

Parshas Lech Lecha

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1. The Basis For Spiritual Advancement

The Torah states, **“When Terach had lived seventy years, he begot Avram, Nachor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father, in his native land, in Ur Kasdim.”**

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the meaning of **“Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father, in his native land, in Ur Kasdim”** is that Haran died in the kiln of Kasdim because of his father. Because Avraham had espoused monotheism and had broken his father’s idols, along with his brother, he was taken by his father Terach to Nimrod the king. Avraham was given an ultimatum to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the kiln (of Kasdim). Avraham chose to die and went into the fire. He emerged miraculously unscathed. Haran, Avraham’s brother, was also given the same ultimatum to bow or be thrown into the fire. He decided that if his brother Avraham emerged from the fire he would not bow to the idol either. However if Avraham was consumed by the fire he would bow. Since Avraham did not die, Haran chose not to bow and thus was cast into the kiln. G-d did not spare Haran. This is the meaning of **“Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father.”**

Regardless of the spiritual quality of Haran’s act (that he only waited to see if Avraham emerged before deciding whether or not to bow) his death was nevertheless a sanctification of the Name of G-d (kiddush Hashem). His death demonstrated to the world that he was not willing to bow to the idol.

The Torah continues by stating, **“And Avraham and Nachor took themselves wives; the name of Avraham’s wife was Sarai (Sarah our Matriarch), the name of Nachor’s wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Yiscah.”** The Torah does not identify the father of Sarai (Avraham’s wife); however it does identify the father of Milcah (Nachor’s wife) by saying “the daughter of Haran.” Then the verse continues by saying that he was the father of Milcah and Yiscah. Rashi cites the Midrash which explains, “Yiscah is in fact Sarai. She was called Yiscah because she was able to see with Divine Inspiration (ruach hakodesh).” Thus the Torah is telling us that Haran was also the father of Sarai the prophetess.

Originally, when the Torah identifies Sarai it does not tell us that her father was Haran. However, when the Torah recognizes Haran as the father of his female offspring, it calls him the father of Yiscah, who happens to be Sarai. Why does the Torah identify the wife Avraham as Sarai and when it identifies the daughter of Haran it refers to her as Yiscah? Why does it not simply tell us that Avraham married Sarai, the daughter of Haran, in the same manner that it tells us that Nachor married Milcah, the daughter of Haran? Evidently Sarai’s special spiritual dimension was unrelated to the influence of her father and due to her own realizations of G-d’s existence. However, Sarai was privileged to come upon G-d’s existence and advance herself to the level of prophet; this was due to the merit of her father Haran. Because Haran had died for the sake of sanctifying G-d’s Name, he merited to have that special daughter- Yiscah.

The Torah only informs us of events that have relevance to the development and involvement of the Jewish People. The fact that Haran gave his life to sanctify G-d's Name, seemingly is an event which is unrelated to the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people. Thus it is important for the Torah to communicate to us he was the father of Yiscah, to give Sarai the merit to be able to develop into a prophetess.

Every Jew relies on the merits of our holy Patriarchs. We say in our daily Amidah (silent prayer) "And He remembers the kindness of the Patriarchs." The kindness was the selfless sacrifice of the Patriarchs. Their dimension of being was so great that they were able to inculcate into the Jewish soul spiritual characteristics that guarantee the perpetuation of the Jewish people until the end of time. It is in their merit that the Jew has the opportunity to come upon Truth despite all of the obstacles that cause most to be misled.

2. G-d Rejoices with His Handiwork

The Torah states, "**Hashem said to Avraham, "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you...and you shall be a blessing."**" Sforno explains, "and you shall be a blessing" to mean that the ultimate blessing of Hashem will be when, "Hashem rejoices in His handiwork." When G-d is satisfied that mankind is functioning and participating on an optimum level - as they should - then the world will be endowed with blessing. Because Avraham was that special person who re-introduced G-d into existence, he would be the cause of blessing.

Sforno continues, "As the Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us, Hashem had asked Yishmael, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest), to bless Him. The blessing was that the Attribute of G-d's Mercy should suppress His Attribute of Justice. Thus, Yishmael's request of G-d was the cause for Him to rejoice and be satisfied with His existence. The ultimate blessing comes about when one contemplates existence to acquire for himself a level of perfection and subsequently shares it with the masses." G-d created existence with a purpose and as long as that purpose is being fulfilled, Hashem will rejoice in His creation and thus His blessing will come upon the world. This is the meaning of "you shall be a blessing."

The Torah states, "I will bless those who bless you; and he who curses you I will curse." Why is Hashem blessing the individual before he even blessed Avraham? Also, Hashem will curse the one who has cursed Avraham only after he has done so. Ohr HaChaim explains that the verse is telling us that Hashem will bless the one who wishes to bless Avraham although he has not yet done so because if a person is blessed and gives a blessing to another, then it will contain greater value for the recipient rather than if it

came from who is not as blessed. Thus, Hashem will bless (in advance) one who intends to bless Avraham so that he should derive greater benefit from the blessing.

Why did G-d want Avraham to be a greater beneficiary of blessing? It is because G-d rejoiced in His handiwork and was satisfied with His creation (Avraham). Avraham our Patriarch attained his objective in existence. The more effective Avraham was regarding fulfillment of his mission, the greater the relevance he had to completing the purpose of existence. Thus, whatever assistance Avraham received was given to him at the most advanced level – to be even more effective.

In order for one to be deserving of blessing, one must align his objective with that of his purpose in existence (which is spiritual). One, who is conscious and has a cognizance of G-d's existence and is thus actively involved in pursuing his spiritual objective, will be deserving of Hashem's blessing at a maximal level- because G-d is satisfied with the individual's accomplishment.

The Midrash tells us, "Fortunate are the tzaddikim that they overturn the Attribute of Justice to the Attribute of Mercy." The world cannot continue within the context of the Attribute of Justice, which is exacting and demands perfection. Nothing would exist under those circumstances and thus the purpose of creation would never be achieved. The world only exists within the context of the Attribute of Mercy. Thus, the tzaddikim are fortunate because it is in their merit that the world does exist. Hashem thus rejoices and is satisfied with their actions because they fulfill the purpose of existence.

3. Avraham Our Patriarch - the Unique Individual

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us that Avraham our Patriarch was tested ten times by G-d. One of these tests was that he was told by G-d to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's household. The Midrash tells us that because Avraham espoused monotheism and smashed his father's idols, Terach took him to Nimrod the king, who gave him the ultimatum to either bow to the idol or be cast into the fire. Avraham chose to give his life for G-d and was miraculously saved by Him.

Additionally, Chazal tell us that because of Avraham's position of monotheism he became a fugitive and was forced to go into hiding for many years. He was despised by his family and his countrymen. If Avraham had become a pariah and was not tolerated to any degree, why was it so difficult for him to leave his community and his family when he was told to go by G-d? One would think that with all of the incentives (children, wealth, and fame) that were promised to him by G-d if he should leave, that Avraham would have been motivated to do so. Therefore, why was this considered a test?

Chazal tell us that Avraham our Patriarch continuously entered into dialogue with the members of his generation regarding theological issues. He tried to convince them that there is an Omnipotent Being who Wills all of existence and that nothing functions outside of His control. Although he had spent many years trying to convert his community to monotheism, the belief in one G-d, he did not succeed. Thus, G-d came to Avraham and instructed him to leave his community and family behind because his efforts were in vain. He would never succeed in changing their beliefs.

The Midrash tells us that Avraham's interaction with his community is analogous to a receptacle containing fragrant perfume placed in a cemetery among the dead. Regardless of how beautiful and aromatic that fragrance may be, there is no one who would benefit from it because it is in a location of the dead. If one is to benefit from that fragrance, one must remove it from the cemetery and place it among the living. Similarly, G-d said to Avraham to leave his community and family because regardless of how elucidating and cogent his arguments may be, they would not cause the people to change their ways. All his effort was for naught. Avraham needed to leave his land and his father's household to go to a place where his efforts would be fruitful.

