



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

Lech Lecha
תשפ"ג

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Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming.

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:3) tells us that Hashem tested our forefather Abraham (“Avraham Avinu”) - - with 10 tests, and he passed them all. One of the tests was the command in this week’s portion to leave his father’s house, his city of birth, and his homeland, to travel to an unspecified destination. The parsha begins with these words (Genesis 12:1):

א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדוּד אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ עֵבְרָה וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ

12) And Hashem said to Avram, go for yourself (for your own good) from your country, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home, to the land that I will show you.

(In the verse he is still Avram, since his name hadn’t yet been changed, but I will refer to him as Avraham.)

A “test” in the Mishna refers to a challenge whose outcome is uncertain with many formidable obstacles standing in the way that need to be overcome such that it is daunting to the protagonist and requires much effort and tenacity on his part to successfully complete. By using his G-d given resources to devise strategies and tactics to overcome the challenge, the protagonist creates within himself new powers that did not previously exist, thus making himself a greater person. Now part of him, he can invoke these skills for new challenges. Until then, these skills were merely dormant potential that could have no effect on the person. Only through using their latent potential could these traits become part of the person’s makeup and contribute to his greatness. One will never grow or reach his potential unless he challenges himself to step out of his comfort zone. As the saying goes, “Calm seas do not make a great captain.”

Hence, one may wonder, what was so daunting about the test to Avraham of לך לך (*Go for yourself*)? Bosses commonly tell employees to relocate to a new state and city because the business needs them there. Although such a move requires many considerations and adjustments,

ultimately the employee realizes that the job is more important than where he currently lives and makes the move. Students, too, commonly leave town to study in a yeshiva or school out of state, or even out of the country, to further their education. Once again, receiving the sought education trumps the convenience of living at home.

So, we still need to understand what was so difficult about this particular commandment that qualifies it as one of the 10 tests with which Hashem tested Avraham.

There are several approaches to answer this question.

1. Maimonides writes in the laws of Idol Worship (1:3)

ויצא לחרן והתחיל לעמוד ולקרוא בקול גדול לכל העולם ולהודיעם שיש שם אלוה אחד לכל העולם ולו ראוי לעבוד והיה מהלך וקורא ומקבץ העם מעיר לעיר וממלכה לממלכה

Avraham went to Haran and began to call in a great voice to the whole world and to let them know that there is only one G-d Who controls the entire world and only He should be worshipped. Abraham would go from city to city and country to country, etc.

Avraham ultimately influenced thousands of people in Haran to leave idol worship and to believe in the One Creator, Hashem. Leaving Haran meant that Abraham had to leave all of his disciples behind. Because only about 300 people went with Avraham, what would happen to the ones who would remain in Haran without their leader to guide them? Avraham realized that leaving Haran meant leaving behind the many souls on which he had worked so hard to bring close to Hashem, who would likely revert to their old ways of idol worship. How would the new souls that he would meet and influence in the future be any better than those that he had already brought close to Hashem? What would be the point?

This presented Avraham with the following dilemma.

Should I abandon all the people who have trusted me about Hashem, allowing them to possibly revert to their idolatrous beliefs, or should I remain with them to support them and keep them loyal to Hashem? What would Hashem want more?

Avraham overcame the thought to “help Hashem” and to stay with the thousands of adherents in Haran. Instead, he obeyed Hashem’s command, packed his bags and got going.

2. Hashem promised Avraham many blessings for going to *“the land I will show you.”*

The next verse in the Torah says (12:2):

ב) וְאָנֹכִי עֹשֶׂה לְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ וְשִׁמְךָ יִהְיֶה בְּרָכָה

2) And I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.

Hashem promised Avraham that he would receive children, a great nation, wealth, and fame if he would do what Hashem asked of him. It sounds like a no-brainer. Why *wouldn't* he go? What more could he ask for? What kind of test could this be?

The Sages explain that this exactly was the test: To see if Avraham would go to the place for himself, for the personal gain that he would receive, or would his motives be pure and he would go only to fulfill Hashem’s will, with no thought given to receive the personal benefits. This was also a difficult personal test to Avraham, for he had no children and had no one to carry forward his legacy. The promise of a child who would lead the next generation in the service of Hashem could have been a great reason for Avraham to follow Hashem’s commandment. But he still did it completely to fulfill Hashem’s command with no interest in personal gain.

The Torah reports (12:4) that Avraham passed the test.

