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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

A Life's Journey

“Go for yourself...” (12:1)

When Hashem instructs Avraham, “*Lech lecha mei’artzecha u’mi’moladetecha u’mi’beit avicha* — *Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house*” — it is more than just a geographical relocation. This command represents the quintessential journey of every Jew and indeed every human being who seeks a deeper relationship with the Divine. It’s a call to leave behind not only physical surroundings but also the psychological and spiritual constraints of the past.

“*Lech lecha*” can be read as “go to yourself.” It’s an invitation to discover one’s unique mission and identity by moving beyond the familiar patterns of life. For Avraham, this meant leaving the idolatrous environment of his father’s home and the cultural norms of his birthplace. For us, it might mean stepping out of our comfort zones, questioning old assumptions, or embracing new spiritual challenges that lead us closer to our true selves — and to Hashem.

Avraham’s journey was not just a one-time event but a continuous process. It is the paradigm of our lifelong journey of “*Lech lecha*.” At different stages of life, we must leave behind what we’ve outgrown and move toward a higher calling. This journey is deeply individual — no two people have the same path. The courage to follow that call is the hallmark of Avraham Avinu and the legacy he bequeathed to us.

The journey is not just about leaving; it’s about arriving at a deeper understanding of Hashem’s presence in our lives. Each step Avraham took brought him closer not only to the physical land of Canaan but to a clearer vision of his relationship with God. In our own lives, the “*Lech lecha*” moments are those times when we move beyond the known and discover deeper layers of faith and understanding.

In conclusion, the call of *Lech Lecha* is timeless. It teaches us that spiritual growth is a journey of leaving and arriving, of moving beyond the familiar to find our true selves. Through Avraham’s example, we learn that every step taken in faith is a step towards discovering the divine purpose within us.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 28)

“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.”

Wilson Mizener – American Playwright

Afterword

I once read a delightful anecdote about a little boy flying for the first time ever, who was obviously terrified. At some point he was so overwhelmed that he burst into tears. A sympathetic flight attendant asked him what he was scared of. “Look,” said the boy, pointing toward the window. “It’s so dark outside, how does the pilot know where to go?”

The flight attendant took the child by his hand and took him to a window where he could see the wing of the airplane. “You see that little red flashing light?” he asked him. When the child nodded, the flight attendant then took him to the other side of the plane and showed him that there was a red flashing light on the other wing as well.

“You see, all the pilot has to do is stay between those two red lights and then he knows that the airplane is going exactly where it is supposed to go.”

The flight attendant then took the little boy back to his seat and moments later he was fast asleep.

Kriat Shema al Hamitah is our nighttime navigation system. Going to sleep does not mean that we are absolved from spiritual obligations. It is true that when asleep we are physically unable to perform Mitzvot, but our subconscious needs to retain the awareness of Hashem’s existence at all times. In effect, when we recite Kriat Shema al Hamitah with intent and concentration it keeps us “within the two flashing red lights” and it stops us from “drifting off course.” Kriat Shema al Hamitah is our way of ensuring that we do not confuse our spiritual coordinates and dream about things that are inappropriate. Just as the Chofetz Chaim taught us (see part one of this series) going to sleep with a spiritual attitude means waking up with a spiritual attitude!

As we have learnt together, Kriat Shema al Hamitah is designed to imbue us with the knowledge that, even when we are asleep, we are Hashem’s children. This beautiful series of Tefillot fills us with spiritual yearnings that accompany us throughout the night until we wake up to begin a new day full of limitless spiritual potential. As we sleep, they keep us attached to the most important Element of our existence – our Father in Heaven – even though we are not conscious of the fact.

That is why the Rabbis composed Kriat Shema al Hamitah, because it is the most effective way to retain our connection to Hashem through our subconscious when we are asleep. Our dreams define our essence because they reflect what we thought about during the day – and, very often, what we will think about during the next day. The ingredients to the sweetest dreams of all are found within the poetic words of Kriat Shema al Hamitah. As we recite each word carefully and lovingly, we are beginning the process of preparing for tomorrow. Because the pristine canvas of tomorrow will be filled with our dreams of tonight. As Paul Valéry, the French poet, essayist, and philosopher so articulately expressed, “The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.”

