



INSTITUTE
FOR
JEWISH
CONTINUITY

Lech Lecha: Living With God

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“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).”

It is in this week’s Parsha that we are introduced to our first patriarch, Avraham. The life of a patriarch is filled with much challenge and sacrifice. The life of a patriarch is far from idyllic and serene. The life a patriarch is filled with upheaval and turbulence and yet, it is meaningful, fulfilling, and impactful. Avraham’s journey began with two words, “*Lech Lecha* (go forth)”, *you must leave what you know and venture into the great unknown*. Avraham’s journey is our journey; the journey of the Jew throughout the ages; the journey of the Jew into the vast unknown. But this great test was but one of ten. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:3) states: *Avraham was given ten tests and he passed them all ...*” We often assume that *Lech Lecha* was the first. However, the Bartenura (Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura, 1445-1515) explains that the first test was “*Ur Kasdim*.” What happened in *Ur Kasdim*? Rashi (11:28) quotes the Midrash that tells the story of Avraham being handed over to Nimrod for judgement. Avraham had smashed idols and repudiated idolatry and was given an ultimatum – give up your monotheistic beliefs or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Avraham chose death over renouncing his faith and as a result was thrown into the fiery furnace. Miraculously, Avraham was saved. This, explains the Bartenura, was Avraham’s first test. But this begs an obvious question: Why isn’t this test mentioned in the text? The episode of *Ur Kasdim* is only mentioned in the Midrash. It is never once mentioned in the Genesis narrative. The test of *Lech Lecha* is told to us in great detail, yet there is no scriptural coverage of the test of *Ur Kasdim*. How are we to understand this glaring omission?

Rav Yisrael Meir Lau (current Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, former Chief Rabbi of Israel) suggests a beautiful explanation. Throughout the ages, we have given our lives “*Al Kiddush Hashem*, (to sanctify the name of God).” Brave Jewish men, women, and children have given their lives rather than renounce their faith or give up their Torah. This ability to make the ultimate sacrifice for God is part of our religious and spiritual DNA. But there is something greater than *dying Al Kiddush Hashem*, and that is - *living Al Kiddush Hashem*. The greatest accomplishment for the Jew is to live each and every day in a way that is a credit to my Creator, my Torah, and my people. Dying for God is an incredible act of heroism, but you only have to summon the courage once. A greater accomplishment is *Living for God* as it requires me to summon the courage, optimism, and strength each and every day.

Avraham’s willingness to give his life at *Ur Kasdim* was an incredible display of spiritual heroism, but this is not the lesson God wants us to take from the life of Avraham or how we are meant to emulate him. Instead, our first exposure to Avraham is *Lech Lecha*. *Lech Lecha* was the test of *living Al Kiddush Hashem*. *Lech Lecha* was not a one-time command. *Lech Lecha* was God telling Avraham, “If you want to be great, you have to be willing to separate yourself from those things that hold you back. If you want to self-actualize, you need to be willing to stand alone. If you want to be holy, you must be ready to venture into the unknown.” *Lech Lecha* was the greatest test – the challenge of *living Al Kiddush Hashem*.

We find ourselves in the midst of challenging times. If a global pandemic weren’t enough, we are in the midst of a contentious election season. One of the greatest privileges we have as citizens of this great country is the right to vote. We each have a say in who the next leader of this great nation will be. This is a privilege we must exercise and take seriously. We also have the right to express our personal views and affiliations, but we must be careful to do so in a manner befitting a Jew. Our mandate is that everything we do and say must



be a *Kiddush Hashem*. It is important for us to be involved in the political process, but we must articulate our views and positions without demeaning or belittling the other. We have seen people literally beating each other up over their differing political views. We have seen a profound erosion of basic human decency and behavior. We must be better. We must model the correct behavior as we are charged with being a light unto the nations. We must pray, learn, work, and vote *Al Kiddush Hashem*.

We stand in awe of those who have died *Al Kiddush Hashem*. We pay homage to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve our faith, ideals, and way of life. But we are called upon to do something of even *greater* significance. We must fight the good fight each and every day. We must make sure that what we do, how we behave, the interactions we have, the aspirations we possess, the goals we set, and the dreams we dream are a source of *nachas* for God and for ourselves. We must strive to *live Al Kiddush Hashem*.

May we each be privileged to find the strength to embark on our *Lech Lecha* journey, and may we find the resolve to make it to our promised land.