Avraham, although he had not yet seen the fruits of his labor, believed that over time his family and community would change as a result of his dialogue with them. The test for Avraham was that despite his self-confidence as being an effective person and his optimism that he would ultimately succeed, he did not question G-d even for a moment when he was told to leave. He could have asked Hashem for one more chance to try to influence them – but he did not. Although he was abandoning his countrymen and family – who would never again have a chance to believe in G-d – he did not question G-d's dictate. He totally negated himself to His Will.

If one were able to recognize and appreciate that he is a beneficiary of G-d's Kindness, that he owes all that he has to G-d, one would not be able to transgress His Will because of his gratitude to his Maker. The reason one deviates from doing the Will of G-d is because he believes that his own participation contributed to his success.

Avraham believed that he owed a great debt of gratitude to his father, Terach. As the Gemara in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that if one finds the lost article of his father and that of a stranger, the obligation of returning his father's item takes precedence because the child owes a debt of gratitude to his father for bringing him into existence. Had it not been for Terach fathering Avraham – there would not have been an Avraham who had re-introduced G-d to all existence. Thus the debt of gratitude overshadowed any other consideration. Thus, despite the fact the Terach had informed on him to Nimrod to be killed if he did not bow to the idol, Avraham felt a debt of gratitude to his father. The fact that Terach had brought great hardship upon his son was unrelated to the debt that Avraham felt that he owed to him. Avraham believed that he could not abandon his father because of appreciation for what his father had done for him. Because Avraham was an

individual who appreciated and internalized to the core of his being the meaning of being beholden, leaving his father was thus considered a test. This is also the reason Avraham served Hashem unswervingly. Despite his feeling of unlimited indebtedness to his father, Avraham negated his own feelings and followed the dictate of G-d without hesitation. For any other individual this would not have been considered a test because their capacity to appreciate what G-d had done is not something that is fully realized.

4. Prioritizing our Successes

The Torah tells us that after Avraham came to Canaan, Hashem appeared to him and said **“To your offspring I will give this land.”** This statement conveyed to Avraham two points: firstly that he would have children (which he did not have presently) and secondly that the land of Canaan would be given to his children. The Torah goes on to say that Avraham immediately built an altar to **“Hashem who appeared to him”** in order to memorialize this prophecy. Rashi explains that the altar was built as a testament for the good tidings which Hashem had promised him, namely that Avraham would have children and that the land would be theirs.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains this verse differently. He explains that Avraham built the altar only to commemorate Hashem’s appearance to him. At this time, Avraham was 75 years old, childless and had no community because he left his homeland at Hashem’s instruction. Although Hashem had communicated to Avraham during this prophetic experience that he would have children and land, this was inconsequential to Avraham relative to experiencing Hashem’s communication to him. Therefore the verse concludes that he built the altar only to memorialize Hashem’s appearance to him. Avraham believed that the promise of children and land was only a means to a spiritual end (to serve Hashem to a greater degree). It was only to facilitate his spiritual objective to bring G-d’s existence into focus in this world.

Rambam writes in *Hilchos Deos*, that when one is engaged in the act of procreation one should keep in mind that this act is to bring about children who will be *tzaddikim* and *talmide chachamim* (devout individuals who will be torah scholars). One should not engage in the act of procreation as an animal, but rather as one who understands that act will have spiritual ramifications.

The Torah tells us that after the Akeidah, the binding of Yitzchak, Sarah Our Matriarch passed away. The Torah states, **“...and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her (v’livkosa).”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Avraham came from Mt. Moriah after the Akeidah to find that his wife had passed away. Rabbeinu Bachya explains the words “and Avraham came” does not refer to location; but rather, to Avraham internalizing the reality of his tragedy. In order for one to bring about a certain state of mind one must reflect upon what has transpired. Avraham had to first “come” to that point within himself before he was able to eulogize and cry for Sarah.