(ד) וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי יְדֹוֹד

4) *And Avraham went as Hashem had told him.*

Avraham did not mix any personal desires in his motivation in going on the journey. He went strictly because Hashem had directed him to.

Hashem interestingly did not reveal to Avraham where he was to go. Hashem just said, *“to the land I will show you.”* “You just get started; I will let you know where to go.” The commentaries explain that this was intended to increase Avraham’s merit with each uncertain step that he would take. It is much harder to travel when you have no idea where you are going.

While these are two acceptable explanations, there is still an unanswered question on the original verse. Hashem told Avraham - *go for yourself (for your own good) from your country, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home.* Isn’t the order reversed? When one travels from home, first he leaves the house, then the city, and, lastly, the country. So Why did Hashem tell it to Avraham in the reverse order?

3. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch צ"ל (1808-1888) presents the following explanation of the test of לך לך.

A person is influenced by his surroundings. Maimonides writes in the sixth chapter of the Hilchos Deiyos:

דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחביריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו

1) *Hashem created a person in a way that he is drawn in his ideas and his actions to the ideas and actions of his friends and the people he associates with, and he will act like the people of his country.*

Maimonides continues to say a person who lives among evil people must move to a different country where the people are good so that his ideas and deeds are not influenced negatively by them.

While we may feel proud to be American, many people from other countries look down at us as being very plain and unsophisticated. We are *as American as apple pie*, not a croissant or anything delicate like that. You would never catch an Englishman or a Frenchman biting into a hotdog and bun loaded with relish, ketchup, and mustard.

When people from New York visit Detroit, they think the city is closed for cleaning. There are no people around, and, those who are, aren't rushing around like there is no tomorrow. The Detroiters walk so calmly they seem to have nothing to do with their lives.

We are definitely influenced by the country and city we live in, but that is nothing compared to the influence from the house in which we grew up. The personalities, values, and attitudes of our parents, mold and shape us from the time we are infants.

The directive to Avraham Avinu was *Go to yourself!* Do not follow societal norms that tell you that if you do what everyone else is doing and you fit in, you are okay and nothing more is expected of you. Do not follow the ways of your homeland and your city, accepting what they do as acceptable and right. You must judge yourself by your relationship with Hashem. You must use a completely different standard for deciding how to act other than, "everyone is doing it."

To quote Rabbi Hirsch (p. 224).

How could we have existed, how continue to exist, if we had not, from the very beginning, received from Abraham the courage to be a minority!

“Up-to-date Judaism!” (“We need to update Judaism,” a powerful force in Rabbi Hirsch’s times.) *The loudest protest against it is the first Jewish word, הָאֵלֹהִים.*

Perhaps inherent in this commandment is the charge to Abraham to purge himself of the negative influences of his country, city, and home. To return to the pure soul that Hashem created in him before it became tainted by his environment. Hashem commanded Avraham to strip away the negative and foreign influences that he received from his country, the city in which he was born, and the home in which he was raised. Hashem instructed Avraham, *“I want you to isolate the pure soul that I gave you at birth and live a life of pure service to Me. If you succeed, I will make you the father of a great nation, one that has **you** as its holy and pure foundation and its source.”*

This is why the command to Abraham is listed in seemingly reverse order. It is actually listed in the order of difficulty. It is easiest to shed the influence of the country, more difficult to shed the influence of one’s city, and most difficult, and nearly impossible, to shed the influence of one’s home. This was quite a difficult test, but Avraham managed to pass it with aplomb.

The big question is how did Avraham know what he originally was, and what the external influence was that he needed to remove? This question applies to us as well. Who are we in essence, without the outside influences of our homes, cities, and country?

The pure soul of a Jew will yearn for a relationship with Hashem and desire to do only what Hashem wants it to.

This concept is expressed in the prayer of Rabbi Alexandri as recorded in the Talmud Tractate Berachos 17a.

ורבי אלכסנדרי בתר דמצלי אמר הכי רבון העולמים גלוי וידוע לפניך שרצוננו לעשות רצונך ומי מעכב שאור שבעיסה ושעבוד מלכיות יהי רצון מלפניך שתצילנו מידם ונשוב לעשות חוקי רצונך בלבב שלם

*After finishing his Amida, Rabbi Alexandrai would say, "Master of the Universe, it is open and revealed to You **that our true desire is to fulfill Your desire.** What is stopping us? The leaven in the dough (the materialistic part of us) and the kingdom we live in (societal influence.) Please save us from them so we may fulfill Your desire as You wish us to.*

The Jew's soul Jew naturally wants to do what Hashem wants it to do. This is because the soul is a spark of Hashem Himself, and as such, has a natural affinity for Hashem. Unfortunately, our earthy body, and the influence of the society surrounding us, impact and taint our pure soul, causing it err from its true essence.

