



Parashat Lech Lecha: “Live With Your Entire Being”

Friends,

This week the universal story ends and the particular story of our tribe and family begins. The LORD said to Abram, **“Go forth from your land, from your homeland and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you.”** (Bereishit 11:1-3)

Our particular story begins with an uprooting, a double uprooting, actually: the first appears at the end of Parashat Noah, there the Hebrew word for “uproot” (akira) appears with different vowels (akara), and it means “barren,” referring to Sarah. The double meaning of this word is not accidental. The second uprooting is in the command to Avraham and Sarah to “go forth” and leave Haran.

Avraham and Sarah become wanderers. Wealthy and successful, but wanderers nonetheless. From this moment onwards (and until this very day), the wandering, the banishment, the uprooting, and the exile - all of these are the lot of Am Yisrael.

The root of Jewish law and morality stems from our experience as strangers in the lands of others: **“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”** (Bereishit 23:9)

What is the meaning of our forebearers’ perpetual status as wanderers and outsiders? How is that, four thousand years later, we still retain this status?

I would like to consider a different view on being strangers in the land, of being outsiders and wanderers.

In two weeks’ time, we will read about Avraham burying Sarah. He will approach the local residents and say to them: **“I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”** (Bereishit 23:4)

At first reading, it seems as if he is saying something like: “Please, I am a stranger here, I have no property, and I really don’t belong here. As such, I am weak. Please be considerate of my situation and allow me to bury my dead on your land.”

But this is not accurate at all... Avraham does not appear to be in that kind of distress. On the contrary. If we remove our own projection into the text, it seems that Avraham feels very much at home! He comes to the sons of Chet (the owners of the land) and tells them: "Gentlemen, I live here among you" (the words "among you" appear twice in this verse). He does not beg to receive a plot of burial land, he demands it: "Sell me a burial site!".

I would like to suggest the possibility that the meaning of Avraham referring to himself as an outsider is the reverse of what we usually think. Avraham is actually saying to the land owners: "I am not territorial as you are. I do not deal with ownership of land. Not because I am separate and disconnected from it. Not at all! On the contrary. Rather, the whole world is my home! I feel very much at home - everywhere - much much more than you do."

I think that, surprisingly, the archetypical wandering Jew actually feels at home everywhere he or she goes. Even when he says "My heart is in the East and I am in the far West" as Yehuda Halevi wrote, or "On the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalms 137:1), he has no plans to make aliyah. He is comfortable and happy in Babylon, Spain, America, or Germany.

Since the beginning of Zionism in 1882, very few people have made aliyah of their own free will. Most immigrants came here because they were displaced, banished, or threatened. Today as well, half of the Jewish people does not live in Eretz Yisrael, and has no intention of doing so.

There is something strange and enigmatic about Jews. We appear to be uprooted, insecure wanderers, yet somewhere deep inside, this wanderer feels like a resident of the world, as if the entire planet is his home.

Many nations wandered and migrated, but none as efficiently and successfully as the Jews. None have adjusted so quickly and so successfully to their new land - time and again - as we have.

Indeed, the descendants of Avraham and Sarah feel that the entire world is their home. There is no other nation whose children go on long treks around the world as Israeli youngsters do after their military service; no other nation whose people do so much international business, as this nation. No other people who work so hard to get as many foreign passports as possible...

We, the descendants of Avraham and Sarah, were the first to discover that God does not live in any specific place as opposed to all the idols of that time. This is because **"the entire world is filled with His presence"** (Isaiah 6:3). And we who are created in His image, fill the world with ours.

We are not truly uprooted. On the contrary: we feel very much at home everywhere that accepts us.

“See, there is a place [makom] near Me” God says to Moshe on Mount Sinai. (Sh’mot 33:21) The Sages’ comment on this is **“God (Makom) is the place of the world, and the world is not His place.”** (Bereisht Rabba, 68)

Feeling truly at home in the world is feeling that we are residents of the Creator, Who is the Place (Makom) of the world.

So here lies an invitation to experience a significant inner shift: **To feel at home within ourselves!** Feeling at home does not begin in our physical home or country. It begins in our very own body - every cell of it - and feeling entirely present in it. From there, the sense of presence can expand to the house, the car, the workplace, and even to the supermarket - because as long as my body is in the supermarket, my home is there too.

Avraham was the first to declare “Hineni”, I am present; I am entirely here; not displaced, uprooted, or banished. Everywhere I am, I am present. The world is not my home; I am the place of the world.

Avraham’s story is an invitation to take ownership of our presence.

Aharon David Gordon wrote a letter to the poet Rachel, who had gone to Paris to study agriculture for a year, and was consumed by guilt for having abandoned her country, the Land of Israel. He wrote the following:

“You write that ‘the bridges have been burned.’ Why??? Is there not a bridge between Eretz Yisrael and the entire world...? Does a person not have a place in the entire world and throughout life? Is Europe not yours as long as you live there, just as Eretz Yisrael is...? Why do you view your time in Europe as a period of temporary transit, as ‘preparation for life’ rather than a period of life being lived? [why are you] planning to live afterwards?? To work and only then to live??... This point of view is incorrect... ‘In all of His paths you will know Him!’... Yes, Rachel, [while in Europe] live in Europe, live with the utmost vitality of your being!”

Yes. Live with your entire being. Know God in all of His paths. Be present, because God is present. Because the whole entire world is filled with God’s presence.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha