

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Lech Lecha
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – Avraham’s job description

Welcome back to the twelfth year of Darchai Noam!

This week’s Parsha of Lech Lecha begins with Hashem’s first command to Avraham:¹

“And Hashem said to Avram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing.” (Breishit 11:1-2)

The commentators notice that Hashem does not reveal the destination to Avraham upfront. Avraham does not yet know that he is to travel to the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan. It is a greater demonstration of faith to pack up all of one’s belongings and follow Hashem’s command without even knowing to where he was headed.

Rashi explains that Hashem did not reveal the land to him immediately in order to make the land dear in his eyes. He also drew out the instructions in order to give Avraham additional reward for every part of the command. Rashi² points out that there are other examples where Hashem took a similar approach of withholding part of the information at the beginning of His command. For example: when telling Avraham to sacrifice “your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak”³; when telling Avraham to take Yitzchak to “one of the mountains that I will say to you”⁴; and when telling the prophet Yonah to go to Nineveh and “proclaim upon it the proclamation that I will speak to you”⁵.

The Chatam Sofer suggests another reason why Hashem did not initially inform Avraham of his destination. Avraham knew that he was to become a great nation that would be dedicated to serving Hashem. By not revealing the destination at first, Avraham would have assumed that Hashem was taking him to an unoccupied land where he could start from scratch and set up a Torah-based society. Perhaps Avraham thought that the land to which he was going was totally uninhabited and did not even have a name. But then Hashem surprised Avraham and revealed that he would actually be going to Canaan which was already full of people! The Chatam Sofer argues that Hashem was emphasising the point that Avraham was not just to start humanity again. That was Noach’s job, after the mabul. Rather, Avraham’s role was to influence the world and bring converts from the masses. He was to teach the world to worship Hashem.

As Avraham’s descendants, we have inherited his job. Soon after Hashem took us out from Mitzrayim, He instructed us to be a “nation of priests and a holy nation”⁶. Being a nation of priests means that our job is to represent Hashem to the world. The prophet Yeshayahu famously declares in Hashem’s name that we are to be a “light unto the nations”⁷.

¹ At that time he was still called Avram, as Hashem had not yet changed his name.

² Based on the Midrash Breishit Rabbah 39:9.

³ Breishit 22:2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Yonah 3:2.

⁶ Shmot 19:6.

⁷ Yeshayahu 42:6.

Note though, that our job is not to bring converts to Judaism. If people genuinely want to convert, they may, but we do not encourage them. Non-Jews can serve Hashem and earn their eternal reward without becoming Jewish. We are unlike other religions, that over the ages have had very persuasive arguments to encourage converts, sounding something like this: “convert or the sword”! We are destined to be a people that are small in number.⁸ When we lament the rate of assimilation and intermarriage, we are not concerned that the future of the Jewish People is threatened *chas v’shalom*. Hashem has already promised us that we will survive forever. Rather, we are concerned for our brothers and sisters who are missing out on participating in this Divine role that we have and missing out on reward in *Olam Haba*.

There is a power, and a corresponding responsibility, with being small in number. This can be demonstrated by the following parable:

There was once a small village with exactly ten Jewish men. Somehow, they managed to have a minyan every single day, for every tefillah. They each knew that everyone else was counting on them, and they made a supreme effort to always turn up to shul on time. And then, one day, one of the Jewish boys had his Barmitzvah! There were now eleven Jewish males! The next day they didn't get a minyan.

As the Gemara⁹ teaches “a pot belonging to partners is neither hot nor cold”. This means when multiple people are responsible for something, it is common for no-one to take responsibility. Consequently, the task is not done. If we know that we are small in number, then we all (hopefully) feel more responsible to do our job and make a difference.

So we are small in number, and we have an important job to do. How do we do it? In the pasuk before we are called a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”, Hashem tells us exactly what we need to do:

“And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. (Shmot 19:5).

We just need to obey Hashem and follow his Torah. The Netziv¹⁰ writes that we could have achieved our function by settling in the land of Israel and living according to the Torah, thus inspiring the world to be aware of Hashem and Divine Providence. However, we did not merit this, and thus it became necessary for us to endure a long exile. In this way we are able to spread the knowledge of Hashem by living among the nations and allowing them to witness how we sacrifice ourselves for Hashem, and how we live upright, ethical lives.

Hashem wants us to carry on the role that was given to Avraham and to influence the world to become a better place. This can be achieved by living our lives in an ethical manner according to the dictates of the Torah. By acting in a way that will sanctify Hashem’s Name, we will cause the nations of the world to respect us and recognise Hashem. Since we are currently small in number, we are all responsible to ensure that we successfully fulfill our Divine responsibility.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember that we have inherited Avraham’s Divine role of influencing the world to become a better place.
2. Remember that we are small in number, so we are all responsible for making sure our job gets done!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁸ Hashem did promise Avraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth (Breishit 13:16). That promise applies specifically to the Jewish people and not to Avraham’s other descendants (see Devarim 1:11 with Rashi) but it seems that the promise will only be fulfilled in the future, perhaps in the time of Moshiach.

⁹ Eruvin 3b.

¹⁰ Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816 –1893), Rosh Yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva.