

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

What would it take today for a person to give up his principles? What would cause a person to leave his faith? The story of Sol Teichman comes to mind.

Sol Teichman was twelve years old when World War two began, and the Germans started rounding up Jews all over Poland. Sol and his family lived in the Hungarian town of Munkacz, in a large family home that once occupied two square blocks; their initials are still visible on top of the house. They are all that is left of the once thriving Munkacz Jewish community, full of Belzer and Munkacz Chassidim. Of the 40,000 people in Munkacz, approximately 80% were Jewish, over 90% of whom were Sabbath observant.

Even so, there was always anti-Semitism in Munkacz, and when Sol would visit his grandparents on their farm, they weren't allowed outdoors on Sunday mornings; after church, as the priests marched with crosses in hand, the parishioners would spit and kick at any Jews they passed...

So the Jews kept to themselves and were oblivious to the storm that was coming...

Mr. Teichman was close with the Minchas Elazar, the Munkaczer Rebbe, and recalled him exhorting his followers that if they kept Shabbos all would be good for them...

Shortly after his Bar Mitzvah, Sol's father was taken away to a Hungarian Labor camp, but as bad as things were, the Hungarians were still not the Nazis, and the Jews still did not see what was coming, until the spring of 1944. On the second day of Pesach (Passover) in 1944, the Jews of Munkacz were given one hour to vacate their homes and were herded into the ghetto.

In June, they were transported to Auschwitz. That was the last time that Sol Teichman saw his mother, sister and three of his brothers. Sol would often later recount:

"If you didn't have faith, you had nothing to live for."

Throughout the terrible Holocaust years, he never ate on Yom Kippur.

As the end of the war approached, the Nazis forced many of their Jewish prisoners to participate in their infamous death march to Dachau. Sol and his brother Steve began the march. But Steve's strength gave out so Sol carried him for the rest of the journey. Of the 6,000 who started the march, only about 600 survived, Sol and his brother among them...

Eventually after the war, the two brothers managed to get aboard a ship full of American soldiers as part of a group of two hundred orphans being sent to America under the sponsorship of Eleanor Roosevelt.

*The boat docked in New York on a Shabbat afternoon. When the two boys realized it was Shabbos they refused to disembark; The Minchas Elazar's voice was ringing in their ears, "Keep the Shabbos and it will be good for you." The crew threatened them that they would be arrested or taken back to Europe, but the Teichman brothers held fast. When the Captain heard what was going on he made sure the boys were allowed to stay on the boat till Shabbat ended; when they got off a crowd was waiting for them; the press had gotten wind of the story and hundreds of people came to meet the two boys, Holocaust survivors who still believed ... **

So how does someone who sees his entire life go up in flames, who loses his mother and siblings, his home, and almost everything he holds dear at such a young age still believe that Hashem (G-d) runs the world? How does he keep faith that Shabbat still matters?

This week we read the portion of *Lech Lecha*, which begins the journey of the Jewish people and specifically the journey of Avraham, the father of Judaism. Jewish tradition (*Pirkei Avot* 5:4) describes his life as a series of ten tests, culminating in next week's portion with the binding of Isaac. Although the Mishna does not delineate what these tests are, it is generally accepted that the first is Hashem's command to Avraham to leave everything behind and undertake a journey to an unknown land.

"Lech Lecha" (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 12:1) 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.

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:

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great." (Ibid.v.1-2)

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?

Rav Moshe Feinstein in his *Darash Moshe* suggests that what made this command challenging was that it made no sense: why would G-d need Avraham to go anywhere to make him famous and allow him to become wealthy and achieve his goals?

If G-d is really all powerful, then Avraham can become great right in Mesopotamia (*Charan*) where he is. And this, says Rav Moshe is what made Avraham great; he spent a lifetime thinking and analyzing the world according to the pagan idolatry of his time, and he alone finally discerned that it was one G-d who was the source of reality, so clearly Avraham was a thinker. And yet he knew when he had to take a leap of faith that was beyond logic. Indeed, faith begins where logic ends.

And it is precisely the ability to move beyond logic, to take that leap of faith that allows us our greatest moments. Love, as an example, is not always logical; sometimes you have to take a leap of faith.

This, suggests Rav Moshe, is what is meant by the verse (ibid 17:1):

“Walk before me and be complete.”

“Hithalech le’fanai Ve’heyeh tamim...”

Avraham walked before G-d in that he acted based on his understanding of what Hashem wanted of him, even though he did not understand; he did what needed to be done even if sometimes it made no sense (*as in the binding of Isaac...*) simply because Hashem asked it of him.

We live in a world where everything has to make sense, and so many of the younger generation are trying to logically find a way to believe. But belief is way beyond faith, and sometimes we need to let go of the limitations and constraints that logic place on us, to discover the world and the reality beyond logic.

For two thousand years the Jewish people continued to believe even when that belief was completely illogical, when it made absolutely no sense.

After the Holocaust, in 1945, the world-renowned historian Arnold Toynbee wrote an article noting that the enigma of history, the Jewish people, was finally falling into the pattern of all other ancient peoples and, just like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians the Greeks and the Romans, the Jewish people were finally going to disappear. He called his article *The Fossil*.

Five years later, after the birth and survival of the State of Israel, an Israeli Historian, Chaim Herzog (who would one day become the President of Israel) wrote an article which he called *The Fossil lives*.

Sol Teichman understood that not everything makes sense; sometimes you just have to let go of the question and put your faith in something much bigger than your own intellect ...

After all, it was Shabbos ...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman

**Special thanks to Rav Mois Navon who reminded me of this story in a drasha, causing me to find it again online*