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Lech Lecha: Letting Go, Moving On

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"And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth (Lech Lecha) from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1)."

In this week's Parsha, we read of the first of Avraham's ten tests. Each test enabled Avraham to actualize his potential and groomed him to be the father of our great nation. We would all agree that moving can be a hassle and, in certain situations, a bit traumatic. But what was so difficult about this *Lech Lecha* command? As challenging as it may have been to leave his home and travel to a distant unknown land, God promised Avraham that he would be successful in every way. How is it a test if God assures success?

Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik *zt'l* provides a fascinating insight. The Rav points out that later in the Parsha, Avraham is told, *"But you will come to your forefathers in peace; you will be buried in a good old age (Genesis 15:15)."* The commentaries are puzzled – Avraham's father, Terach, was a known idolater. Why would God tell Avraham that he would be joining his father in the afterlife?

Avraham and Terach, father and son, were locked in fierce religious debate. Avraham was a monotheist and his father a staunch idolater. Avraham tried to teach his father about God; he tried to show Terach the folly and emptiness of his idolatrous ways. Terach felt so betrayed by his son that he handed Avraham over to the authorities to be executed for "heresy." Through miraculous intervention, Avraham survived (*Midrash Rabba Noach 38:13*). Could it be that Terach had a place in the World to Come? Could it be that Avraham was to spend eternity alongside the man who had ordered his execution? Rashi explains, *"This teaches us that Terach repented."*

The Rav explains: *"Terach so hated Abraham that he denounced him and colluded to have him executed. Later – I don't know how long it took – the same Terach saw the light and realized Avraham was right and society wrong, that his past was wrong, that a life dedicated to paganism and idolatry, to a cruel philosophy, to ideals in conflict with the basic principles of decency, was a waste. There was a tremendous change in Terach ... When the command of Lech Lecha came and Abraham began to pack his bags, he realized to his great surprise that his father's bags had already been packed long before. Father and son, hitherto locked in mortal combat, joined hands and together started out on the great march to Canaan (Abraham's Journey, 54)."*

After years of conflict, disagreement, and animosity, father and son finally had a chance to build a meaningful and enduring relationship. For so many years, Avraham was an orphan even though his father was alive. Finally, father and son experience theological and spiritual reconciliation and have a chance to build a relationship. Herein lies the true test of *Lech Lecha*. At the very moment when Avraham and Terach established this common ground with one another, God called out to Avraham, *Lech Lecha*, go forth, you must leave. For Avraham to self-actualize and become the man he was destined to become, he had to leave his father and leave behind any and every vestige of his past. *Lech Lecha*, you must go to yourself, by yourself. You must venture out on your own, separate and distinct from all you have known until now. To remain connected to the circumstances of your birth and childhood will handicap and prevent you, *Avram*, from becoming *Avraham*. The test of *Lech Lecha* was not one of relocation; it was a test of estrangement after finally achieving reconciliation. Avraham needed to separate himself from his past life in order to embrace his destiny.

The theme of the Book of *Bereishis* is *maaseh avos siman la'banim*, that which occurred to the fathers is a symbolic foreshadow for the children. The experiences of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs pave the way and set the stage for our life challenges and in reality represent the challenges inherent in the human condition. Avraham's first test was to muster the strength to let go and detach from the things that would hold him back. This came with great personal pain as it meant not just leaving behind a parent, but leaving behind a father whom he was just getting to know.

We each have things that hold us back and keep us tethered to our present reality. Sometimes it is an unhealthy relationship, a negative habit, a destructive behavior, hurt feelings or a grudge so old we've forgotten what it's about. If we want a chance to make it to our personal promised land, if we want to become the people we know deep down we are capable of becoming, we too must engage in the process of *Lech Lecha* and learn to detach, move on and let go.