

Devar Torah – Lech Lecha

Written for

Harry Kellys Bar Mitzvah

In this weeks parasha G-d tells Avram to leave his house, his father and all his family. Avram is told to go to a land which G-d will show him. Once he reaches the land of Canaan he wanders around up and down starting in Shechem then going to near Beth-el and then to the south of Canaan. He is forced to go down to Egypt to escape famine in the land G-d had just told him to go to. When Avram comes back from Egypt to Canaan his shepherds get into an argument with his nephew Lots' shepherds over land. To resolve the argument Lot chooses to live in Sodom in the east.

Avram continues to move around a bit more eventually settling in Hebron. The parasha concludes with Avram and his wife Sarai changing their names under G-ds command to Avraham and Sarah. G-d also commands Avraham and all his decedents in the laws of Brit Milah, or circumcision, as a sign of the covenant (promise) between G-d and the Jewish people.

I am interested, particularly in the fact that Avram is always moving about and never stays in the same place for a long time especially at the beginning of the Parasha. There are a few reasons for this; one of them being that he was merely doing what he had been told to do by G-d which was to move to this land where G-d promises

קום הַתְּהַלֵּךְ בְּאַרְצוֹ, לְאַרְכָּהּ וּלְרוּחָהּ כִּי לְךָ,

אֶתְּנֶנָּה.

“Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you”.

He had been promised that the land would be his and so he was walking up and down the land to see what he had been given, like a child would do with a new toy, they would turn it on and play with it to see what it could do. An alternative explanation to this is that Avram had to move up and down the land as he had cattle so he was like a Shepherd having to find a place for them to eat.

I disagree with this idea as it does not say that Avram had any cattle until he came back to Canaan from Egypt. A quote that proves my point is that the sedra says that

וְאַבְרָם, כְּבֹד מְאֹד, בְּמִקְנֵהוּ, בְּכֶסֶף וּבְזָהָב.

Avram went back to Canaan with all that he had acquired in Egypt, livestock, silver and gold.

I wondered if a link could be found between the constant movement of Avraham, and the subsequent history of Bnei Yisrael, to prove that we developed a moving habit or that moving around became an adapted gene. Ultimately has this ability to move or travel helped in our survival over time?

An overview of Jewish History shows that we have constantly had to move around both through choice and necessity and always worked hard to establish a Jewish community where ever we have lived.

An example is seen in the establishment of Dutch Jewry after the expulsion from Spain which eventually led to the establishment of British Jewry. Even after the expulsion there were still Jews living in Spain , but they lived in secret. My Booba tells a story of when she visited Majorca in the early 60's wearing a kamaya, when she walked into a shop. The family that owned the shop started to stare at it. They asked her to go to the back of the shop where they asked her what it meant to her. It turned out that these people where a Jewish family who had been living a Jewish life in secret for more than four hundred years. As a people, we have the ability to adapt and live our lives as Jews even in secret.

A final example is the establishment of the State of Israel. Many Jews from around the world moved to live there, some because of necessity and some from ideology. Despite the fact that many different Jews came from many different places, we were still able to adapt to our new surroundings and create a new community.

Has this habit of constant moving helped us survive?

As part of my Devar Torah I identified two questions to ask a group of people (my teachers and some community rabbis) from within the Jewish community so that I could collect a broad group of opinions on these topics. I hoped that through collecting a range of answers I could inform my own opinion.

The first question was based on my ideas for the constant movement of the Jewish people starting with Avraham and whether this had any long term affect on the stability and longevity of the Jewish people. I asked: "What did they think helped the Jewish people survive over a long period of time and what do you think gives us our strength?"

Needless to say my head teacher Dr. Coleman said that it was down to a commitment to education and educating our children that we survived. A good friend of the family, Ellis Slater, agreed that it was due to Education but he attributed it to an emphasis on learning that gives us the intellect to appreciate the positive aspects of life and the tenacity to look to the future beyond persecution.

Ellis's response also came under the category of persecution since he felt that always being on guard and on the outside of society kept us together and so our survival was a necessity not a choice.