This was the directive to Avraham: Return your soul to its original state without the outside influences of your country, city, and home.

How did Avraham accomplish this difficult task?

The Torah teaches us that Avraham Avinu kept the entire Torah before it was given. We derive this from the verse in Genesis 26:5

ספר בראשית פרק כו

(ה) עָקַב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע אֲבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי וַיִּשְׁמַר מִשְׁמֵרָתִי מִצְוֹתַי חֻקוֹתַי וְתוֹרָתִי

5) Because Avraham listened to my voice and kept my safeguards (Rabbinic safeguards to the commandments), my commandments (the logical ones, such as do not steal, do not murder) , my decrees (that have no perceivable logic), and my Torahs (written and oral).

The Midrash asks:

מדרש תנחומא ויגש - פרק יא

ומהיכן למד אברהם את התורה רשב"י אומר נעשו שתי כליותיו כשני כדים של מים והיו נובעין תורה שנאמר אף לילות יסרוני כליותי (תהלים טז) ר' לוי אמר מעצמו למד את התורה

*Whence did Avraham learn the Torah? Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said. His two kidneys became like two pitchers of water that overflowed with Torah. Rabbi Levi said, **he learned it from himself.***

How could he have learned it from himself? What sources would he have used?

Our Sages teach us a very deep concept. The Zohar says that Hashem looked into the Torah and from it He created the world. We could compare it to the blueprint that a builder looks at as he builds a building. The architect drew on the blueprint all the building's specifications, and the builder follows the instructions set in the blueprint. Once the building was built, it would be possible to look at the building and redraw the blueprint from its specifications since they accurately reflect the information that was on the original blueprint.

Similarly, Hashem used the Torah as the blueprint for the world, and Avraham Avinu was able to look at the world and figure out the blueprint – the Torah - whence it came.

There is another layer of depth to this concept, viz, that is that the Torah is also like the blueprint for the Jewish person. The Torah contains 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. The 248 positive commandments correspond to a person's 248 limbs, and the 365 negative commandments correspond to the person's 365 veins and sinews. Through looking into himself and understanding how he was constructed, Abraham was able to arrive at the 613 commandments. This is the opinion of Rabbi Levi who says "from himself" he learned the Torah.

Avraham was able to discern not only the 613 commandments, but even the rabbinic laws that would later be enacted to safeguard them. We lack the ability to comprehend Avraham's greatness and his ability to do this. Of course, Hashem helped him.

King Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 7:29:

ספר קהלת פרק ז

אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם יָשָׁר וְהִמָּה בְקִשּׁוֹ חֲשִׁבֹת רַבִּים

29) Hashem made man straight, but they sought out different calculations.

If we were to just follow our inherently pure soul, we would naturally follow the straight path. Unfortunately, we are so inundated by the values and perspectives of the off-kilter world around us we cannot help but be influenced by them.

Our Sages interestingly teach us that if a Jewish child did not come into contact with any other people, he would automatically begin talking לשון הקודש (Hebrew) at the age of two. This shows that the Torah is deep within our souls, and to the degree that we remain pure of outside influences, it can shine forth more brightly.

Because of our open society and the ease of communication, foreign ideas and ideologies threaten to adulterate the Torah's pure values and morals. This may be our greatest challenge in today's world: to remain pure and unaffected. It is entirely possible through technology to gain exposure to any and every type of lifestyle, idea, or value held by even the world's most depraved people. We have no way of knowing if and how they have somehow insidiously affected our way of thinking. How are we to follow the directive of לך לך, to return to the real me?

We must follow the path set by Avraham Avinu and use the only tool capable of purifying our souls from outside influences, and that is to study the Torah and absorb its holy and pure concepts. The more Torah we take in, the more pure truth we have in us, and the more falseness is driven out. The true Torah thoughts and ideas that take over our minds will ultimately drive out all the false and erroneous ones until we have only pure Torah thoughts and ideas in our minds. It is a lifelong process, and the positive effect of the Torah on our souls slowly becomes evident. This is the *only* way to have only the truth in our souls.

All who come to Partners Detroit and avail themselves of the opportunity to learn Hashem's wonderful Torah are absorbing Torah ideas and concepts, which, if accepted internally, will rout the many erroneous ideas that we pick up from our environment. What an amazing accomplishment that is!