

Lech Lecha

When I lived in Israel, there was an oft-repeated story about the chaverim of Kibbutz Hazorea. It was told that during the 1930s, every year on Yom Kippur they would dafka make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to eat ham sandwiches at the Wailing Wall. As you can imagine, this “ritual” drove the haredim crazy. One year a particularly angry group went to Rav Kook, the chief Ashkenazi rabbi, to get him to do something about these crazy blaspheming Jews. Rav Kook pondered their request to censure the kibbutzniks and told them, “these are not the Jews you have to worry about. The ones without the Yom Kippur ritual are the ones that should trouble you.”

Though I have always loved this story for its irony, but I don’t think I ever really understood the motivation behind Rav Kook’s response. Let’s study today’s torah portion, Lech Lecha, and see if it can help illuminate Rav Kook’s stance.

The first sentence and the name of the parasha give us great insight into the nature of God and the nature of Abraham. God’s command to Abraham is to *lech lecha*. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, another chief rabbi, this time of England, translates *lech lecha* as “to go into yourself.” Leave your nation, your birthplace, your family, leave everything that is external, everything that is distracting, and go deep into yourself, discover who you really are, what you really stand for and go to a new place where you can act on this knowledge and be yourself. The story of the creation of the universe in the Lurianic kabbalah begins with God filling all of existence and then abruptly contracting himself in order to leave space for the universe. Nothing could be strong enough to contain the infinite energy of God, so the kelim into which God’s energy was placed exploded. The explosion spread God’s sparks of holiness throughout the universe.

In our parasha, similar to the Lurianic schema, God tells Abraham to contract into himself, to reach his core, so that he can then go forth and spread God’s message of holiness and mitzvot to the world. God’s command of lech lecha is the first of a series of ten tests he give to Abraham to prove his worthiness as messenger. Why test Abraham? God provided these test because he knew he would succeed in his mission. God knew that when Abraham reached into the depth of his soul he would find a pure tzaddik. The tests required Abraham to demonstrate a pure faith in his submission to God. Through the successful performance on these tests, Abraham earned God’s two-part blessing: first, a promise of many future descendants; and, second, the land of Israel, the land of God’s blessings for his progeny to live in and to keep God’s commandments.

Abraham provides for us an example of how to be in the world and how to be with God. But it is a tough standard to live up to. It is hard to do the right thing, let alone follow the 613 commandments. That is why many of us don’t. Let’s use the example of tithing. How many of us give 10% of our pretax income in tzedaka? I know, we try, but we have so many expenses that seem to take precedence over giving to others, that it becomes hard to fulfill this important commandment.

It is harder still to do the right thing for the right reason. Returning to the tzedaka example, how many of us give to WBEZ during their pledge drive to get the premium or out of the guilt that Ira Glass makes us feel, rather than out of a pure heart of someone who wants to support public radio?

As hard as it is to do the right thing for the right reason, it is harder still to do the wrong thing for the right reason. I am talking about doing something you know is not right, but you must do it because it upholds a higher value. The reason why this is so hard is that it forces you to reconcile two contradictory ideas in your head simultaneously, and this causes cognitive dissonance. It takes a special person, with a big mind and a big heart, to be able to see that it is possible to keep a mitzvah at the same time as violating it.

Lech Lecha, introduces us to such a man, Abraham. This week he is told to abandon his parents, his past and his homeland for a place he doesn't know, and in next week's parasha, to abandon his future and sacrifice his son, the one who was promised to him to make his name great, all because he heard the word of God. He understood that there are times when you have to abandon everything you love to follow a higher calling. There are times when you throw out the ten commandments, including the honoring of one's father, and the prohibition against murder, when it is to serve a greater purpose.

Let's return to Rav Kook. This Jewish calendar year of 5775 is a shmittah year, giving me the license to talk about shmittah today. Rav Kook was not only pressured about kibbutznikim eating ham sandwiches at the Wailing Wall on Yom Kippur, but in 1909-1910, which was another shmittah year, he received pressure from the haredim to enforce the laws of shmittah. The kibbutznikim and other farmers wanted to use the *heter mechira*, the fiction of selling of the agricultural land of Israel to non-Jews for the year, in order to de-sanctify the land, and allow its cultivation during the shmittah year. The haredim wanted Rav Kook to enforce a d'oriesa mitzvah, a torah commandment to respect a Shabbat ha'aretz, the commandment to not cultivate in the land of Israel for a year in order to honor God.

For Rav Kook, the concept of a Shabbat for the land, a remembrance of God's rest after the seventh day of creation, was something that he thought a great deal about. The shmittah year gives the Jews in Israel a break from the acquisitive values of creation, and focus one's attention on higher purposes for a year. By living off of the produce that God provides without labor, the shmittah year provides an opportunity to become oneself, rather than just a slave working to subsist. The seven year cycle of shmittah is also linked to the Yovel, the Jubilee, the culmination of the seven, seven year shmittah cycles, leading to an explosion of freedom in the 50th year. This cycle was a sacred, mystical, messianic concept to Rav Kook. It was the entire reason for the Jewish enterprise and the return of Jews to the state of Israel. Let us just say that Rav Kook loved the shmittah year.

But as important as the values of the shmittah were to Rav Kook, he also understood the imperative to attract European Jews to Palestine to settle the land, to redeem the land and by redeeming the land by performing agricultural labor in the Land of Israel, the people themselves would in turn be redeemed. This would not happen if Jews could not make a living in farming in Israel. In the Torah, God promised to provide food on the seventh year to sustain oneself. But even if this kind of sustenance were possible, it would not provide the output necessary to support the agricultural export economy needed to grow the state. Rav Kook saw those who were building the state, including the secular, communist, and even blasphemous kibbutzniks, as the precursor to the mashiach. He could overlook their lack of torah observance, and their misguided politics and crazy philosophies because he believed that they would eventually be redeemed by working the soil of the Holy Land. Consequently, Rav Kook embraced and promoted the *heter mechira*, allowing the kibbutzniks to work the land on the shmittah year. He reasoned that exploiting this legal fiction, the idea of shmittah will remain alive while at the same time permitting Jews to cultivate the land and create a state that can one day fulfill the mitzvah and advance a messianic dream.

In the second paragraph of the *shmonah esrey* we say about God "*mechaye metim b'rachamim rabim.*" He revives the dead with abundant compassion. I think that Rav Kook saw the chalutzim as breathing life into the dry bones of the land of Israel, while at the same time they were themselves dry bones. If the land was to be reclaimed, and the people redeemed with it, that is, if the dead were to be revived, it would have to be accomplished with *rachamim rabim*, with abundant compassion.

When faced with the hardship of doing the thing we are commanded, it can be extremely stressful to know that you want to honor that commandment, but must do something to directly violate it. Abraham had faith at such a high level that he followed God's commands even against rational thought, and against torah values like honoring one's parents, and protecting one's child. He could see that there are times when you have to act for the sake of heaven, come what may. His reward for his obedience was a people and a land. Rav Kook was also faced with tests of whether to follow the letter of the law, or to sacrifice the letter to pursue a higher value. He was keenly aware of God's promise to Abraham, that he would be made a great nation, and that his descendents would live in the land of Israel. He knew and loved the laws of shmittah, and the concept of freedom shining forth from the land of Israel. But he also saw the secular kibbutznikim as God's hand fulfilling his blessing of Abraham and protected them with the *heter mechirah*, and from the wrath of the haredim, in order to encourage them to build the country, so the country could build them, and to build us.

How is it possible to have the strength and courage to pass the test of sacrificing something that we love for the sake of Heaven? How can we cultivate the compassion and abundant love to see humanity in those who do the opposite of what we know is right? How can we develop the foresight and confidence to promote something we

know is wrong because we see that it will eventually lead us in the right direction? Lech lecha.

Shabbat Shalom.