

The phrase לך לך appears twice in Tanach, once in פרשת לך לך and again in פרשת וירא in the story of עקידת יצחק. At first glance the phrase seems odd, as the extra word לך (Lcha) appears superfluous. In both cases, Gd's command to Abraham could have been easily understood without the word לך (Lcha). Rashi notes that Gd is telling Abraham that his journey from his home land to the land Gd is directing him towards will be for his benefit. Given that Abraham was following Gd's command, why would we have thought otherwise? What special benefit is the Torah alluding to?

Parshat Noach concludes with Terach taking his children and leaving Ur Kasdim. They make it as far as Charan where Terach remains and establishes his new home. While the commentaries offer different interpretations of where Terach came from and where he went, he clearly ended his life in Charan and that was the destination Eliezer (for Isaac) and Jacob traveled to in order to find spouses. Terach was a major idolater who complained to Nimrod that his son Abraham destroyed his idol inventory, knowing full well that this would result in Abraham being cast into an inferno. It takes an extreme level of depravity, or commitment, to sentence one's own child to such a fate. After Terach realized what he did, he regretted his actions and questioned the direction of his life. He realized he could no longer remain where he was. His experience with his son, and his son's influence on him, led him to seek something bigger and better. Indeed, Chazal tell us Terach repented.

Abraham expended so much effort on the people of his generation, especially his own father, to recognize the One Gd and reject idolatry. He finally succeeded in reaching his own father. He left Ur Kasdim and began life anew with his family. His mission should have concluded at that point. Yet no sooner has the family settled in Charan, when Gd commands him to leave and distance himself from his family and travel to an unspecified destination. Abraham could have said he accomplished his mission, what more could he do? Gd tests him and he complies. What was the essence of this test?

Abraham's destiny was not simply to convert his father and those around him. His destiny was to be the founder of a great nation that would have a special relationship with Gd. He was told his mission was indeed not complete. Indeed, it had barely begun. He could not remain connected to Terach and accomplish that mission. His separation from his past had to be complete. Chazal tell us that Abraham stood on one side of the river while his father Terach, his family and the other nations of the world stood on the other. Why single out Terach? Apparently, Terach had greatness in him as well. He was the grandfather of several great nations, even more than Abraham. His descendants included Ishmael, Ammon, Moab, Edom. Abraham could have said that he and his children belonged in that group. Gd told him that he must separate himself. Terach's destiny was not his. Where ultimately the other nations descended from Terach will come to a climactic end, Abraham's children will have a glorious future. Gd told him that he must make a choice: stay with Terach and be subject to the same fate as the rest

of his family, or forge a unique destiny, together with Sarah. The benefit Gd referred to was the unique greatness Abraham and his offspring would achieve, distinct from the rest of Terach's family.

How could Abraham prove that he was worthy of such a great reward and destiny? He had to show the world that not only did he recognize the One True Gd, but that he was ready to follow Him wherever He led him. It is easy to follow when one knows the destination. It is much more difficult to leave a comfortable home surrounded by loved ones and depart on a journey that had no final destination. Gd instructed Abraham לך לך, it is your decision, but this is a test with lasting ramifications. If you are willing to break your familial ties and leave them behind to follow Me wherever I take you, the benefits will be great. If you remain here with your family, even a family with whom you have made inroads towards recognizing the One True Gd, your impact and destiny will be limited. You have to choose which bank of the river you want to be on: Terach's or your own unique side.

The Torah tells us that both Abraham and Sarah were barren. Indeed, not only was Sarah incapable of bearing children, so too were Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. Perhaps this was in order to make a definitive break with their ancestors. Abraham and Sarah finally had a child but it was not as the children of Terach. Rather it was as the couple who had a unique covenant with Gd, consummated in the latter half of פרשת לך לך. Their connection to Terach had to be severed in order to demonstrate that this child was on their river bank and not Terach's. Isaac and Jacob were not barren but their wives were. They were also Terach's descendants and therefore had to also separate from their ancestors, Terach and Laban. Only after they choose to stand on the same bank with Abraham can they have children worthy of establishing the Jewish Nation.

Abraham encounters another life altering situation at the age of 99. He has finally established a covenant with friends who he trusts and holds in high regard. His message of belief in One True Gd seems to have caught on. Suddenly, Gd presents him with Brit Milah, circumcision, which extends the previous covenant that promised Abraham and his children the land of Israel. Chazal tell us that the nations of the world conspired to prevent Abraham from circumcising himself and following Gd's command. Why were they involved at all in this decision? Apparently Abraham had preached a lifestyle that abhorred idolatry and self mutilation in its service. The nations of the world felt that Abraham was being hypocritical in doing to himself what he preached others should not do to themselves. Also, by following through on this covenant, Abraham would now be separating himself yet again from the people and community he built. He would be moving yet again to one bank while all his followers remained on the other. Despite this, Abraham complied with this test as well, just as he did when ordered to leave his father's house.

At the end of Parshat Vayera, Abraham and Sarah finally have their long hoped for child, Isaac. Abraham had established cordial relations with the local population. He reached a treaty with Avimelech. He established a place where travelers could come to rest and learn of the One True Gd he worshiped. Suddenly Gd appears to him and tells him of one more test. He is told in great detail to offer his unique, special son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. He is told:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְאֶשְׂר-אַהֲבָתְךָ וְלִחְדָּךְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם
לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הֶהָרִים וְאָשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

We again find the phrase לך לך associated with a mission that has an unspecified destination. What was the purpose of this test? Abraham had reached an understanding with the people around him. They considered him as one of their own. Perhaps he felt a close relationship with them as well. Despite all Sarah's attempts to sever his relationship with Ishmael, Ishmael was still hanging around the periphery. Gd tells Abraham that he must now take a stand yet again that will put him on the other side while everyone else remains behind on the other. He had preached for years against child sacrifice as abhorrent and despicable. Now he is being told to perform the very act he preached against for all those years. He would be deemed the ultimate hypocrite and dismissed by those who admired him. Ishmael and Eliezer accompany Abraham and Isaac on their journey but are told they can only go so far. Upon their return from this mission, Abraham and Isaac will be on one side and they will remain on the other. There can be no going back from this. Gd tells Abraham if he complies with this command he will reaffirm the other tests he already passed and confirm his unique relationship, as well as that of his children, forever. Indeed, Akeidat Yitzchak is invoked by the Jewish People as a special merit whenever they are in need of Gd's intervention and assistance. The phrase לך לך indicates that in following this command, Abraham and his children will benefit immeasurably and confirm their relationship with Gd forever.

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