

A Thought on Parashat Lech Lecha 'Leaving Home, Reaching Out'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



The world struggles to come to terms with the magnitude of refugee crises, and as national leaders lock swords on muddy battlefields of ethics and compassion versus political pragmatism, we would do well to remember that, as Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch puts it, our nationhood began when a refugee took some of his family and friends and began a long journey to an unknown destination. Rav Hirsch wrote in his commentary on the Torah that, in making himself a refugee of his own free will and giving up his homeland and his rights as a citizen, Avraham Avinu justified his appointment as father of our nation:

"While everybody in the whole world was making every effort to establish themselves, to settle securely, he is to give up his homeland and his rights as a citizen, of his own freewill to make himself a refugee, to throw a protest in the face of the gods worshipped by all the nations. This demands courage and the conviction of the truth of the inner feeling, and consciousness of G-d, this demands the Jewish conception of G-d and Jewish confidence and boldness - and that was the first thing that Abraham had to do to justify his appointment." (Rav Hirsch on the Chumash, Bereishit pp.224-225)

Refugees of today are fleeing 'from' and 'to.' They are escaping from physical danger or economic hardship, and to countries where they hope to live safe and prosperous lives. Lehavdil, Avram was also fleeing both 'from' and 'to,' but his flight was a response to a Divine instruction, "לך לך," "Go for yourself." Moreover, in picking up and leaving his home, wrote Rav Hirsch, Avram was going against the grain in a society and an age which tended to glorify the majority rather than the individual. The generation of the dispersion said, "Na'aseh Lanu Shem," "We shall make ourselves a name." They believed that they could come together as a community and, in their arrogance, proclaim their actions as ends in themselves, call on others to follow them towards their empty purposes and dispense with Hashem and His laws entirely.

Rav Hirsch is careful to point out that even in Judaism the majority has a high status, and, "Judaism, too, values attachment to the community as supremely important." However, the words "לך לך" indicate that, "everybody is responsible to Hashem for himself. If necessary, alone - with G-d - when the principle worshipped by the majority is not the true G-dly one." (Ibid. p,224) Rav Hirsch notes that the Hebrew words used by the Torah in these pesukim not only describe Avram's mission, but also have the force of emphasising the difficulty of the task: He

explained that, "our very language teaches...in the word ארץ (land) and בית (house / home) how strong are the bonds that attach a person to both." He continued, however, "Yet stronger than the bond that attaches us to fatherland and family should the bond be that attaches us to G-d." (Ibid. p,224)

Look at this next remarkable sentence:

"How could we have existed, how continue to exist, if we had not, from the very beginning, received from Abraham the courage to be a minority!" (Ibid. p,224)

In Pirkei Avot (1:14) we have the well-known teaching: "He (Hillel) used to say: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?'" The first phrase is a call to the individual to step aside from the majority in order to perfect himself. In the second, there is a hint to the fact that each of us is also part of a group, and that we share in each other's accomplishments.

As we saw above, Rav Hirsch writes that, in leaving his land, birthplace and parental home, Avram displayed, "...courage and the conviction of the truth of the inner feeling, and consciousness of G-d." However, we also know that Avraham Avinu's character went beyond the courage to take a stand as an individual against the paganism of his times. Leaving his land and home behind him did not stop him reaching out to strangers, such that he is characterised for all time as having the middah of chessed – lovingkindness. Rabbi Mordechai Miller expresses this as follows:

"The qualities of tolerance and hospitality are basic to Abraham's very nature, to the extent that when messengers of G-d came to him in the guise of wandering idolatrous Arabs (Rashi, Bereishit 18:4) he entertained them with warmth and lavishness that took no account of their primitive religious standing."
(Sabbath Shiurim 5729 p.18)

We see, then, that two great, opposing forces, sat together comfortably within Avraham Avinu. On the one hand, he had the ability and strength of character to turn his back on all that was familiar and homely in order to remove himself from a world of idolatry and instead pursue spiritual growth. On the other, as we shall see in next week's sidrah, he was able to reach out to even those furthest from his conception of holiness and welcome them into his tent with open arms and genuine hospitality.

As their descendants, we inherit traits from the Avot, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. We have the capacity to act as they did. However, we do not always know what potential we possess, what strengths lie within us. By looking carefully at the lives and the actions of our Forefathers we gain a glimpse not only of their greatness, but also of the potential for greatness within

ourselves. Therefore, we, too, should be able to find within us, as within Avraham, the ability to welcome all people in a sincere spirit of love and friendship, while also having the courage to distance ourselves from forces and influences which threaten our spiritual growth.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy