

The Nature of Our Calling

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By Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit

Parshat Lech-Lecha

Dedicated to All the sacred work of menschwork.org and my father Lester Zevit, Eliezer Shimon b. Shoshana V'Ahron Yosef HaKohen (1938-2020).

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“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, his daughter-in-law Sarai ... and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan. But when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there ... and Terah died in Haran. God said to Abram, Lech lecha (“get yourself up and go” or “go towards your Self”) from where you dwell and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you...and you will be a blessing ...” (Genesis 11:31-32, 12 (https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.11.31-32.12?lang=he-en&utm_source=jewishexponent.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker):1,2)

While this week’s parsha starts at Bereysheet (Genesis 12 (https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.12?lang=he-en&utm_source=jewishexponent.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)), in the Torah scroll there are no chapters and verses, only columns, indentations and a little space between the five books.

Honoring this, one can see from the text above that the idea that Avram wakes up one morning to a unique Divine realization and call to go to Canaan, is a recommitment and reaffirmation of the journey he was on — not a “eureka!” moment. Even the character of Avram’s father, Terah, so textured by midrash and interpretative stories, is more than an idol-maker that Avram challenges and breaks from (Genesis Rabbah, chapter 38 (https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.38?lang=he-en&utm_source=jewishexponent.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

It is Terah who takes the initiative to leave his ancestral homeland, fueled by the death of his son Haran, and enables the extended family (including Haran's son Lot, of future fame), to leave painful memories and explore new horizons. Terah dies in a city midway between Ur and Canaan, named after his deceased son, consumed by grief as his son's name indicates.

Perhaps the Torah narrative is inviting us to look at what we leave behind that in fact goes with us — mourning, grief or trauma that is unaddressed goes where we go. We may even break free physically and yet become immobilized, and even meet our end as Terah did, in the place internally, or in external work or family circumstances that carries the name and burden of the very past we left.

None of us lives in a vacuum, and Torah and our tradition, in fact, elevate and esteem the person who connects their own actions and ideas with those who have come before and are in the generations yet to come.

At the same time, possibility, purpose and aspiring to transcendent ends for the good of all may yet be ahead. I once read an article called "The Calling" that defined this term as when the longing of one's heart and capabilities meets the needs and aspirations of the time and state of the world in which we live.

What then is the new Lech Lecha Avram experiences? What of Sarai and Lot's own spiritual journeys and how do they co-influence each other to hear the Divine call to get up and leave the place their father was only able to go so far into? What is the deep internal life Avram touches so that he hears or experiences the call to take the inner truth and express it in action fulfilling a vision that is at once his and the Universe's call and a legacy he is fulfilling l'dor v'dor — from generation to generation?

In this new year of 5782, a shmita year — a year of release and checking our use of the land and its bounty; psychological and economic forgiving of debts; socio-economic rebalancing; reviewing our Torah, purpose and direction — we add additional inquiry to the ancient charge.

The overall themes of the shmita year support and enhance our ongoing work; it does not replace or negate our current activities. The confluence of this earth-based justice cycle of Jewish life can provide a broader container within which to continue to adapt and find resilience and meaning amid so much uncertainty.

I invite all of us, in this New Year to review our own personal, professional and communal lives in the light of these shmita year principles, and listen to the ancient call of Lech Lecha to see where we can fulfill the promise of our individual and collective lives:

How do you want to live in the world with a deeper connection to conscious Jewish values-based living?

How can you renew, reconnect and relate to your spiritual life?

How can you release and re-evaluate your consumption of resources and ownership of "stuff"?

How can you rethink, with discipline and forgiveness, habitual physical, emotional and thought patterns? Which of these "debts" need to be forgiven so you can move out of past-based determined living and what debts need to be repaid so we can all be free of individual and collective injustice that is continuing its systemic grip on us and oppressing others?

How can we revisit together our local and broader communities' role and work in climate, racial and economic justice?

Like the charge to Avram to become all that he might become, to grow into Avraham in a new place he did not know, so we are asked to expand our self-image to reflect the values and Godly potential more fully in our lives. Then we will come to know the blessing we inherently are meant to be — not at the cost of others along the way — for the benefit of humanity (Adam) and the future sustainability of the adamah, the earth itself.

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit serves as rabbi at Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia, co-founder/co-director of the Davennen Leader's Training Institute and associate director for the ALEPH Hashpa'ah (Spiritual Direction) program. He is the author of "Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Community," and a member of the Religious Leaders Council of Greater Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Faith Leader's caucus of POWER Interfaith PA. The Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia is proud to provide diverse perspectives on Torah commentary for the Jewish Exponent. The opinions expressed in this column are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Board of Rabbis.

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