

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

The winter of 1944 was an extremely bitter winter in Poland, and none felt it more than the Jews lost in the world of the lagers, the concentration camps.

Often in life, it is the little things one remembers years later, and if you ask Rav Yisrael Lau what got him through that bitter winter as a seven-year-old boy in Buchenwald, he will tell you about Fyodor from Rostov, and a simple pair of earmuffs.

Every morning, the Nazi guards would rush into the barracks screaming and yelling and swinging their rubber truncheons every which way; the prisoners had only seconds to jump out of their bunks and stumble out in the snow; anyone not standing in roll call when it began was often killed on the spot.

As the guards walked up and down the lines in the bitter cold morning, their Alsatian dogs straining on their leashes, they watched for any puddles in the snow.

None of the prisoners, you see, had any time to relieve themselves in the morning before they were forced to stand in the bitter cold Polish winter mornings, and eventually from the cold they were forced to relieve themselves, a distinctive puddle would form at their feet. And when the guards saw this, they would mete out the most horrific blows, often ending with the prisoner falling to the snow in a heap of blood.

Rav Lau recalls many prisoners desperately trying to keep their legs together to put off relieving themselves and avoid almost certain death.

And little Srulli Lau who figured this out very quickly was sure this would be the death of him, until a Russian prisoner of war named Fyodor from the city of Rostov took a liking to him. Something about the little seven-year-old boy, still alive in the hell of Buchenwald touched this large Russian POW, who made it his mission to ensure this Jewish boy would survive.

One morning at roll call Fyodor snuck up behind little Srulli and placed a pair of earmuffs on his head. And from then on, every morning, as the frost turned people's ears red, Srulli could at least take comfort in the fact that his ears were warm, and the knowledge that there was someone who cared, kept him alive.

In 1989, when the Iron curtain was beginning to fall, but had not yet crumbled, Russia was beginning to realize that her relations with the West was being affected by her oppression of Russian Jewry. The cry 'Let my people go' had not yet been answered, but the light was beginning to shine at the end of the tunnel. During this time, it was decided that it would be a wise public relations move to invite a small mission of six Rabbis from around the world, to visit Russia in order to counter all the negative press on Soviet Jewry.

During the trip they were allowed to visit with the small Jewish community still associated with the Kol Ya'acov Synagogue on Arkepova Street in Moscow. Since the rabbinic delegation was due to visit with some very significant Russian Officials the next day, Rav Lau, the group's spokesman, asked the

elderly Jews who came to the meeting what requests they should make of the Russian government. To their surprise, the Jews did not ask for food or medicine or even exit visas. All they wanted was the right to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. When asked why this was so important to them one of them explained:

“I am an old man, with one foot in the grave, and I have only one daughter and two grandchildren. One day, when they visit my grave, they will see I am buried in a different section and will ask why. And maybe this will allow them to discover they are Jewish and lead them to explore what that means....”

Rav Lau was curious as to whether there were any other precedents for this request and was told the Armenians were granted a separate graveyard, so perhaps the case might be made for a Jewish graveyard as well.

The next day, which happened to be Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel, they met with the Supreme secretary of the Soviet Politburo, Tangiz Mintscheshvili, and Rav Lau was given the opportunity to speak. Remembering the significance of the date, he turned to his host and said:

“You know, Comrade Mintscheshvili, today is my 44th birthday, but really I am 52 years old.”

The look on the Secretary’s face suggested that he thought this to be a rather strange remark, at which point Rav Lau continued:

“You see, 44 years ago today, I was liberated from Buchenwald, and I would be dead were it not for a man who shielded me with his body from a hail of bullets on that day and kept me alive for the time I was there. All I know about him is that he was a Russian POW named Fyodor from the city of Rostov.

“In those horrible days, in that terrible place, the Russians and the Jews were not separate peoples, we were one. And we stood together, shoulder to shoulder in the fight against Nazism, and the evil it represented.

And since that time, I celebrate my birthday on this day, because without Fyodor from Rostov, I would never have been re-born at the age of eight, on this day. If then in those terrible times, we managed to hold hands together, can we not find the strength today to join hands with each other?”

At which point Rav Lau expressed the wish of the Jewish community to be allowed a separate cemetery.

Mintscheshvili, through his interpreter, asked if there was a precedent for such a request, and upon hearing that the Armenians had their own cemetery, banged on the table and announced:

“If the Armenians have a cemetery, then we will not discriminate; the Jews too will have their cemetery!”

And in the same breath he added:

“And Rabbi, today is the 3rd of May. On September 1st our Minister of Education will announce that the Jews, like every other minority, will have the right to choose their own education for their children! Rabbi, you are speaking to me of places to bury your dead, but I am also speaking to you of places to bring up your children!”

Beginnings have a way of breeding beginnings: 44 years after Fyodor kept a little boy alive in Block # 8 of Buchenwald his final act of kindness was to give back to the Jews of Russia the chance to teach their children Torah....

This week's portion of *Lech Lecha* is actually the last stage of the beginnings we have been experiencing over the last few months.

Last week we read of Noah's emergence from the Ark after the Flood, when the world was given the chance to begin all over again. And the week before that we read the portion of *Bereishit*, (Genesis) which speaks of the creation of the world, the ultimate beginning.

The week before that we celebrated Simchat Torah, when we express our joy in completing the yearly reading of the Torah, as well as reading it all over again... from the beginning. And the week before that (after the Rosh Hashanah - Yom Kippur beginning of the year), we build and sit in our Sukkoth (booths) which begins our relationship with mitzvoth all over again.

This week, we finally arrive at what might be considered the end of the beginning, as Avraham bursts onto the world stage as the first Jew.

How indeed does Avraham's story begin? G-d actually tells him it is time for him to go on a journey, and that he must leave his land, his birthplace (hometown) and his family (the house of his father), to a land that He, G-d, will show him.

It is interesting to note that Avraham is being asked to let go of his past, but he is not really told where he will be going. He is only told to go to:

"...ha'aretz asher arecha'." *"...to the land that I (G-d) will show you."* (Genesis 12:1)

Why is Avraham not told where he is going?

Interestingly enough, this is the beginning of a series of challenges (tests?) that Avraham must meet, concluding with the story of the binding of Isaac. And there too, beginning with the exact same language of "*Lech Lecha*" (go to find yourself? Go for yourself?), Avraham is told to take his only son Yitzchak and offer him up (whatever *that* means...):

"Al echad ha'harim asher omar eilecha'"

"On one of the mountains I will tell you of." (22:2)

There too, Avraham is not told exactly which mountain he will need to find. But here, Avraham is asked to give up his future....

And in the process of being told by G-d to set out on this journey which we are still on 4,000 years later, Avraham is told:

"Ve'e'escha' le'goy gadol, va'avarechecha', va'agadla' shemecha', ve'heye' bracha. Va'avarcha' mevarachecha'...ve'nivrechu' becha' kol mishpechot ha'adama'."

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing And I will bless those who bless you... and through you will be blessed all the families of the earth.” (Bereishit (Genesis) 12: 2-3)

What is all this blessing? And what does it mean that Avraham will *be a blessing*? Obviously if Hashem (G-d) blesses him he will be blessed! And why doesn't it just say Avraham will be *blessed*?

Rashi, on the words “*heyey bracha*” (And you will be a blessing), comments that the words mean:

"The blessings are put in your hand."

In other words, since he was already promised that G-d will bless him, what do the words "*heyey bracha*" add?

“Until now, blessings were in the Hand of G-d. He blessed Adam. He blessed Noach. He blessed Avram. However, the words "*heyey bracha*" add the ability to bless. From now on, you -- Avram -- will bless whomever you wish.” (Rashi 12:2)

What does this mean? What does it mean that Hashem has given Avraham the power of blessing? And why is this gift given specifically to Avraham as opposed to Noach or Adam?

And lastly, what does it mean that through Avraham all the nations of the world will be blessed?

Rashi understands this to mean: “A man will say to his son: *‘be like Avraham.’*” (Rashi 12:3)

But this seems to imply that the meaning of this verse is that Avraham will be the *actual blessing* people give to each other which is not at all what the verse implies. The straightforward understanding would seem to be that through Avraham's efforts and success, ultimately the entire world will be blessed. So why does Rashi understand this to mean Avraham will be the blessing itself?

Perhaps in order to understand what is going on here, we need to understand the concept of being blessed. What, indeed, is a *bracha*, a blessing?

Most people think that a blessing is about thanking G-d for the gifts we are given in this world, assuming that for example, the blessing over bread is to thank G-d for giving us the bread we eat. But that is actually a mistake. To bless does not mean to say thank-you. There is a word for thanks and it is ‘*todah*’. In fact, we do find many instances where we thank G-d such as the ‘*modim*’ prayer where we thank G-d for all the little miracles we experience in our lives every day, or the second blessing of the Grace after meals (the ‘*birkat hamazon*’) the ‘*nodeh lecha*’ where we thank G-d for the land of Israel and for the Exodus from Egypt. But that is not the word *bracha*. So, what is the meaning of *bracha*, or blessing?

The Torah tells us that eventually

“Hashem ***beirach*** et Avraham bakol”,

“Hashem ***blessed*** Avraham with everything” (24:1), great wealth and increased his possessions.

And later, when Avraham's servant, Eliezer is searching for a wife for Yitzchak, he says,

“Va'Hashem ***beirach*** et adoni me'od...” “And Hashem blessed my master with great wealth...”

In other words, *bracha* means to increase, and in this case, Hashem increases Avraham's wealth or even his family, giving him a son. (See Rashi 24:1)

And the word *bracha* is also related to the word *bereicha* [a pool or reservoir]. So "*Baruch Ata*" does not mean: "*Blessed art Thou*." It means: "You are the source (or reservoir) of blessing.

And if this is true, then what Hashem is really telling Avraham, is that our purpose in this world, is to increase Hashem's presence in the world. And there are different ways in which we do this.

If, before I eat an apple, I take a moment to appreciate that the apple is really a gift from G-d, then the apple becomes a vehicle for blessing because it increases Hashem's presence in my life.

And when I bless another person, what I am really doing is to recognize that every human being is created in G-d's image, and thus, they become a vehicle for increasing Hashem's presence in my life.

You see, when G-d tells Avraham that he must leave his home and journey to the land of Israel and that he will then be blessed, most commentaries understand this to mean that the blessing is the *reward* for the journey, and the journey is the goal.

However, one could suggest that the goal is to bless Avraham, and the journey to Israel is just the vehicle whereby Avraham can be blessed.

In fact, if the blessing is the reward, it leaves us wondering why we need to know what the reward is, and in fact even why there is a reward at all. After all, Avraham would fulfill what Hashem wants simply because Hashem asks, and not for any reward. But if the blessing is the goal, then the Torah makes sense.

The entire point of everything Avraham stood for was man's challenge of becoming a vehicle for bringing G-d into the world, which is why Rashi suggests that "*A man will say to his son: 'be like Avraham.'*" Because the goal is to become such a living model of ethics and loving kindness, that anyone around you wants to *be* like you. And then you have actually become a blessing; a vehicle for bringing G-d into the world.

After the Flood it becomes clear that the entire world cannot do this together, so it needs to begin with one small nation, but the goal, indeed the dream, is that one day the entire world is blessed. And ultimately the message Avraham brings with him to a new land, is that every human being is blessed, because every human being is created.

And every human being has the ability to be a Fyodor who is not looking *for* blessing, but rather becomes a blessing, and not always because he or she is looking for it, but simply because in the course of life they rise to who they can be, because of who they really are.

May we be blessed soon, all of us, to live up to the blessing we all can be....

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman