Lech Lecha — Daring to See

Broward Central Synagogue (5787-2026)

Genesis, Bereshit, is the book of beginnings: the beginning of the world through the six days of Creation; the beginning of humanity through Adam and Eve; the unfolding of peoples and civilizations through Noah and his descendants. And then, with Abraham, the beginning of the story that will give rise to the Jewish people and shape the religious imagination of much of humanity.

This week, our Torah portion begins the saga of the patriarchs. Abraham leaves Ur Kasdim with his father and travels to Haran. Later, accompanied by his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot, and their household, he continues toward Canaan. He passes through Shechem, pitches his tent near Bethel, and journeys south toward the Negev. (Genesis 11:31; 12:5–9).

Consider the contrast. He leaves the world of Mesopotamia, in present-day Iraq: a cradle of urban civilization, monumental architecture, sophisticated technologies, and powerful political institutions. His journey eventually takes him toward the dry expanses of the Negev. (Genesis 12:9).

From the world of great cities to the uncertainty of a tent. From familiar surroundings to an unfamiliar horizon. What leads someone to make that journey? What makes Abraham willing to leave so much behind?

The Torah tells us that God speaks: "Lech lecha. Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, to the land that I will show you." Rashi reads *lecha*, "for yourself," as "for your own benefit, for your own good." (Genesis 12:1; Rashi ad loc.).

But why does God choose Abraham? Why this particular man, the son of Terah, whom the Midrash describes as an idol worshipper who sold idols? What distinguishes Abraham from the world that raised him? (Bereshit Rabbah 38:13).

Two midrashim help us explore what the biblical text leaves unsaid. Read together, they suggest that Abraham's calling begins with his own search. Abraham reaches toward God, and God responds.

Both stories reveal the same extraordinary capacity: Abraham notices. He pauses. He asks a question. He challenges what everyone else seems prepared to accept.

(1) The first is the famous midrash of the *birah doleket*, the illuminated—or burning—palace:

"Rabbi Yitzchak offered this parable: A person was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace burning (or illuminated). He said: 'Could this palace have no one in charge?' The owner of the palace looked out at him and said: 'I am the owner of the palace.' "So too, Abraham our father

asked: 'Could this world have no one in charge?' The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out at him and said: 'I am the owner of the world.'" (Bereshit Rabbah 39:1).

The Hebrew expression *birah doleket* carries two possible images: a palace illuminated by light, or a palace engulfed in flames.

- If the palace is illuminated, Abraham sees something that awakens wonder. There is light here. There is order, beauty, life. How did this come to be? Who stands behind it?
- If the palace is burning, the question becomes more disturbing. There is destruction here. There is suffering. Where is the owner? How can this be allowed to continue?

We can hear Abraham's question in both ways: as a search for the source of existence and as a protest against the condition of existence. Other travelers might have continued down the road. We can imagine them admiring the lights or noticing the flames and then returning to their own concerns. Abraham stops. The world becomes a question that he cannot ignore.

That is our first patriarch. And we are his descendants. We inherit an invitation to look carefully at reality, to question it, to raise our voices when something demands a response. Faith begins here with the courage to pay attention.

(2) The second midrash takes us back to the story immediately preceding Abraham's family history: the Tower of Babel.

At first glance, Babel might seem like a dream of human cooperation. One language. One. shared undertaking. Humanity working together toward an extraordinary achievement. Yet several nineteenth-century Jewish commentators detect something deeply troubling beneath that unity. The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, who led the Volozhin yeshiva in the Russian Empire, reads the project as an attempt to prevent divergent thinking. Isaac Samuel Reggio, the Italian Jewish scholar from Gorizia, emphasizes domination over other peoples. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the German rabbi from Frankfurt, describes the sacrifice of individual worth to collective glory. (Haamek Davar, Genesis 11:4; Reggio, Genesis 11:4; Hirsch, Genesis 11:4; 12:1).

Their emphases differ, but together they expose the danger of a collective project that claims too much authority over human life.

Safah achat udevarim achadim: one language and the same words. In the Netziv's reading, that sameness becomes coercive. What happens to the person who thinks differently? What happens to someone who asks whether the tower should be built at all?

The midrash makes the human cost painfully concrete: *"If a man fell and died they paid no heed to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, and said: Woe is us! when will another one come in its stead?" Then Abraham passes by. He sees the city and the tower under construction and curses their undertaking in the name of God, invoking the plea: "Swallow up, O Lord, divide their language."* (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 24; Psalm 55:10).

Again, Abraham is traveling. Again, he sees. Again, he refuses to keep walking. How can a society reach the point where a brick matters more than a human being?

The tower rises, while the value of the people building it falls. Within this midrashic portrait, we begin to understand the person who can hear *Lech lecha*. Abraham is willing to question the foundations of his land, his birthplace, and even his father's house.

Those are the worlds that form us. Our land gives us institutions, public values, and accepted definitions of success. Our birthplace gives us belonging, familiar voices, and assumptions that feel natural because we have heard them all our lives. Our father's house gives us our most intimate loyalties: the traditions, expectations, and fears we carry within us.

Abraham must create enough distance to examine them. The Torah describes a physical departure. We can also hear a demand for intellectual and spiritual distance: the space to reconsider what we have inherited before deciding what we will carry forward.

The journey toward the Negev gives us an image of that space. The desert becomes, in our reading, a place where the noise of civilization can recede enough for a different voice to be heard. Sometimes we need such a wilderness ourselves. Time to study. Time to think. Time away from the pressure to provide the answer that everyone around us expects.

This is part of what it means to call Abraham *HaIvri*, "the Hebrew." One midrashic explanation declares: the whole world stood on one side, and he stood on the other. (Bereshit Rabbah 42:8). Maimonides describes Abraham beginning to explore with his own mind, thinking day and night, questioning the religious world in which he had grown up. His understanding emerges through a sustained search. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3).

In that sense, we might call Abraham our first "free thinker": the founding figure who dares to examine what his surroundings regard as unquestionable. Amid a world of many gods, Abraham comes to recognize one source of existence. One Creator, whose authority reaches beyond the borders of any city, people, or empire.

Today, we might reach for images of interconnectedness: the elements in our bodies forged in stars, or the "butterfly effect," in which a tiny change can lead to dramatically different outcomes. These are modern images, far removed from Abraham's conceptual world. Yet they can help us imagine connections beneath apparent separateness.

Abraham's religious insight carries its own moral demand: one God, one creation, one human family. The person on the other side of the border belongs to that creation too. So does the worker whose life the builders of Babel have learned to disregard.

Such convictions can come at a cost. Abraham gives up familiarity, security, and the reassurance of agreement. His descendants will repeatedly face the challenge of living as a minority. Hirsch writes: "This demand itself placed Abraham in the completest contrast to the ruling tendency of his age."

He describes a centralization that makes people "lose their personal value" and reduces them to "mere subordinate workers, mere bricks" in the construction of collective fame. Under the slogan *na'aseh lanu shem*, "Let us make a name for ourselves," the community's prestige becomes an unquestionable purpose. (Hirsch, Genesis 12:1).

For Hirsch, the danger extends to the authority of majority opinion. Whatever the majority honors can come to be treated as worthy of everyone's allegiance. Then he turns directly toward us: "Everybody is responsible to God for himself. If necessary, alone—with God,—when the principle worshipped by the majority is not the true godly one." (Hirsch, Genesis 12:1).

We cannot surrender our moral responsibility to the sentence, "That is what everybody does." When an accepted idea diminishes human dignity, when a familiar practice numbs our compassion, when the pursuit of prestige makes people expendable, Abraham's legacy asks us to pause.

To look again. To question. And, when necessary, to speak.

That responsibility applies in the larger society and within our own communities. We, too, must ask whether belonging leaves room for an honest question.

But where does Abraham's independence lead? His story continues among other people. He settles by Mamre, at Hebron. He forms relationships and alliances. He welcomes strangers. He intervenes when others are in danger. His distinctive convictions become the basis of an engaged life. (Genesis 13:18; 14:13–16; 18:1–8).

The purpose of taking distance is to gain something worth bringing back. We seek spaces of independent growth so that we can return to our relationships with clearer judgment, deeper compassion, and the courage to offer a different possibility. And here the Torah brings us back to a single word: *shem*. A name.

The builders of Babel say: **Na'aseh lanu shem. Let us make a name for ourselves.**

God tells Abraham: **Va'agadlah shemecha. I will make your name great.**

Both stories speak of a great name. But Abraham's promise continues:

Vehyeh berachah. Be a blessing. And then: "Through you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:2–3). The promise of a great name is inseparable from a responsibility toward others. At Babel, the pursuit of a name makes a human being expendable. In Abraham's calling, greatness must become a source of blessing for human beings.

That is the challenge we inherit: to sustain an independent conscience and place it in the service of the world. To live with the courage of a minority and a concern that reaches toward every family of the earth.

To notice the illuminated palace and ask where its light comes from.

To notice the burning palace and demand a response.

To notice the person falling beside the tower—and stop.

Lech lecha. Dare to see.

Give yourself enough distance to discover what you believe, and enough courage to live by it. Then carry what you have discovered back into the world. And let the greatness of our name be found in the blessing we bring to other.

Shabbat Shalom!