The Hebrew letter **“kof”** in the word *v’livkosa* (***and crying for her***) is written smaller than the other letters. The Kesav Sofer z’tl explains that the Akeidah was the most difficult of all of Avraham’s ten tests that Hashem had presented to him. It was also the pinnacle of his spiritual accomplishment. He realized the infinite value of the Akeidah – that it would be the guarantor for the survival of the Jewish people until the end of time. On Rosh Hashanah, although it is the day of judgment when the shofar (ram’s horn) is blown, the prosecution of satan is immediately silenced because this brings to the forefront the merit of the Akeidah. The level of joy and ecstasy that Avraham experienced after the Akeidah is indescribable. Thus, the Kesav Sofer explains that as a human being, who is emotionally occupied with joy, it is impossible (despite the tragedy) to fall to the depths of despair and grief. Avraham was not able to internalize the pain of losing his wife and to

grieve for her properly, as he would have under other circumstances. This is communicated to us through the letter “kof” in the word *v’livkosa*, which is written smaller.

Through proper evaluation we need to prioritize the events in our lives to determine what is truly the greater blessing. What is primary and what is secondary. For example, one may become pained and preoccupied when the result of a business transaction was not what he had expected it to be. However does that same individual feel pained when he missed the recitation of the Shema in its proper time or missed his pre-set time of Torah study because of other matters? One must appreciate and understand that material existence is here only to accommodate one’s spiritual objective. The Chazon Ishe z’tl was a Torah giant and tzaddik of his generation. He was childless. Yet, the greatest pain of his life was when he felt that he did not perform a mitzvah properly.

If we would understand and truly relate to what we say in our daily prayer service, we would be ecstatic. If one appreciated the meaning and significance of being Hashem’s “Holy people” and His “chosen people,” one could not be negatively affected by experiencing any difficulty or setback in the material realm. Despite the fact that Avraham had no children, no land, and a minimal amount of assets, all that was significant to Avraham (relatively speaking) was G-d’s communication to him and not the promises contained within that communication.

Tana d’vei Eliyahu states that every Jew must say to himself, “When will my actions reach the level of my forefathers Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov?” This must be the aspiration of every Jew. A Jew must aspire to spiritual greatness using our Patriarchs as our model of achievement.

5. Avraham’s True Motive for Saving His Nephew

The Torah tells us that Lot, Avraham’s nephew was taken captive after the four mighty kings defeated the five kings. Lot was residing in Sodom, which was one of the communities conquered by the victors. The Torah states, **“Then came the escapee and told Avram, the Ivri...And when Avram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his disciples...”** Chazal tell us that the escapee who fled the battle was Og, the King of Bashan.

The Torah uses the term “brother” in reference to Lot who was taken captive. Lot however was the nephew of Avraham and not his “brother.” The explanation for this is that despite their previous serious disagreement (which caused the parting of their ways), Avraham came to his nephew’s aid. Avraham still considered himself responsible for the welfare of his nephew as if he were his brother. When Avraham was informed of Lot’s capture he immediately set out to rescue him despite the fact that he could only succeed through a miracle. Chazal tell us that Avraham had entered into battle with only his dedicated servant Eliezer and miraculously defeated the four mighty kings, thus rescuing Lot.

After Avraham emerged from the battle, the Torah states, **“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.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Avraham was concerned that since he was able to defeat the four mighty kings despite his limited resources, he may have depleted his merits to bring about the miracles. Avraham initially understood that he would not be able to save his nephew Lot without miracles. As the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, “If one experiences a miracle, he should be concerned that he may have depleted his merits.” Evidently, there is a cost factor in bringing about a miracle. This was the basis for Avraham’s concern. Hashem responded to Avraham that he should not be concerned and that his merit was not diminished through the miracles; but in fact, his reward would be “very great.” Meaning, destroying the four mighty kings and saving Lot gave him even greater merit. How do we understand this?

In order to answer this question we must first understand why Avraham was willing to risk everything to save Lot? When Lot departed from Avraham he went to live in Sodom, which is identified by the Torah as an evil community. As the Torah states, **“The people of Sodom were wicked and sinful towards Hashem, exceedingly.”** Evidently, if Lot chose to become a member of the community of Sodom, he too was a wicked individual. The people of Sodom, despite their recognition of their Maker, intentionally defied Him. If Lot was in fact such an evil person, why did Avraham risk losing his entire life’s spiritual investment to save him?

Lot was only taken captive because it was a way to bait and entrap Avraham in order to have him killed. Through the capture of Lot, the four kings believed that Avraham, despite the overwhelming odds against him, would go into battle in an attempt to save his Nephew and thus be killed. They perceived Avraham as a zealot who did not take into consideration his own life. When Avraham is informed that his nephew was taken captive, the Torah identifies him as *“Avram ha’Ivri.”* Chazal explain this to mean that Avraham stood on one side and the rest of the world stood on the other. Meaning, Avraham was a person who was willing to take on the world single handedly. The Midrash tells us that the escapee who informed Avraham that his nephew had been captured was Og, the King of Bashan, whose motive was to have Avraham go into battle and be killed so that he could take Sarah (Avraham’s wife) as his own. Avraham understood that his nephew’s capture was only meant to be an entrapment for him. He understood Og’s ulterior motive exactly. Nevertheless he risked everything to save Lot.

If Avraham was to succeed in rescuing Lot, would the value of the victory simply be that he saved his nephew, who was an evil person? Or was it something beyond that. Avraham understood that the victory over the four kings would be a public *kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G-d’s Name) that would come about as a result of rescuing him. Therefore, as a result of his victory Avraham became, *“Av Hamon Goyim – the father of all nations.”* Therefore, G-d said to Avraham that he did not need to be concerned that his merits were depleted; but to the contrary, his reward was very great.

When Avraham was informed about Lot’s capture, the Torah states, **“when**

Avraham heard that his brother was taken captive.” By using the term “his brother” the Torah is communicating to us that the impetus for Avraham’s initiative to save his nephew was for the sake of bringing about a kiddush Hashem. Haran, Lot’s father, gave his life in the Kiln of Kasdim to sanctify G-d’s Name. Because Haran did not bow to the idol he was cast into the fire. Thus, Avraham’s interest in saving Lot was not to save the individual, but rather, through the rescue of his nephew he would bring about the greatest sanctification of G-d’s Name of all time. The term “brother” alludes to the sanctification of G-d’s Name. Thus, because Avraham understood the value of his objective (kiddush Hashem) he was willing to sacrifice all of his spiritual accomplishments.

The Vilna Gaon z’tl would appoint an agent every year well in advance of Succos to seek out an Esrog on his behalf. One year the Esrog crop did not yield favorable results and it was difficult to procure a beautiful Esrog. The Vilna Gaon’s agent, after a long search, finally came upon a wealthy individual who was in possession of an Esrog that would meet the Vilna Gaon’s approval. The agent informed this individual that he was seeking to purchase an Esrog on behalf of the Vilna Gaon and was willing to pay any price for it. The man responded that he was already a man of means and was therefore not interested in selling the Esrog. The agent asked him, “What then do you want in exchange for your Esrog?” The man responded, “I will give you my Esrog in exchange for the Vilna Gaon’s share in the world to come.” Reluctantly, the agent agreed and returned to Vilna with the Esrog. When the Vilna Gaon asked him, “What was the cost of the Esrog?” He hesitantly responded, “Your share in the world to come.” The Vilna Gaon joyfully replied, “Baruch Hashem (Thank G-d) I can for the first time in my life perform a mitzvah completely selflessly for its own sake, without any consideration of reward.” The Vilna Gaon appreciated performing a mitzvah in the most perfect manner. He was willing to give up all his life’s spiritual accomplishments for the sake of performing one mitzvah.

Avraham understood and appreciated the value of causing a sanctification of G-d’s Name; therefore, the personal cost of this objective was irrelevant. However, after the fact, because the victory came about through miracles, he was concerned that his merits were depleted. To this, Hashem responded not to worry. The merit for his endeavor is very great because the value of bringing about a *kiddush Hashem* has no limit.

6. The Expression of One’s Essence (from Noach)

The Torah tells us that all humanity participated in the building of the Tower of Babel to wage a battle with G-d. The Torah states, “**The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose.**” Rashi explains that the one language spoken by all humanity was Hebrew (*lashon HaKodesh*- the Holy Tongue). Seemingly, everyone was able to unite because they shared a common language and thus were able to communicate with one another. The Torah continues, “**Behold, they are one people with one language for all...Come, let us (G-d) descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another...**” G-d confused their language. Meaning that the original 70 families that were united against G-d were no longer able to communicate in a common language (Hebrew), but rather each family was given its own language. They subsequently were dispersed and thus became known as the generation of the dispersion.

When a project is of paramount importance and many people from around the world gather together to participate, they will not be hindered in communicating ideas and concepts to one another even though they do not share a common language. It is possible to communicate ideas without the use of language. Since this is the case, why was the confusion of language a basis for terminating the building of the Tower of Babel? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that after the introduction of multiple languages, when a person would ask his fellow for a hammer, the other would think he had asked him for an ax. As a result of this they would begin to quarrel, which would ultimately lead to one of them being killed. Is the disruption of language alone enough to cause such a degree of chaos?

The Gemara in Tractate Megillah tells us that as a consequence of the Babylonian Emperor destroying the First Temple, Hashem said (verse from Isaiah), "I will come upon them (the Babylonians) and I will cut from them..." The Gemara explains this to mean that their alphabet and their language will come to an end." Tosafos asks, "The interpretation of the Gemara seems to be difficult because even in our times the Babylonians still speak Aramaic. If so, what is the meaning of G-d saying that He will eliminate the Babylonian language?" Tosafos answers, "The language that is referred to in the verse from Isaiah was a dialect spoken by the royalty and the upper echelon of Babylonian society. That dialect no longer exists."

Maharal of Prague z'tl in his work on the Megillah of Esther answers the question of Tosafos differently. He explains that language is an expression of ideas and concepts of a particular culture and society. When a Greek expresses himself in the Babylonian language, the language is only a facilitator for him to express the Greek culture. Regardless of his mode of communication, he is expressing himself from the perspective of a Greek. Thus, when G-d said that the Babylonian language will come to an end, it does not mean that people will no longer speak that language; but rather that language would no longer be a medium for the transmission of the Babylonian culture.

When the world spoke a common language, the Holy Tongue (Hebrew), all humanity shared a similar perspective and mindset. Because they had a common perspective they were able to reach a consensus and act in unison to build the Tower of Babel. However after G-d confused their language, a metamorphosis took place within each of the 70 families that participated in the mutiny against G-d. Their inability to understand each other was not merely the result of different communication skills. In fact, Hashem had changed the worldview held by each of these families. Therefore they could no longer reach a consensus. Thus, the building of the Tower of Babel was disrupted.

At the time of the dispersion, the unifying language of Hebrew was no longer spoken. Thus, the essence of the world was no longer rooted in what is represented by the Holy Tongue. Since Hebrew is the language of G-d, and the world no longer expressed itself through this medium, it is a reflection on humanity – that their essence was no longer intermingled with G-d.

The Midrash tells us that Avraham our Patriarch, emerged speaking Hebrew after many years of hiding in a cave (from his pursuers). Through his selfless sacrifice in espousing monotheism, he merited having his essence restored to Godliness and this expressed itself through the Hebrew language.

One of the reasons the Jewish people merited the redemption from Egypt was that they did not change their language. They spoke Hebrew despite their acculturation by their Egyptian masters. Although the Jewish people stopped circumcising themselves and subsequently became idolaters, they nevertheless retained their Hebrew language. Based

on the Maharal of Prague, because the expression of the Jewish people was Hebrew (the language of G-d) it was an indication that there was still a spark of G-dliness within them that could be ignited. Had they no longer spoken Hebrew it would have indicated that their spark of G-dliness had been extinguished- thus terminating their relationship with G-d.