

## LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

# The Path To Follow Lech Lecha

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## Guard Your Tongue!

### A Segula to be Free of All Sin

The Chafetz Chaim wrote, "It is obvious that we should accustom ourselves to watching what we say. We must not say anything that may be negative about others, even if it causes no harm – and especially if it makes them lose their livelihood – and we must not shame others with our cruel words. We must also be careful not to be dragged into conflicts because of the stories we have heard, for all this is evil. The same applies to other prohibitions and instructions in this area."

In this way, a person will automatically keep away from theft and fraud, for if he has already taken it upon himself to not hurt others in any way through his words, how much more will he avoid doing so through his actions. If he conducts himself in this way, over time he will find himself free of many sins.

It is written, "And the L-RD said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1). Commenting on this in the name of the Sages, Rashi states that the meaning is: "For your own benefit, for your own good. It is there that I will make you into a great nation, whereas here you will not merit having children. Also, I will make your character known to the world [Bereshith Rabba 39:2]."

Here we see that G-d promised great things to Abraham, contrary to the trial of Isaac's sacrifice when He told him, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love..." (Genesis 22:2), without promising anything in return. We therefore need to understand the meaning of this trial to "Go for yourself from your land."

The following questions arise:

1. Why did G-d command Abraham to leave Haran, since it was there that he succeeded in converting people and bringing them to a knowledge of G-d? Furthermore, he made everyone proclaim the Name of G-d. If such is the case, why did Abraham have to abandon his religious activities? If it was in order to receive his reward in Eretz Israel, we cannot say that this was a trial, since it was for his own benefit.

2. In addition, why is the narrative not in chronological order? It should have first stated, "From your father's house," followed by "from your relatives," and then "from your land." The commentators have already noted this inversion.

To explain this reversal in the logical order of the passage, the Sages have said: "If a man sees that his [evil] desire is conquering him, let him go to a place where he is unknown, don black and cover himself with black, and do as his heart desires" (Kiddushin 40a). Concerning this passage the commentators have stated: "One must not be mistaken and think that he will sin elsewhere, but rather that his black clothes will bring him to restrain his desires and repent" (Tosaphot in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel). The fact is that he will not be disturbed in a place where nobody knows him, and he will then be able to repent and correct himself, for no one will come to remind him of his past sins. It was the same for Abraham when G-d told him: "Go for yourself from your land," for elsewhere – where no one knows you – you can progress better in your service of G-d, which is not the case here, close to evil King Nimrod and his entourage. You will not be able to serve G-d in the house of your father either, for there you are prevented from so doing. Even if you manage to overcome the pressure of these godless men, they will never appreciate your deeds.

Abraham did not hesitate for a moment. He immediately assembled his entire family and "the souls they made in Haran" (Genesis 12:5) – meaning all his followers – and quickly left in accordance with G-d's command. Thus it is written, "So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him" (v.4), for G-d's word is a commandment.

Here we see Abraham's great piety and humility. In fact he could have remained pious, even among ungodly men, and overcome their influence and pressure for the rest of his life. This is especially true since all his deeds were motivated solely by his love for G-d, and he did not seek out fame or renown. Therefore he could have told himself that, in spite of the opposition of his surroundings, he was going to stay

in his land without deviating from his chosen path. However Abraham did not ask any questions after G-d spoke to him. He immediately left Haran and headed in the direction of Eretz Israel, for he knew that if G-d commanded him to leave his land and his father's house, He had His reasons.

The first reason was that, although Abraham knew that he did not have to fear the influence of his wicked environment, all those whom he and his wife Sarah had converted were not yet at that level. They were not yet at the point of being able to overcome the trials of their surroundings and the time, and they risked returning to their wicked ways if they stayed. Abraham had good reason to be concerned about this.

The second reason was that Abraham understood that his role was not to serve G-d secretly and in private, but on the contrary, in broad daylight – in plain view and full knowledge of all – so that everyone could witness his deeds. In fact this is exactly what he did, as the Rambam states: "His sole aim was to correct people from the error of their ways and to make them understand that there is but one Creator. It was to bring them to a knowledge of G-d" (Hilchot Akum 2:2-3).

Nevertheless Abraham had some questions: In a new land, would he also be able to convince people to believe in G-d, as he had done in Haran, especially since he did not know to which land G-d would lead him? This was a great trial for someone who, during his entire life, had fought for G-d in spite of the opposition he faced along the way. One must not forget that this was the time of the Tower of Babel, a time when peoples were dispersed as a punishment for having separated themselves from G-d and practiced idolatry. However Abraham withstood this trial because he knew that such was his duty at the time.

It was therefore a trial for Abraham to leave his land, and to him it constituted neither a kindness nor a benefit. He had succeeded in Haran, but would he also succeed in another land? What kindness or benefit would he gain in a strange land? Yet Abraham withstood this test, and if G-d says, "For your own benefit, for your own good," one must do what He commands.

We now understand the order of the words in the verse ("from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house"). This order occurs because Abraham was busier outside the house than inside it, in the sense evoked by the statement: "Not study, but practice is the essential thing" (Perkei Avoth 1:17). Abraham was outside for the majority of his time. He was interacting with people and speaking to them, and his house had but secondary importance. This is why G-d first said, "your land," since being outside in the land was essential to him. The phrase "your father's house" was mentioned last because it was secondary to him. Without a doubt, that was the reason why this trial was so difficult, for he was attached to that place – to that land – and he wondered if he could ever succeed in a new land. Yet he withstood this trial, and G-d promised that he could continue his work in a new land.

# MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

## Personal Interests Lead to Error

It is written, “There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land” (Genesis 12:10).

Naturally, none of us will question Abraham’s decision to journey to Egypt because of famine. Similarly, when he described Sarah as “my sister,” in his great wisdom he obviously evaluated this course of action and concluded that it was warranted.

However this is not the opinion of the Ramban, who states: “Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to be a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for G-d surely has the power to help and to save” (Ramban on Genesis 12:10).

This is astonishing! Abraham, the greatest of the spiritual giants, and a man who recognized his Creator at the age of three, plumbed the depths of Halachah and judged that he had to journey to Egypt. Yet here come the words of the Ramban to contradict him, believing that the Halachah is not so clear-cut on this issue, and furthermore that Abraham’s actions were a sin. How could this be? It remains for us to learn an important principle here: If one makes a decision that personally affects him – even one as carefully weighed as the decision made by Abraham in his wisdom – it must still be scrutinized to see that it has not been influenced by personal interests.

In that regard, it is said that the Gaon and author of Sifte Cohen (the Shach) was once involved in a monetary dispute with one of the prominent residents of Vilna. He and his opponent agreed to present their arguments to one of the great Torah scholars of the generation, a man who lived far away and did not know the Shach. The scholar in question was Rabbi Avraham Abba, the Rav of Novardok. Before going to see him, the Shach reviewed all the passages in the Gemara and Shulchan Aruch that dealt with the issue at hand, and he concluded that he was in the right. He was therefore certain that he was going to win his case.

When they presented themselves before Rabbi Avraham Abba, the rav immersed himself in the depths of Halachah, finally concluding that the Shach was wrong! The latter was stunned to hear this decision, which in his view was not in accordance with Halachah. He therefore asked Rabbi Avraham Abba to explain how he had reached his decision. Rabbi Avraham went to his library and took out a book on Choshen Mishpat – a book written by none other than the Shach himself – and explained that his decision had been based on this book! The Shach then examined what he had written, and he concluded that Rabbi Avraham was correct. The Shach immediately revealed his identity to him and said, “How great are the words of our Sages, for they have stated: ‘A man cannot see to his own disadvantage’ [Shabbat 119a].”

## The Importance of Eretz Israel

*It is written, “And the L-RD said to Abram, ‘Go for yourself from your land’ ” (Genesis 12:1).*

During all the time that Abraham remained outside Eretz Israel, Hashem did not appear to him. Abraham only heard G-d’s voice saying, “Go for yourself from your land.” However once he accomplished G-d’s command and arrived at the land in question, Hashem appeared to him and made a

great announcement: “To your seed I will give this land” (v.7). If we look at the book of Genesis, we will see that the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to the Patriarchs only in Eretz Israel. The Sages have said, “One should always live in Eretz Israel...but whoever lives outside the land may be regarded as one who has no G-d” (Ketubot 110b). The Midrash recounts an extraordinary story which shows us that a person should not leave the holy land in order to better his financial situation: “The story is told of a disciple of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who emigrated from Eretz Israel, and who came back wealthy. When the other disciples saw him, they became envious and also desired to travel abroad. Becoming aware of this, Rabbi Shimon brought them all forth to a certain field near the village of Maron, where he began to pray: ‘Field, become full of golden dinars.’ Immediately, the soil began to produce golden dinars before their gaze. He then said to them, ‘If it is the gold that you want, well, take all the gold you want now, but you must know that he who takes riches now is taking his share of the World to Come, for the sole reward for studying the Torah is reserved for the World to Come’ ” (Shemot Rabba 52:3).

## Feel the Mitzvah!

*It is written, “And the L-RD said to Abram, ‘Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house’ ” (Genesis 12:1).*

Rashi explains that the words lech lecha (“go for yourself”) signify, “For your own benefit, for your own good.” What was the good that could have motivated Abraham to depart?

We may understand this by means of an incident that happened to the holy Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl. While imprisoned, an old man paid him a visit and explained why he was there. Because of the fact that Rabbi Nachum had been collecting money to free Jewish prisoners, he was living a life of wandering. Hence to feel the importance of this mitzvah, Heaven provoked his imprisonment. Only then could Rabbi Nachum experience the bitter taste of imprisonment, which would enable him to more fully appreciate the mitzvah that he was performing.

Abraham, who practiced hospitality at an elevated level, was told by Hashem to “go for yourself” and become a wanderer, for it was in this way that he would know exactly how his wayfaring guests suffered. Yet Abraham was to realize that this was for his own benefit and good, so that he might perform this mitzvah with even greater pleasure and joy once he fully understood the feelings of his guests.

This is an appropriate place to mention another marvelous story concerning devotion to the poor. The Gaon Rabbi Nachumke of Horodna once went to collect money for the poor. Among the people he met was a very wealthy man, but as soon as this man opened his door and saw the outstretched hand of the Tzaddik, he slapped him! The Tzaddik was not fazed, but instead he humbly said: “That was for me. Now what do you have for the poor?” These words made the wealthy man realize his error, and he instantly opened his pocketbook and gave the Tzaddik a sizable donation.

## EISHET CHAYIL

The Gemara states that Rabbi Yochanan said, "We learned fear of sin from a maiden," and recounts that he had witnessed a maiden fall upon her face and exclaim, "Master of the universe! You have created Paradise and Gehinnom; You have created righteous and wicked. May it be Your will that men not stumble through me" (Sotah 22a).

The Maharsha explains this passage in the following way: This young woman had prayed that nobody should sin and be punished because of her, for she too would be punished, as the Sages have said: "He through whom his neighbor is punished is not permitted to enter within the proximity of the Holy One, blessed be He" (Shabbat 149b).

This story symbolizes the purity of a young Jewish woman who was concerned over the spiritual welfare of the Jewish people. There is no doubt that this young woman made numerous efforts to observe the rules of modesty, in order that she not divert people's looks to her. However she teaches us a great principle as well, namely that it is not enough to meticulously follow the laws of modesty, for one must also join prayer with tears in asking Hashem to help in this effort.

## REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

### The Mitzvah of Circumcision

A positive mitzvah is found in Parsha Lech Lecha, the mitzvah of circumcision, as it is stated: "This is My covenant that you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised" (Genesis 17:10).

The reason for this mitzvah is that Hashem desired to set a permanent sign in the bodies of the people that He chose to carry His Name. This was in order to distinguish them, vis-à-vis their bodies, from the other peoples, just as they are distinguished from them by their souls, which are not the same as others. Besides the fact that it constitutes an improvement to the body, this distinguishing physical feature is found in its particular location on the body because it is from there that Israel perpetuates its existence. Hashem desires virtues in the chosen people, and He wants man to undertake his own improvement. This is why He did not create man in perfection from birth, thereby hinting to him that in the same way that he can perfect his body, so too can he perfect his soul through acts of greatness.

Concerning this subject our Sages have said: "The precepts were given only in order that man might be refined by them" (Bereshith Rabba 44:1). The very performance of the mitzvot purifies the souls of the Jewish people, and the same applies to the mitzvah of circumcision, which purifies the soul by removing the foreskin, which is described as shameful. Furthermore our Sages have said, "Great is circumcision, since thirteen covenants were made thereon" (Nedarim 31b).

## IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

It is written, "Who has brought about and accomplished this? He Who proclaimed the generations from the beginning: I, the L-RD, am the first, and I am He Who will be with the last" (Isaiah 41:4).

We are often surprised by the way Hashem directs the world, and we are seized with many doubts. However we must understand that Hashem's ways are incomprehensible to our feeble intellects, and that Hashem evaluates each event in the world with an all-encompassing gaze. As the prophet states in the haftorah of our parsha: "Who has brought about and accomplished this? He Who proclaimed the generations from the beginning." The Sages recount that when Rabbi Akiva was being taken away to be executed, the angels asked the Holy One, blessed be He: "This is the Torah, and this is its reward?" (Berachot 61b). Hashem replied, "If I hear another complaint, I will transform the world into chaos." What kind of response was this to the angels' question?

We may understand this by means of a parable: A great king desired to have a ceremonial garment made for himself. He therefore purchased five yards of the finest fabric and had the material sent to his most skilled tailor. After a few weeks, the tailor presented the king with a magnificent garment, which he rejoiced over immensely.

This event, however, aroused the jealousy of the tailor's colleagues, and they told the king that the tailor had stolen a yard of royal fabric. They pointed out that the king had given him five yards of material to work with, yet the king's garment was but four yards long.

The king called the tailor and revealed his suspicions to him. The tailor asserted that the work involved in making such a garment always requires more material than the final product. "I'm surprised that Your Majesty does not realize this himself," the tailor added. Yet when he saw that the king's anger had not subsided, he asked that the garment be returned to him, saying: "Your Majesty, I will prove to you that I'm right." He then began to take the garment apart in order to show the king all the stitching and cuts which had "stolen" the extra yard in question. However the king's anger still did not subside, and in fact it increased! "Not only have you not returned the stolen material, but you also took my garment apart!" Upon hearing this, the tailor replied: "Your Majesty, in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of my words, I was forced to return the garment to its initial state."

Such was the answer given to the angels by the Holy One, blessed be He. He said, "If you utter another word of complaint over the death of Rabbi Akiva, I will return the world to a state of chaos." In other words, Hashem would return the world to its initial state before creation, and He would then reveal all His systematic calculations to them. They would then understand that He was correct in how He directs every event that transpires.

## A TRUE STORY

### The Power of Faith

It is written, “He believed in the L-RD, and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

The Gaon Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Zatzal had a special physician by the name of Dr. Kushelevsky. This man was both a skilled doctor and a Ben Torah, a Talmid Chacham possessed of great character traits. One Friday a woman came knocking at his door in tears. She begged him to come and examine her sick son, whose life was in great danger. Dr. Kushelevsky immediately put on his hat and ran with her to her home. Upon seeing how gravely ill her son was, he prescribed numerous medications (20 drops of this, 20 drops of that) and then departed.

After Shabbat, Dr. Kushelevsky went to see how the woman's son was doing. Upon arriving, he was astonished to see that the boy was standing upon his feet just like everyone else, which was nothing less than a medical miracle. “How did you care for your child?” he asked her. She explained in detail what she had done: “You prescribed some medication for me to prepare before Shabbat. What did I do? I heated some water, and when it was boiling I took the prescription that you had given me and I dropped it into the water. On Shabbat, when my son was in pain, I took that water and gave him 20 drops of it, telling him: ‘The One Who instructs medicine to heal will instruct this water to heal.’ And that’s exactly what happened. During Shabbat the boy completely recovered.”

## YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

### The Tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto “Hakatan”

One day Rabbi Haim Pinto “Hakatan” (the second) traveled to the city of Meknes. During that time some rabbis were involved in a dispute with the rav of the city, and they did not show him proper respect. Rabbi Haim Zatzal decided that he had to do everything he could for the rav's honor, for it is written: “Their hiss is the hiss of a serpent” (Perkei Avoth 2:10).

Rabbi Haim called for the person involved in the dispute and warned him that he should stop his insubordination, for it would cause tremendous harm. However the man did not listen to Rabbi Haim, and he even mocked him.

Rabbi Haim then called this man into a secluded room and said to him, “Are you not suffering from a headache? I will tell you the reason for this. During the fast of Esther, your hunger was greater than you could bear, and so you grabbed a small biscuit to eat. However your wife suddenly arrived and you hid it. Later on you went into a secluded room and there you quickly ate it. Afterwards you put your head in a bucket of water and drank. You have been suffering from headaches ever since, correct?” The man was very frightened by what he heard, and he realized that he was dealing with a holy man of G-d. He immediately left the room and made peace with the rav of the city.

Rabbi Haim Pinto Zatzal died on Heshvan 16, 5698 and was buried in Casablanca. May his merit protect us all.

## A MATTER OF EDUCATION

### The Intelligence of Man and the Torah

It is written, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence” (Genesis 6:13). Although the generation of the flood also committed serious sins, Rashi cites the Sages in saying that “their fate was sealed only because of robbery” (see Sanhedrin 108a). The Ramban says that the reason for this is “because the prohibition against violence is a rational commandment, there being no need for a prophet to admonish them against it.” He also states: “The punishment decreed upon them was only because of violence, since this is a reasoned concept and does not require the Torah to prohibit it” (Ramban on Genesis 6:2). In the book Chovot HaLevavot (Sha’ar Avodat HaElokim), it is stated that not only are there commandments that people should derive intellectually – not from what the Torah tells them – but that all the instructions of the Torah are only meant to help a person reach the level at which man’s intelligence becomes the intelligence of the Torah, at which point they will be in harmony. The Sages say something similar to this in commenting on the beginning of the book of Psalms: “Happy is the man...[whose] desire is in the Torah of the L-RD, and in his Torah he mediates day and night” (Psalms 1:1-2). Here Rashi cites the Sages in saying that at first it is “the Torah of the L-RD,” yet afterwards it becomes “his Torah” (Kiddushin 32b). From this we learn that laboring in Torah means not only studying it, but also arriving at the goal of the Torah. It is only by laborious effort that man’s intelligence can be shaped until it becomes identical to that of the Torah. Hence when a child or youngster asks an unusual question, or one whose answer is beyond his comprehension, he should not be told: “We don’t ask questions like that.” In Torah learning there is no reason to fear questions, since the Torah represents truth. The answer to such a question should be, “You’ve asked a difficult question, and the answer is very complex. When your level of understanding increases, don’t forget to ask this question again!” Silencing a question closes the path to greatness, wherein the Torah is acknowledged as a Torah of life. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, “The enormous mistake made in learning Torah is that we have removed life from the Torah. Hence the Torah has been removed from life.”