Kriat Shema al Hamitah is truly an extraordinary moment in our day. What a thrill it is, and what a privilege it is, to end our day with the absolute awareness that our bond with our Father in Heaven never sleeps – even when we do.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

Wholehearted Faith

Parashas Lech Lecha traces Avraham’s rise to greatness and shows us the path to follow. After passing several critical tests of faith, Hashem promised him enormous reward, to which Avraham said, “But You have not given me any children [to inherit whatever reward I will receive]...” Avraham knew that according to the signs of astrology, he was not destined to bear children. Hashem took him outside and told him that his descendants would be uncountable like these stars (15:1-6). On a deeper level, the verse means that Hashem took Avraham “outside” the astrological influence of the stars and under Hashem’s direct influence. According to nature, he could not have children, but for Hashem — who is above nature — anything is possible (*Rashi*).

Later in this *parashah*, Hashem commanded Avraham to have wholehearted faith (17:1). This meant that Avraham — and his descendants who strive to continue in his path — should not be overly concerned about astrological signs, and they should not seek stargazers and fortunetellers. Rather, even if the astrological signs forecast doom, they should place their trust in Hashem alone (*Ramban* there and in *Teshuvos HaMeyuchasos* §283).

We can illustrate this idea with the well-known story of Rabbi Akiva’s daughter: Stargazers predicted that she would die on her wedding night, but she was saved by the merit of an extraordinary act of charity she performed by giving her portion of food to a poor person (*Shabbos* 156b). As heirs of Avraham’s legacy of faith, we can override the influences of astrology and other rules of nature through good deeds, prayer, and finding favor in Hashem’s eyes.

Much later in the Torah, Hashem repeats the Mitzvah to have wholehearted faith, this time to the Jewish people. The verse states, “Be whole [in your faith] with Hashem, your God” (*Devarim* 18:3). *Rashi* there comments that when our faith in Hashem is whole, we are with Him. This means that the more we internalize that He is the ultimate controller of every aspect of our lives, the more we merit to rise above natural influences and be “with Hashem” alone. Similarly, R’ Chaim Volozhiner famously said that when a person meditates on the fact that there is none other than Hashem, he is invulnerable to any harm (*Nefesh HaChaim* 3:12).

This precept is central to Jewish life. If a Jew becomes ill or experiences other types of suffering, he is meant to recognize that Hashem is disciplining him and prodding him to correct his conduct (*Berachos* 5a). Before taking medication, for example, he should first pray that it works, recognizing that Hashem is the ultimate Healer (*Mishnah Berurah* 230:6). Otherwise, there is a concern that he may place his trust at least partly in the doctor and medicine — which is a violation of the Mitzvah to place one’s trust entirely in Hashem.

With a short prayer, a person reminds himself of Who is ultimately in control; this recognition alone can be enough to merit relief. One should similarly involve Hashem in all aspects of his life by praying for all of his needs and thanking Him after having received them (see *Shaar HaTziyun*, *ibid.*, and *Berachos* 9:5).

Avraham’s wholehearted faith gave him the strength to risk his life and stand up against the rest of the world. We shall carry his torch proudly and unflinchingly until all doubts fade with the rising sun of the Mashiach.

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits G-d appearing to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants, and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants.

A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty would cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the region and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs from accepting any of the spoils of the battle.

In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to Eretz Yisrael, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel, Hagar returns to Avram and gives birth to Yishmael. The weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and his entire household.

Q & A

Questions

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites." How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "*palit*" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "*ma'aser*" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?
17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of G-d.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. 12:8 - He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. 14:1 - Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 14:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - G-d had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's King to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. 15:13 - With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.