Speaking from Israel, Rabbi Nir Menashe also felt that this adversity can be turned to a good thing but Rabbi Nir went on to say that our unshakeable

belief in one God with our ability to put faith into action also contributed. This issue of faith into action I categorised as pride and identity which has been cited as an important factor by many of my respondents including Rabbi Chaim (Weiner). He said that the willingness to make sacrifices to keep G-d's laws helped us retain our identity. Our Rabbi, Joel Levy, suggested that Jews believe that we matter and have a responsibility to the world which we carry out by keeping the mitzvot. My Jewish Studies teacher, Mrs Hayley Simon agreed with him too. Yoni, my Bar Mitzvah teacher taught me something from Rav Soloveitchik who taught using the story of Avraham trying to buy a burial plot for his wife Sarah. Even though the Hittites were willing to give him The Cave of Machpelah for free, Avraham insists that he wants to pay as although he is like them he is also apart from them. This teaches us that although we should be loyal citizens and in our case British Patriots (specifically against the Aussies!), we should still be slightly on the outside of society. Assimilating without compromising our core values.

Rabbi Chaim attributed our survival to many factors one I classified under Geography which he says is "the fact that we were scattered all over the world meant that when things got bad in one place, the Jews elsewhere were still around to continue our people." Rabbi Chaim also said that because we believe in a universal God, we could travel anywhere and would always have God looking over us.

This issue of G-d's influence was mentioned by Dr. Annette Boeckler who provided a story of a German Kaiser, Frederic the Great, who asked a person to prove G-d in just three words. In response to this the man slowly bowed down and said "Majesty, the Jews." Similarly, my old Jewish Studies teacher Mr Kett and a member of our Shul, Rabbi Paul Glantz, agree that the fact we have survived is a mystery. Mr Kett quotes Mark Twain asking what the secret of the Jews' immortality is and Rabbi Paul hopes that it is because we have something positive to contribute.

The final reason that Rabbi Chaim gave was that after the expulsion from ancient Israel and temple worship, we adapted but we also kept our religion

as we understood that our exile from Israel was due to our sins. We could have given up on Judaism and said that because there is no temple and no sacrifices any more, we will stop practicing Judaism, but we carried on practicing and the way we keep it now has evolved greatly to fit our present circumstances without losing Judaism's essential elements.

After all these answers it appears to me that certain themes have developed:

- 🚩 Theme 1 is the "I don't know, it must be something to do with G-d theme".
- 🚩 Theme 2 is "Education".
- 🚩 Theme 3 is "persecution is a pain in the backside but can make us stronger!"
- 🚩 And theme 4 is "mitzvot hold us together even when they have to adapt to circumstances".

Interestingly no one came up with my theme, which was did Avraham's constant movement become an adapted gene or a habit that has helped us survive over time. I obviously need to research a little further.

Rabbi Joel suggested that I explore the issue of diversity in the Jewish world and whether it has proved to be a good or bad thing and to see if we can square this circle by bringing it all back to Avraham and my parasha.

My respondents to this second question also gave very varied answers. Interestingly nobody said diversity was a bad thing. Though Ellis felt that it was neither good nor bad but dependent on how it was used. Shelley Marsh felt it to be our greatest strength, but she also felt that diversity in the world is the only way we can exist and so therefore is inevitable.

The other answers fell into three categories:

- 1) Different strokes for different folks
- 2) Difficulties with diversity
- 3) And challenges of diversity.

Let me take each of these themes one at a time:

Firstly, different strokes for different folks:

Rabbi Paul Glantz said that no one has the truth and we need to learn from each other. My Bar-Mitzvah teacher Yoni Weiner reminded me that we have just celebrated the festival of Succot on which we are taught that the four species are like four different types of Jew: those with torah knowledge, those who do good deeds, those who have both and those with neither.

