the High Holy Day festival period. The universal dominates Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as the King of the entire universe, and Yom Kippur when we declare, “...for My house (the Holy Temple) shall be called a house of prayer for all people.” (Isaiah 56:7)

Further, the seventy sacrifices offered over the course of the festival of Sukkot symbolize our commitment to the welfare of all seventy nations. But in stark contrast, Shemini Atzeret signifies a more intimate and particularistic rendezvous between God and Israel, when the Almighty sends all the other nations home, wishing to enjoy a celebration with Israel alone. Simhat Torah, the added celebration of our having completed the yearly reading of the Pentateuch during this festival, merely emphasizes the unique and separatist significance of this holiday.

The tension is also apparent in God’s dealings with Abraham. At first God instructs Abraham, “Go out of your land, and from your kindred birthplace and your father’s house, unto the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)

There are no introductions or apologies. It’s straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the land of Israel.

However, in the next verse, this ethnocentric fervor of going up to one’s own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of God’s next mandate: ‘...And through you shall all families of the earth be blessed.’

From this moment onward, both of these elements – a covenantal nation with a unique relationship to God and the universal vision of world peace and redemption – will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham’s descendants. But after all is said and done, in the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges in the historic arena as a war hero who rescues the five regional nations – including Sodom – from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings. Even after Abraham’s nephew and adopted son, Lot, rejects Abraham’s teachings, he still wants to continue his relationship with Lot, and even bargains with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The midrash magnificently captures Abraham’s concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion of Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of God’s appearance to Abraham after the patriarch’s circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre. Why

stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees, Mamre? The midrash explains that when God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to seek the advice of his three allies – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Aner said to him, “You mean to say that you are one hundred years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?” Eshkol said to him, “How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, different from the other nations of the world.” Mamre, however, said to Abraham, “How can you refuse to do what God asks you? After all, God saved all of your two hundred and forty-eight limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If God asks you to sacrifice a small portion of only one of your limbs, how can you refuse?” Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, God chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. (Genesis Raba 42:14) What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as ‘checking out’ the advisability of circumcision with his three gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be by the introduction of this unique and nationalistic sign upon his flesh. Abraham is concerned because Abraham is a universalist.

“And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abram was Sarai...” (Genesis 11:29)

Until that time, the women are generally anonymous, with all the ‘begetting’ seeming to take place because of the men alone [Gen. 5]! Hence when the Bible records: “And Abram took his wife Sarai...and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran....” (Genesis 12:5), Rashi hastens to explain based on the midrash, to ‘gather souls’ meant that ‘Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.’ At least our Sages believed that they truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord. And indeed throughout this Biblical position, Abraham is seen as a Jewish “missionary,” building altars to God and calling out to the local inhabitants to believe in the God of creation and love for every human being!

Abraham truly internalized this mission of Abraham Judaism, to bring the blessings of the God of love and lovingkindness to every human on earth. Since Abraham’s vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how do we understand his willingness to cast his own flesh and blood to the desert? The Tosefta on Masekhet Sotah, commenting on the verse spoken by Sarah in Lekh Lekha: “...I was derided in her [Hagar’s] eyes. Let God judge between me and you,” expands this theme and demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah held two very different world-views. The Sages in the Tosefta fill in the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham:

“I see Ishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Isaac, the name of heaven will be desecrated,” says Sarah to Abraham.

“After I gave her [Hagar] such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress [of our house], how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?,” replies Abraham. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Sarah’s position is crystal clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world – but not at the expense of her own son and family. She teaches us that our identity as a unique people must be forged and secure before we can engage in dialogue and redemption of the nations. God teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: “Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called.” (Genesis 31:12)

Indeed, one of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it – or almost lose it. It may well be argued that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate – and be truly committed to – his only son and heir.

Shabbat Shalom