

Lech Lecha 5784 – Purpose, Responsibility, and Hope

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ
מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמְּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ
אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

יהוה said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאֲבָרְכְךָ
וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

*I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you shall be a blessing. *a
blessing: a standard by which
blessing is invoked.*

וְאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֲאָר
וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה:

*I will bless those who bless you
And curse the one who curses you;
And all the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you."*

What does all this mean? All this sounds good, blessing and all, but I think that to really get what has been going on it's important to remember what has been happening. This is the third parashah in this new year. We've read Bereshit, creation, Adam and Eve – introduction to the tree of life and the tree of *to'v v'ra* and the choice to follow God's instruction – or not, and the expulsion from the garden of Eden. We have learned about Cain and Abel, the first fratricide that comes from the choice to act on feelings of jealousy and hate.

Humanity multiplies and spreads out, and God sees the lawlessness and violence of human beings on earth. Noah though, finds favor with God. God starts over with humanity, putting hope in Noah and his family. God brings the flood, and Noah, his family, and a sampling of earths animals board the ark and survive the flooding of the earth.

God now sees that humanity needs laws to live by. The first of God's laws appear in chapter 9 of Genesis, where the 7 laws of Noah are derived: Not to worship idols. Not to curse God. Not to commit murder. Not to commit adultery or sexual immorality. Not to steal. Not to eat flesh torn from a living animal. To establish courts of justice.¹ God then makes a covenant to never again bring a flood to destroy every living being on earth.

¹ Enumerated in the Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 56a-b and Tosefta Avodah Zarah 9:4

Then human beings gather to build the tower of Babel, and God realizes that with only one language among humanity, “nothing they propose to do will be out of their reach,”² and humanity’s speech is confounded so as to no longer understand one another’s speech.

There are ten generations between Noah and Abram. God watches humanity.

Though just seven laws are given, humanity doesn’t follow them very well.

Watching humanity, I believe that God realizes something.

God approaches Avram³ and says, “I will make of you a great nation.” *Why?*

Humanity needs purpose. Purpose, a good one, inspires, imbues one with responsibility and hope. God says to him, “You shall be a blessing.”⁴

Instead of dealing with all of humanity, God sees he must focus on a single person, and that person will teach his family, and his tribe, the twelve tribes, and all Israel.

Abram and his wife Sarai (who become Abraham and Sarah) do not have a family right away. It takes decades. We often wonder why. I propose that it’s because Abram is himself ‘growing up’, learning moral thinking and behavior, with God’s tutelage, before he becomes a father. He is an uncle, though, and one of the first responsibilities is his nephew Lot. Lot and his whole household are kidnapped and taken captive by invaders. Abram gathers those with him and they pursue the invaders and rescue Lot and his household.

Almost a millenia ago, the Sages wrote in the Talmud: ...redeeming captives is a great mitzvah. (BT Bava Batra 8b). Right at the beginning of Abram’s journey with God, he learns of the importance of redeeming the captive, and we are all too aware of this imperative today. Abram learns what we today are taught, the value and preciousness of human life. He learns the lessons that he will pass on to the next generation and the next, and on to us today.

This is education. This is our inheritance.

Rabbi Sacks z”tl, taught:

Egypt and Israel three millennia ago were nations that asked themselves the most fundamental human question of all: How do we defeat death and conquer mortality? How, in the brief span of a human life, do we participate in something that will endure long after we are no longer here? The Egyptians gave one answer—an answer that through the ages has tempted emperors and tyrants, rulers and kings. We defeat mortality by building monuments that will stand for thousands of years. Their stones will outlive the winds and sands of time.

² Genesis 11:6

³ Abram (exalted father) becomes Abraham (father of nations) in chapter 17.

⁴ Genesis 12:2

The Jews gave an entirely different answer.

The Israelites, slaves in Egypt for more than two hundred years, were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck the country. Whatever their cause, they seemed to convey a message: The God of Israel is on the side of freedom and human dignity.

On the brink of their release, Moses, the leader of the Jews, gathered them together and prepared to address them. He might have spoken about freedom. He could have given a stirring address about the promised land to which they were traveling, the “land flowing with milk and honey.” Or he might have prepared them for the journey that lay ahead, the long march across the wilderness.

Instead, Moses delivered a series of addresses that seemed to make no sense in the context of that particular moment. He presented a new idea, revolutionary in character, whose implications remain challenging even now.

He spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. Three times he turned to the theme: And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say ...⁵ And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.’⁶ And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him ...⁷ About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators.

Freedom, Moses suggested, is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a land, you need an army.

But to defend freedom, you need education. You need families and schools to ensure that your ideals are passed on to the next generation, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. The citadels of liberty are houses of study. Its heroes are teachers, its passion is education and the life of the mind. Moses realized that a people achieves immortality not by building temples or mausoleums, but by engraving their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, and so on until the end of time. The Israelites built living monuments—monuments to life—and became a people dedicated to bringing new generations into being and handing on to them the heritage of the past. Their great institutions were the family and education via the conversation between the generations.

