

Parashat Lekh L'kha 5781

Shabbat Shalom! This Shabbat's Parashah is Lekh Lekha which opens with the story of Avraham Avinu (Abraham our father) coming into full swing. It's interesting that our Chumash, Etz Chayyim doesn't translate all three of the parts of this opening verse. *Lekh lekha me'artz'kha, umimolad't'kha, umibeit avikha el ha'aretz asher arekha.*" (Get yourself going from your land (*artz'kha*) from your native land (*molad't'kha*) i.e. the place where you were a child (*yeled*), that is where you were born (*nolad*), from your father's house (*beit avikha*) to the land that I will show you. Avraham is introduced to us at the end of last Shabbat's Parashah (*Noakh*). And in fact, he and his brothers and their wives and Lot, his brother's son, all left their native land with Terakh, Avraham's father, at the end of last week's Parashah. However Terakh died in Kharan after a while and that's where last week's portion left us hanging.

So this week's Parashah opens with these famous words: *Lekh l'kha*. As you all know the tradition of Midrashic commentary rarely explains the literal, plain, obvious meaning of the words – it usually finds a hidden meaning embedded in the very same words. In this case the Zohar takes the word (*artz'kha*) literally “your land” and says it's truly referring to your *artziyutkha* your physicality. So the deeper meaning is “transcend your physicality” and go “into yourself” (*lekh l'kha*) go (*lekh*) into yourself (*l'kha*) (which is, actually a very literal translation). Go “into yourself” i.e. your inner self, not your outer self, your physicality. If you, Avram do this, I will “appear” to you (*arekha*) (instead of translating it as I will show you). In other words if you seek your soul you will find G!d, the Eternal One, there. And then you will become a blessing- in other words the life you will live in accordance to that path will be a blessing to others.

Avraham is essentially round three in the Torah of trying to establish a higher consciousness in the world. Round one, obviously, was Adam and Eve, round two was Noah and his family- and now it's round three. Of course there are connections between them and the text itself echoes those earlier episodes with the use of certain words that resonate with the earlier stories and with later crucial narratives in the Torah too. Just to mention a few connections to other well-known passages in the Torah. G!d promises Avram that his children will be like “the dust of the earth” in number and in next week's Parashah, we see the same word for dust (*afar*) when Avraham reflects to himself when he is arguing with G!d, that he is just

“dust and ashes” (*afar v’efer*). At an early covenant scene between Avram and G!d, when Avram makes an offer of a heifer, she-goat, ram, turtledove and a young bird and cuts them in two (this is called the *brit beyn ha’b’tarim* – the covenant between the “pieces”) – when the sun sets a “deep sleep” (*tardemah*) comes over Avram. This same Hebrew word is used concerning Adam before Eve is formed from his “rib.” After this verse Avram is told that his offspring will be “strangers in a land not theirs and they shall be enslaved and oppressed there for four hundred years.” A little earlier, in 15:7 G!d says to Avram that “I am the Eternal One who brought you out of Ur Kasdim (Ur of the Chaldeans) to give this land to you as a possession. Of course that phrase (“who brought you out”) is associated with the exodus from Egypt especially.

Avraham and Sarah are the beginning of our people. Originally they are called Avram and Sarai. Avram means “high” or “great” father. Sarai implies a powerful person, a ruler, a noble person. Their names are changed in this Shabbat’s portion. Shakespeare said “what’s in a name, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” and those are beautiful words conveying a significant insight. However, in the Torah and in our tradition in general, a name has great significance. In the beginning of the Torah, when there is only one language, which (of course) our tradition says was Hebrew, Adam names all the animals. Each name is understood to capture the essence of the thing. When a name is changed in the Torah, it has great significance. It implies that the person has changed in some fundamental way and the name is seen as a reflection of that. Avram became Avraham, Sarai became Sarah. Both of them added a “*hey*” to their name – as a reflection of their connection and devotion to the Eternal One Whose name has two “*hey*”s in it and Whose Name is a combination of the verb “to be” in the past, present, and future tenses.

When we give a name to someone in Hebrew, we connect them to someone in the past who had that name, but who has passed away. Unfortunately I encounter many people who don’t know their own Hebrew name or the names of their parents. It’s a shame to see this powerful tradition being lost. Words have great power. Something said in one language can never be completely conveyed in another. A language contains within in the culture from which it spawned. The Hebrew language is an inheritance that contains within it great treasures of our past and present and potentially our future if we nourish it to whatever degree we are capable of doing so. We don’t all have to become fluent in Hebrew, but every word we learn is a gift to ourselves. One of the miracles of the 20th Century is the amazing revival of the Hebrew language

as a spoken language. Probably more people speak Hebrew today than have ever spoken Hebrew at any one time before. There are over seven million Hebrew speakers in Israel alone today. Hebrew as a spoken language turns prayer into living speech. It makes the Bible and so much of our spiritual heritage accessible again. Hebrew as a living language revived in Israel is the reason why all non-Orthodox branches of Judaism including all of us Ashkenazim, adopted the Sephardic pronunciation as used in Israel – not only because it's more authentically middle-eastern/semitic, but also as a strong expression of identification with Israel and the revival of Jewish nationhood along with the Hebrew language. *Derekh agav* (by the way), the modern Orthodox in Israel, whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic all pray in the Sephardic pronunciation. The revival of Jewish sovereignty in our ancient homeland and the revival of our ancient language are two of the great miracles of the 20th Century. And it all goes back to Avraham and Sarah. Shabbat Shalom.