

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*“Allah Hu” Akbar”. “G-d is great”. These are the final words witnesses say the terrorist screamed before ramming his car into a crowd killing three month old Chaya Zissel and wounding several others in Jerusalem this week.*

It all seems so wonderful, this idea of being in touch with the reason we are here, with a loving caring G-d. Yet, as we have been so horribly reminded of late, some of the greatest tragedies in human history have been perpetrated in the name of that very same G-d.

How can we be sure that an attempt to explore our relationship with G-d and embrace our Jewish identity, or for that matter any religious affirmation, will really end in peace and harmony, and not in hate and destruction?

Additionally, another question we have been confronted by in recent events: am I allowed to place my own life in danger to save another, or do I, indeed must I, always come first? What is my obligation to my own life?

One of the most difficult questions I have ever encountered in rabbinic literature was asked of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry in the Kovno ghetto during the Holocaust:

Is one allowed to step out of line to try & help someone who has fallen by the way during a forced death march? On the one hand, the person who has collapsed from sheer exhaustion will certainly be shot as soon as the Nazis notice him. On the other hand, the fellow stepping out of line, if seen, would almost certainly be put to death as well.

Were the firemen rushing up dozens of floors in the World trade center doing the right thing, placing their own lives in danger in an attempt to save others? Or is it possible that my life is not really my own, and as a gift is something I am responsible to protect as much as if not more than someone else's? And even if one is not obligated to risk one's life for another, at the very least isn't this an ideal we aspire to, and certainly something we admire?

Rav Oshri's response, that while absolutely not required, such an action is clearly allowed, and even to be admired, clearly indicates that we do value and aspire to such a level.

All of which leaves us wondering what is going on with Abraham at the very beginning of Jewish history.

Recall for a moment that the first Jew came on the world scene over 4000 years ago. The world was a pagan sea of idolatry back then, and one individual somehow succeeded in re-connecting with the idea of The One; The Endless One. Believing that there was one source of all good, Abraham waited seventy years until finally, G-d responded.

And what was the message G-d gave Abraham? What was the mission?

“*Lech Lecha*”; Go from your country, your home, even your family, leave everything behind, and journey into the unknown, to the land that I will show you.

Jewish tradition suggests that this was the first of ten challenges; ten tests Abraham would ultimately face, setting the stage for the creation of the Jewish people and the world’s introduction to monotheism...

This journey, tradition teaches, must have been an incredible leap of faith. To be willing to leave everything behind, to journey into the unknown following a belief the entire world at the time considered to be madness, must have taken tremendous courage, self-sacrifice and idealism, not to mention altruism, and selflessness, without any ulterior motive.

And yet, if one takes a closer look at the actual story in the Bible, nothing could be further from the truth!

The words that represent the mission G-d gives to Abraham are “Lech Lecha”.

So what do these words really mean? Literally, ‘go for yourself’! Indeed G-d then shares with Abraham what he will gain by taking this journey:

(Genesis 12:1-2) “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great.”

**Rashi** (Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105) explains the words Lech Lecha as “for your own good and your own benefit”. Indeed these three benefits promised by G-d are explained as producing great progeny (children), great wealth, and great fame.

And in fact, the portion of Lech lecha proceeds to describe how Abraham, upon arriving in Israel, achieves all three of these blessings. He acquires great wealth upon his return from Egypt, he achieves great fame by defeating the mighty empire (5 kings) of the day on the battlefield, and he has a son (Yishmael) and is promised another (Yitzchak) at the end of the portion.

So what was the great test or challenge here?

If you were seventy years old, without children, a poor man with no money, unknown, and with a set of ideas so radically different that people thought you were a mad man, and G-d came to you and promised that if you took this journey, you would become wealthy, famous and finally have children, wouldn’t *you* go? Who wouldn’t?

Even more challenging, is *this* the beginning of Judaism and monotheism? What happened to selflessness? To the pursuit of the ideal for the ideal’s sake? Of what value is this journey if it is only undertaken for one’s own self?

Indeed, the words in the verse clearly suggest that Abraham will only achieve his mission and fulfill the word of G-d if in fact he does this purely for himself!

In other words, if he takes this journey to an unknown land leaving everything behind, but says to G-d: I don’t need the fame or the fortune. I do this only for your sake, and because I love you, he will have failed in his mission! He will not have achieved “Lech Lecha”. The task is to do all this for himself!

In fact in Genesis 18:19, G-d clearly says that He loves Abraham because he inspires his children to follow G-d, “*in order to receive all that G-d has promised Abraham*”!

How can this be? What of selfless devotion to G-d?

Perhaps the Torah is suggesting something here which is so often over-looked, but which forms the basis for what Judaism is all about.

While one’s motivation should not be focused on one’s self, the job Abraham needs to ‘get done’ is *all* about his self.

**Before you can change the world, you need to change yourself, and the ultimate goal of Abraham, is to become Abraham.**

In fact, when we meet him, his name is actually Avram; only at the end of the portion (17:5) does G-d change his name to Avraham, because he has become the Abraham he was meant to be.

If I am here in order to be a partner with G-d in creating the world, then ultimately, the greatest gift I give to the world *is* myself; I develop my self for the world, because it is the gift I have been given by G-d. And in Judaism, a gift is a challenge, and a responsibility.

*Who I am is G-d’s gift to me, but who I become is ultimately my gift to G-d.* It is precisely by becoming all that I can be, that I best serve everyone around me and make the world a better place.

It is not always so easy to figure out who I am meant to be, what my gifts are, and how best I can make a difference to the world. But that is our first priority in this world.

As an example, so often people are expending so much effort on trying to ‘meet the right person’. But the truth is, it’s not about finding the right person, it’s about becoming the right person. If you become who you are meant to be, then the right person will find you.

We often encounter people trying to decide what they want to do in life. But if you have become who you are meant to be, then what you have to do will no longer be a question, it will only be a challenge.

Finding G-d must be wrapped up in finding ourselves. And if we are trying to serve G-d whilst denying ourselves, then it doesn’t matter what I become as long as the ends I worship are well served. So I can be a crusader in one of the bloodiest religious campaigns in history, or fly a jet plane into the World trade center, all in the name of G-d, because it doesn’t matter what I do, it only matters why I am doing it.

Judaism however, teaches that this is not religion, it is perversion. If the purpose of it all is that the world becomes an ethical place, then if I am not becoming a living model of ethics on my path to serve G-d, I have missed the entire point.

And that is why Abraham’s journey begins with G-d’s message to serve *himself*.

Be sure, says G-d, that you become the Abraham you were meant be. And be sure that in your pursuit of a relationship with G-d, you don’t get so blinded by the light that in the end you can’t even look yourself in the mirror...

Each of us, every human being, is a world unto ourselves, as well as being part of the entire world. The Talmud teaches that he who saves one life; it is as though he has saved the entire world. And if each human being is a world, then to lose sight of a single human being 'to save the world', is to be blind to what the world is all about.

May Hashem grant us all the courage to take the journeys we need to take, to find and become the persons we need to be, and to build together the world that we long to share.

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem

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