In place of temples they built houses of prayer and study. In place of stones they had words and teachings. They saw God not as the power that enslaves but as the power that sets free. Instead of worshiping mighty rulers they affirmed the dignity of the

⁵ Exodus 12:26-27

⁶ Exodus 13:8

⁷ Exodus 13:14

widow, the orphan, the stranger, the vulnerable, the weak and the neglected. In that counterintuitive reversal they discovered the secret of eternity. Whether through accident or design or something greater than either, the Hebrew slaves who built Ramses' temples had lived through one of the great revelations of history. These were our ancestors, and we are their heirs.⁸

My friends, I wish more people knew this about us. I believe we have much educating, much *Tikkun Olam* to do. Just this week, in the Forward, Steve Israel wrote the following:

The roots of this generation of Hamas terrorism resides in ideas fomented in Gaza's education system for decades. While serving in Congress between 2001 and 2017, I studied what goes on in Palestinian schools. I reviewed their textbooks, met with educators and diplomats, and introduced legislation and amendments compelling the Department of State to monitor antisemitism in foreign classrooms. I saw firsthand that a generation of Palestinian children were being taught at an early age to reject living peacefully with Israel. They read about it in their schoolbooks and heard about it from their teachers. They were raised on a steady curriculum of violent rejectionism. My colleagues and I in Congress were unable to change that reality. Now, as the world reels from the devastation of Hamas' terrorism, understanding how Palestinian children are taught is essential to any discussion of the future in the region.⁹

And, students in this country, in colleges, universities, and even high schools, are, right now in the midst of a war right on their campuses. Reported just today in the Jerusalem Post, 45 antisemitic incidents on US university campuses in just three days. In the last two weeks, Among the most disturbing incidents reported was at [Cornell University, where a lecturer categorized as "antisemitic,"](#) described the Hamas's massacre during the celebration of Simchat Torah in western Negev settlements as an "exciting event." Meanwhile, at UC Davis in California, a lecturer took to social media to call for violence against Jewish students.¹⁰

The Torah stated a principle: If someone comes to kill you, rise and kill him first. We are taught that we do not turn the other cheek. Our Talmud teaches also that when we rise up in self-defense we are to avoid killing the person coming toward to kill us if it is at all possible. We may wonder, especially now, if Israel is doing the right thing. Let me share with you a teaching: "...a king should fight only obligatory wars. Which wars are obligatory? The wars of the seven nations, and the war of Amalek, and saving Israel from an enemy who comes against them."¹¹ Amalek was known in Exodus for killing the women, children, and elderly at the rear of the

⁸ Excerpted from [A-Letter-in-Scroll-extract-digital.pdf \(rabbisacks.org\)](#)

⁹ [The roots of Hamas' terror attack can be found in Gaza's schools – The Forward](#)

¹⁰ [Alarming surge: 45 antisemitism incidents on US university campuses in just three days \(msn.com\)](#)

¹¹ Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 5:1-2

caravan of Israelites after the exodus from Egypt. This is pure evil and we recognize it in the October 7th actions of Hamas. For Israel, this is an obligatory war. To this day, because of the actions of the Amalekites, the Torah commands us to simultaneously always remember them and to blot out their name.

Today we hear words like genocide, apartheid, occupation, and blockades. People out there are taking in media and social media posts without checking facts or even understanding what is really being said. It just *sounds* compelling. "Free Palestine" sounds like a good thing to support, but what it really means is to destroy Israel and kill Jews. What is so perplexing is that we are taught the ways in which to do *tikkun olam*, to heal the world, and to help and to never oppress the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. We are never to forget that we were strangers in a strange land. And yet Jews and Israel are demonized and vilified.

It pulls at our heartstrings when we hear of war, starvation, mistreatment, and where people in the world are hurting, we go to help. We have created and support organizations such as Jewish World Watch, an organization dedicated to helping survivors of genocide and mass atrocities around the world, we have HIAS, a global leader in providing humanitarian assistance and protection for refugees, Israel is well known for sending teams into danger to aid other countries when disaster strikes, including United Hatzalah of Israel; MASHAV, Israel's national aid agency; the nonprofit SmartAid; the NGO IsraAID; and Magen David Adom.

We Jews are not perfect, but we strive to become better people, and to improve the world. I am immensely proud to be a Jew. I have never walked into a synagogue without hearing that *tikkun olam* is our directive, to heal the world. We even argue with one another about how best to do this! And this gives me hope.

As long as we keep learning, and teaching, like Abraham, even arguing with God like he did, on how best to heal the world, I have hope. The world needs Jews more than it knows. We come forward to heal the world not for any thanks, but because it is the right thing to do. We are not the only ones that do this. And this gives me hope. Especially in this time where more and more people fear the terror, war, and aggression that is out there, I believe that we are here to teach not only our children, but the world, how to respond, how to heal, and how to hope. This was Abraham's purpose. And it is ours.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Lisa