My old head teacher Mrs Anthea Aberly said that diversity is a key ingredient to a civilized humanity. My current Head Teacher Dr Colman said that diversity teaches us that there is more than one way to live our lives. Annette suggests that diversity is a sign of health and life and it's good that there are so many different versions. Rabbi Tony Bayfield said that an individual's journeys mirrors the stories in Bereshit and the journeys of our ancestors. Rabbi Chaim says that every person is different; different spiritual homes are needed for different people. Rabbi Joel said that the Mishnah is a book of arguments not concrete decisions; it is the proof that there has always been diversity.

Rabbi Nir quoted: "Shivim panim laTorah". There are seventy faces to the Torah all facing towards the torah working for the good of God (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15).

Shelley says that diversity has always been part of Jewish life; it's not a new thing. Avraham's journeys throughout his life equipped him with the ability to adapt to change and situations without compromising his values and belief in G-d.

Second are the difficulties with diversity:

My current head teacher expressed the feelings that diversity is problematic; it could go too far and seek to change the fundamentals of Judaism. Conversely, Annette felt that it's a pity that people cannot deal with the

otherness of others and use diversity as a source of argument. Shelley referred me to the story in the Garden of Eden of each creature being named as an individual by the first human. They are named and not judged, accepted for who and what they are. This reminds us to be non-judgemental and accept everyone for who they are. Rabbi Joel feels that religions are dangerous when they claim to have the sole access to God and that it's dangerous to confuse a belief in diversity with anything goes. However, I feel that what Rabbi Joel has just said is a contradiction and the challenge is to live within a balance.

Thirdly are the Challenges:

Rabbi Tony Bayfield says that we need to take responsibility for our journeys in order to respect ourselves and our community and Rabbi Chaim felt that you have to learn to live with differences.

Diversity allows for evolution; Ellis Slater feels that the purpose of Judaism is to bring about the Moshiach when God will be King over all the Earth and we will all work together to create the best possible world using the same methods in harmony. Rabbi Joel said that diversity is good when we listen and engage with different voices, but it needs to also commit 'deeply and passionately' with our chosen path. The existence of diversity must not be allowed to undermine our personal commitments. This links nicely with what Yoni previously taught me from Rav Soloveitchik about living between a Modern secular and Jewish world.

So now having reviewed all my evidence, it is time for me to conclude at last! Firstly can I thank everyone, who has helped me put this Devar Torah together. You have provided me with much support, inspiration and food for thought.

But now let me share my thoughts.

Of all of the people who have helped me with this Devar Torah the one that sticks in my mind the most is the source that Yoni gave me by Rav Solaveitchik saying that the reason we have survived is because of our ability to integrate with the community around us while still holding onto our core values. I believe that the core values of Judaism are: An unshakeable belief in one God; The creation of the world in 6 days(symbolic of the fact that there is a higher creative power than human kind); When the Moshiach comes all Jews will live in Israel and there will be no war as Isaiah says " nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore"; and the 613 mitzvot in the Torah.

Throughout my Bar Mitzvah learning I have also been studying Mishnah Brachot. This book of Mishnah opens with the discussion on 'When does one recite the Shema in the evening'. It then goes on to describe in great detail very precise instructions for when you can say the Shema, Amidah and various blessings over food and drink.

I think it is interesting to consider that this the first book of the Mishnah is based upon Brachot and blessings. Considering the time it was written it could have been based upon telling people that the Moshiach will come and not to lose faith, or how to believe in one G-d when living in an environment with other religions. Instead the Rabbis of the Mishnah chose to base it upon the timings of when particular Brachot should be said. These Brachot have the same thing in common, they can all be said within the walls of wherever Jews are living and are not dependent on one central house of prayer like the Beit Hamikdash. This reinforces something that I already knew which is that Judaism is a religion that can be practised almost anywhere at any time and allows us to mix in diverse societies. Which brings us back to diversity which in my opinion is not so much a good thing or a bad thing, it is merely a fact of life that you just have to live with. Avraham lived in a diverse society but was not afraid to practice his Judaism, a lesson that I think everyone should learn and have learnt myself in writing my Devar Torah. This hopefully has now squared my circle.

Shabbat Shalom and thanks for listening.