

wanderings in Canaan itself. These raise three questions: What was the Bible's intention . . . ? Why was the area of the land divided thereby into three regions: one extending from the northern border to Shechem, the second from Shechem as far as Bethel, and the third from Bethel to the southern boundary? And why is it that it was at these particular stations—in the vicinity of Shechem and of Bethel—that Abram built altars unto the Lord? . . . Scripture intended to present us here, through the symbolic conquest of Abram, with a kind of forecast of what would happen to his descendants later. According to this tradition, the token was first given to Abram and afterwards repeated to Jacob [Gen. 33:18], and the significance of the duplication is to corroborate and ratify . . . In conformity with this, the Book of Joshua [Josh. 7:2; 8:9; 8:30] portrays for us the actual subjugation in a manner paralleling the ideal conquest by the Patriarchs—even the wording is similar—as though to say, the possession of the land gained in the days of Joshua was already implied, in essence, in the symbolic conquest that the first patriarchs had effected in their time . . . ” (Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part Two*, 303–305)

By comparing Abram's itinerary to that of Jacob and Joshua, Cassuto uncovers a vital message and thread that links generations of Israelites together. Abram's journey was anything but random. The chosen way stations are part of the divine plan toward settling the Israelites in their Promised Land. The biblical narrative reinforces the fateful journey of Abram, and regards it as a prototype for later generations. Or as the rabbis teach, "*ma'aseh avot siman l'vanim*" (the deeds of the ancestors are a sign unto the children). Jacob and Joshua inherit Abram's journey, literally and figuratively. And we, as their descendants, are gifted with the very same mission—to travel the length and breadth of the Land, and hold it near and dear to our hearts and hands. May we, like Abram, merit to experience and welcome the Presence of God in these sacred places and beyond.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Lekh Lekha
Genesis 12:1–17:27
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11 Heshvan 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, Vice Chancellor and Director of Community Engagement, JTS.

Henry David Thoreau never met Abram, but he had an incredible insight into a question raised by the command from God that begins Abram's journey in this week's Torah portion.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*: which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *à la Sainte Terre*,” to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander . . . Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or home, which, therefore, in good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. (“Walking,” from *Walden and Other Writings*, 597)

Was Abram a Holy-Lander, or a man without land or home? It is an important question to consider during these literal first few steps of our foundation narrative. Like many of the richest parts of the Torah, the opening lines of Parashat Lekh Lekha are fraught with ambiguity: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen. 12:1).

What exactly was God asking of him? Did Abram know his destination? Did he realize he was beginning a journey to the Holy Land, or was he walking without any specified destination? We can imagine how either path would elicit anxiety. But there is no doubt that beginning a journey

without knowing where it would lead could be met with greater apprehension and concern. Beyond the journey and the destination, though, what did Abram think of Haran? Was he happy at home? Was he content with his surroundings? Did Abram want to set off on a new path and leave his life and family behind, or was he comfortable with the life he was leading?

Our Sages have woven creative and well-known tales that give context to the scene. There are countless children who are taught these midrashim, and believe them to be authoritative through much of their schooling. (Count me as one of them.) How many of us can tell the story of Abram smashing his father's idols and, when confronted with the offense, telling his father that they destroyed themselves? This and many other myths from Genesis Rabbah paint a negative picture of the life that Abram led in developing his critique of the empty practice of idolatry. Our interpretive tradition portrays Haran as a place where Abram was a foreigner. We can only imagine that he would have been willing to leave and start a new life somewhere else, no matter what the casualties along the way.

However, returning to our parashah, we read that the Torah does not say that Haran was a harsh place; it does not describe an atmosphere consistent with the midrashim. This more literal reading of the text makes Abram's departure all the more dramatic. How much more resolve and strength of will would it take to leave a place where you actually feel at home? Even if we say that Abram's passion for God led him to realize that he had to leave Haran to begin this new chapter in his life, this must have been a difficult decision for our emerging patriarch.

So what could have motivated him to make that leap? Did he know where he was going? Did his faith and trust in God ultimately inspire his first steps out of Haran? Did Abram receive some sort of guarantee that the life he would lead would be more fulfilling than that he was leaving? What ultimately inspired Abram to not only hear God's command, but respond?

The Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovski, reads the opening line of our parashah very closely, and teaches that there is a shift in how God relates to Abram from the beginning of Abram's call to the end of his journey. When we read the initial command, God addresses Abram verbally, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land . . .'" As much as Abram may have wanted visible proof that the destination was real and its promise true, during these first steps, Abram only gets God's word. Only when Abram arrived at "the land that I will show you" would he realize he had reached the end of his journey. Only when he was living his new reality would Abram have the ultimate proof that leaving Haran and the journey were worth it. Only then could he see that he had made the right decision to listen to God's command and leave Haran.

"*Lekh lekha*" (go forth). Abram had a choice when he heard that command. He could remain where he was in the comfortable, familiar life he was living in Haran. He could keep his eyes closed—not willing to venture out and see what God would show him—or he could open them and look to the future. Then he would realize that, even though he was living a comfortable life, what waited beyond the horizon—no matter how unsettling, anxiety-producing, or unknown it was—was the Promised Land.

What Parashat *Lekh Lekha* is teaching us is that it isn't knowing the destination that makes us take that first step, it is trusting that we will reach the Promised Land when we depart—believing in God and knowing that no matter how difficult the road ahead, no matter what struggles or complexities wait along the way, the life at the end of the journey is the only ultimate proof that the first step was worth it. The essential point is that we must take that first step, listen to the voice within us that says, "*Lekh lekha*," and begin the journey.

Was Abram a Holy Lander, or without land or home? He answers that only when he ultimately arrives in the Promised Land. Until then, he is sauntering . . . but either way, he is on the journey.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

At the opening of this week's parashah, Abram, the nascent visionary and patriarch of the Israelites, is given the divine command to separate from all that is known and familiar. God declares, "Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). With these words and the promise of God's blessing, Abram assembles his family and makes the long journey from Haran to Canaan—completing the trek begun by his father, Terah. Once Abram arrives in Canaan, we are informed of his ambitious itinerary in the land: "Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem . . . And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel . . . and he built there an altar to God. Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negev" (Gen. 12:6–9). How may we understand the selection of these particular sites in Canaan? And what resonance do these places have for the descendants of Abram?

Renowned biblical scholar Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951), professor of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1938–1951), writes,

Details of Abram's travels are given only in respect to the last and most important stages, namely, his