

פרשת לך לך

# Parashas Lech Lecha

## ROOTS, SPROUTS, AND TREES

וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ

*Abram passed into the land (12:6).*

Many of the details mentioned in the stories recounted in *Sefer Bereishis* seem to be irrelevant or inconsequential. Why do we need to know how many wells were dug by our forefathers or exactly who prepared the food for the heavenly visitors to Avraham's tent? What is the significance of the Torah's telling us about Avraham's travels throughout the land of Canaan or where he went when there was a famine in the country?

Ramban (*Bereishis* 26:20) addresses this question: "I will explain to you a general rule regarding all of the upcoming *parshiyos* that deal with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Everything that happened to our forefathers is symbolic of what will occur to their children. Therefore, the Torah relates at great length the travels, the

digging of the wells, and the other occurrences. One might think that these stories are unnecessary, while in reality they were all written to inform us of what will happen in the future.” For example, Ramban explains that the three wells dug by Yitzchak symbolize the three *Batei Mikdash*.

In order for a tree to grow, a seed must be planted in the ground. The type of tree that will grow is determined by which seed was planted and how it took root. This concept is true in the spiritual realm as well. The *Avos* are not only our roots in a physical sense; they are also our spiritual roots. All of their actions were carried out with the intention of creating a spiritual nation. These actions were the seeds of the Jewish people, and the sprouts that grew out of those seeds can be perceived through what has occurred to the Jewish nation in the course of history.

When Bilam planned to curse *Bnei Yisrael*, his intention was to annihilate them by destroying their roots. For this reason, he had seven altars built, to rival the seven altars that were erected by our *Avos*. He was unsuccessful in his attempts, as he himself stated: “I look at their beginnings and their roots and I see that through the actions of the patriarchs and matriarchs their foundations are concrete like mountains and hills” (Rashi to *Bamidbar* 23:9).

Although the *Avos* succeeded greatly in their endeavors, they had the ability to do even more than they did. *Chazal* (*Bava Metzia* 85a) tell us regarding Avraham’s hospitality toward the three angels that every action he performed personally garnered a reward that was delivered by Hashem Himself, while every action that he performed through an emissary garnered a reward that was delivered by an emissary of Hashem. Additionally, Ramban writes (*Bereishis* 12:10) that because Avraham did not place complete faith in Hashem that He would sustain him during the famine, and he left the country in which he had been commanded to reside, his offspring suffered the exile in Mitzrayim.

*Chazal* tell us (*Nedarim* 32a) that it was because Avraham took along *talmidei chachamim* when he waged war against the four kings that his descendants became slaves in Mitzrayim for 210 years. What should Avraham have done differently? How could he fight mighty armies with a handful of warriors? It seems that

Avraham, who was planting seeds with his every action, could have done even more, thereby influencing the events that would later “sprout” from his actions.

How does this apply to us? For one thing, it gives us a new appreciation of every single word written in the Torah. Additionally, there are instances when we, too, have the ability to plant seeds for the future. For instance, our actions on Rosh Hashanah plant seeds for the following year, and during those two days we must be extra careful with our behavior.

Finally, this knowledge gives us an incentive to strive for greater heights. If the Torah tells us that even Avraham could have done more, then certainly we can do more.

*(Shiurei Chumash, Parashas Lech Lecha 12:6,12)*

***“If the Torah tells us that even Avraham could have done more, then certainly we can do more.”***

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## A TIME TO PLANT

וַיַּרְק אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו

*And he armed his initiates (chanichav) (14:14).*

After being informed of his nephew Lot’s capture, Avraham galvanized his aides in pursuit of the captors. “And he armed his initiates (*chanichav*) ... and he gave chase until Dan” (14:14). Rashi comments that the root of the word “*chanichav*” is “*chaneich*,” which means to initiate a person or tool into the craft in which it is destined to remain. Similarly, “*Chanoch lanaar al pi darko*” (*Mishlei* 22:6) should be translated as, “Initiate a child in accordance with his style.” According to Rashi’s explanation, *chinuch* (loosely translated as education) means proper initiation, ensuring that the child starts off on the right foot.

