



Lech Lecha: Always Careful

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." (Bereishis 13:1)

Avraham was commanded to leave the life he had known, venture forth into the great unknown and embrace his personal destiny. Upon arriving in the land of Canaan, he is faced with the stark reality of regional famine that forces him to relocate (together with his family) to Egypt. It is in Egypt that Avraham faces a society hostile to his spiritual and moral views. Yet, Avraham and Sarah persevere and make their way back to the Canaan. It is during this return journey to Canaan that the Torah shares an interesting piece of information.

And he went on his journeys, from the south and until Beth El, until the place where his tent had been previously, between Beth El and between Ai. (Bereishis 13:3)

Rashi comments:

And he went on his journeys: When he returned from Egypt to the land of Canaan, he went and lodged in the inns where he had lodged on his way to Egypt. This teaches you etiquette, that a person should not change his lodgings (Arachin 16b).

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehuda Lowe, 1525-1609) explains that if Avraham had changed his lodgings people would have assumed that he was unhappy with the accommodations or with the character of the proprietor. This could have led others to speak negatively about the inn-keeper and adversely impact his livelihood.

While this is certainly a beautiful idea, I would have made the argument that Avraham should not be bound by these types of considerations. After all, he is on a mission from God. He needs to spread monotheism and reintroduce Hashem to humanity. He needs to get back to Canaan and get to work. Let him stay wherever he wants, wherever is most convenient – why the need to retrace his steps?

The Torah is teaching us an incredible lesson. In our quest for personal spirituality, we must be ever-vigilant of the feelings of those around us. Even if one is on a mission from God, even if one is engaged in the most holy and spiritually pure endeavors, one is never exempt from maintaining the highest levels of interpersonal conduct. Building one's relationship with God is never a license to trample on my relationship with the other.

Rav Soloveitchik zt'l told a beautiful story involving his great-grandfather, the Beis HaLevi (Rav Yosef Baer Soloveitchik). The Beis HaLevi was in Warsaw and decided to visit Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit (1815-1878), the Rav of the city. As the two great rabbis were seated in the living room, they heard the Jewish maid begin to sing. Rabbi Gesundheit got up and was going to ask her to please lower her voice. (There is a concept in Jewish law of *Kol Isha*. Under certain circumstance a man is not permitted to hear a woman sing.) Rav Yosef Baer took hold of his host's arm and pulled him aside. The Rav of Warsaw asked the Beis HaLevi why he had stopped him. *"I will explain my actions,"* said Rav Yosef Baer. *"Your maid works hard. The only enjoyment and pleasure she has is singing. It is true that we are enjoined from listening to her singing, but we can step outside or go into a different room. However, you want her to stop singing. That is not fair. It is her only enjoyment!"* (The Rav Vol. II, page 178).

The Beis HaLevi understood that we must be unwavering and unyielding in the fulfillment of our halachik obligations. But we must honor our spiritual responsibilities with a concurrent sensitivity to the needs of the other.

This was the lesson of Avraham Avinu. We must strive to grow spiritually but never at the expense of the feelings of another. You can be the man of God, father of monotheism, patriarch of a nation – but you must still be vigilant with how you treat your fellow man.