“You should teach your children Torah so that they should discuss its words” (*Devarim* 11:19). Rashi quotes *Chazal*: “When a child knows how to speak, his father must teach him ‘*Torah tzivah lanu*”

*Moshe.* From here we derive that when a child begins to speak, his father should converse with him in *Lashon Hakodesh* and teach him Torah. If he did not do this, it is as if he has buried his child.” The harshness of our Sages’ words derives from their understanding of the importance of perfect timing. If a father does not teach his son “*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*” when the child starts communicating verbally, he has in a certain respect buried him.

Why is this moment so crucial? The first moments of speech are the time to “plant” *emunah* in a child. Agriculturally, there are specific times for planting; if a person waits until after the rains to plant, nothing will grow from all his labor. The opposite is also true. If he plants prematurely, the seeds will not sprout because the ground is

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not properly prepared to accept the seed. So, too, parents must “grab” each opportune moment during the course of their child’s education and make the most of them. If they wait too long, they may very well have missed their chance. If they try too early, their child will most likely not be ready to absorb the lesson. However, if

they catch the correct moment, then not only will lessons take root, they will continue to sprout and grow as the years go on.

We must bear this concept in mind during the entire course of our children’s development, and synchronize our expectations with our child’s abilities. If we demand too much or too early, before the child understands what we want from him, then we might very well be causing serious damage to his educational growth. Such “seeds” cannot take root; a child cannot develop through demands that he does not understand. He must grow in stages and move up step-by-step through the different stages of childhood.

Some parents, for example, do not properly relate to their children’s games. Rav Yisrael Salanter would say that if a child is playing with a piece of wood in the bathtub and he says it’s a boat, taking away the wood from him is comparable to sinking the yacht of an adult. A person who disturbs a child’s game is in essence stealing from him.

Additionally, one cannot expect a young child to sit quietly at the Shabbos table for the duration of the meal. A child needs to run around. Demanding that he sit still for an hour and a half is asking too much of him and can be harmful to him. Despite the parent's good intentions, a child cannot grow through expectations that are beyond his ability. On the other hand, if one properly adjusts his demands and his children's education in accordance with their abilities, with Hashem's help the rewards will sprout forth and only continue to grow with time.

(*Zeriyah U'Binyan B'Chinuch*, p. 13)

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## SWEARING NOT TO FALTER

הִרְמַתִּי יָדִי אֶל־ה'

*I lift up my hand to Hashem (14:22).*

After Avraham defeated the four kings in battle, the king of Sodom made a request: "Give me the people and take the spoils for yourself" (*Bereishis* 14:21). In response, Avraham swore not to take any of the bounty, lest someone claim that it was the king of Sodom who made Avraham wealthy. Ramban explains that the impetus for Avraham's oath was to keep his *yetzer hara* in check. He cites *Sifrei*, which states that we find such conduct on the part of all righteous men: they swear in order to prevent their *yetzer hara* from causing them to sin.

It is only the righteous who conduct themselves in such a manner. When they are concerned that their desires might get the best of them, they swear not to fall prey to their *yetzer hara*. This effectively erects a fence between them and the sin, for they will certainly not renege on a promise. Most of us, however, do not feel these concerns. We are often complacent and do not take the necessary precautions to avoid likely or imminent *aveiros*. The Torah teaches us that this is not the proper way. The righteous do not trust themselves, and when an opportunity for sin presents itself they immediately incapacitate their *yetzer hara* by swearing not to falter.

Practically speaking, we should not place ourselves in circumstances where we will be tested or tempted to sin. However, if we anticipate that we might come to such a situation or we already find ourselves in such a situation, the best ammunition against the *yetzer hara* is to create a barrier, by taking additional or exceptional precautions. Such conduct will give us the added dose of determination not to fall into the hands of the *yetzer hara*. If Avraham felt it necessary, shouldn't we?

***“The best ammunition against the yetzer hara is to create a barrier, by taking additional or exceptional precautions.”***

(*Shiurei Chumash, Parashas Lech Lecha 14:22*)



## ABSORBING THE MESSAGE

דְּמַשֵּׁק אֶלְיָעִזֵּר

*Damascene Eliezer (15:2).*

The Torah refers to Avraham's right-hand man as "*Damesek*" Eliezer. Rashi explains that "*Damesek*" is an acronym for "*doleh u'mashkeh*" — he draws forth and gives to drink — since Eliezer taught the Torah he learned from Avraham to others. We see from this appellation that Eliezer was not simply repeating Avraham's words verbatim. He delved into Avraham's lectures to understand their intent, he internalized their message, and he was then able to extract pearls of wisdom and teach them to other students.

The Alter of Kelm would write down his discourses and distribute them among his close disciples. They would then reciprocate by commenting on what he wrote. One *talmid* extracted from a single discourse nearly twenty fundamental ideas with regard to *chinuch*! Hearing or reading a *mussar* discourse sets the groundwork for character improvement. However, real change only happens as a result of reviewing and inculcating the message.

In Rav Wolbe's yeshivah a specific time was designated to review each *mussar* discourse. He would often say that feelings of spiritual arousal that one experiences after hearing a *mussar* discourse do absolutely nothing for a person in the long run. One must first review what was said; only after understanding its significance can he can build on it in a way that fits his personality.

This idea holds true not only with regard to parroting speeches, but also vis-à-vis imitating the actions of others. In the words of Rav Yerucham Levovitz, "Do not wear borrowed clothing": Do not copy other people's actions. Every individual has his own unique role in *avodas Hashem*, and only he was given the tools to actualize this potential. One must develop a plan of action that is appropriate for him and proceed accordingly.

The next time you hear or learn some *mussar*, take an extra minute to try to understand what the *mussar* is telling you. A small amount of *mussar* that

a person truly understands will go a lot further than a vast amount of *mussar* whose message was lost somewhere along the way.

(*Shiurei Chumash, Parashas Lech Lecha* 15:2, 17:1)



## HASHEM'S CHERISHED PEOPLE

וְאֶתְנֶה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ

*I will set My covenant between Me and you (17:2).*

At the end of *Parashas Lech Lecha* the Torah describes Hashem's command to perform the mitzvah of *bris milah* and Avraham's subsequent fulfillment of this mitzvah. To truly appreciate the enormity of this event, we must take a few minutes to contemplate the implications of the Torah's account of this mitzvah.

The *parashah* begins with Hashem's instruction to Avraham to leave his land of residence for an unknown destination. We know that Avraham was seventy-five years old at the time, but the Torah does not tell us anything about the first years of his life. We are not told that he was thrown into a fiery furnace because of his staunch faith in Hashem; nor does the Torah describe the ten years he spent in jail, as related by *Chazal* (*Bava Basra* 91a). Rather, the Torah chose to begin its narrative about Avraham with an account of the first time Hashem spoke to him. This was such an important event that the Torah saw a need to record it for all future generations.

The *parashah* concludes with the mitzvah of *bris milah*. After circumcising himself, Avraham was on an even higher spiritual level and had an even greater connection to Hashem than described at the beginning of the *parashah*. Not only did the Creator speak with Avraham, He entered a covenant with him!

"Praise the Name of Hashem, for *His Name alone is exalted*" (*Tehillim* 148:13). Hashem is exalted beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, the next *passuk* declares, "And He will raise the pride of His nation, causing praise for all His pious ones, *for the Jewish people, His intimate nation.*" Despite the awesome loftiness of the Creator, there is a nation on earth that He considers His cherished and intimate people and with whom He interacts!

This relationship began with the *Avos*, and specifically with Avraham Avinu. It is hard to comprehend how a human being was

able to rise to such heights, to the point that he merited entering a covenant with Hashem.

***“One of the very foundations of our faith as Jews is the belief that a person has the ability to reach the level where Hashem will actually speak to him.”***

One of the very foundations of our faith as Jews is the belief that a person has the ability to reach the level where Hashem will actually speak to him. One who

questions the veracity of the prophecies of our *Avos* or of Moshe Rabbeinu does not demonstrate a lack of belief in the Creator.

Rather, he shows that he does not believe such greatness is attainable by a human being.

*(Shiurei Chumash, Parashas Lech Lecha, Introduction to 17:7)*

We must believe in the awesome potential of every Jew to forge a relationship with Hashem. Let us not sacrifice this potential by becoming caught up in the petty things in life!