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Rashi unpacks the command of *lekh lekha*: “go for your benefit and for your own good and there I will make of you a great nation.” As in the “hero’s journey” described by Joseph Campbell, Abraham must depart, initiate himself into a new reality, and then return—to himself. He returns a truer self, a renewed self. The Land of Israel, the Rabbis teach, has the capacity to affect the mind and soul: “The air of the Land of Israel sharpens one’s acuity” (BT Bava Batra 158b). There is not only a physical connection between the Jewish people and the Land, but also a deeply mystical and intellectual one. We nurture the Land and the Land nurtures us. We are a reflection of the diverse landscapes of Israel; we are richly layered and textured like Israel; and we aspire heavenward—just as the earthly furrows beckon to the heavenly horizons of our Promised Land. It all begins with a journey—trusting in that commanding voice which will take us to a beautiful land and a deeper and truer self.

Lekh Lekha 5777

לך-לך תשע"ז



## What Was Promised to Abraham?

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In this week’s parashah, Abraham makes his dramatic first appearance on the stage of the Torah, when he follows the command to go forth to an unknown land, relying on the promise of an unknown God. His moving story, along with that of his sons and grandsons, has captivated readers from all three large monotheistic religions. Generation after generation wished to read these patriarchal and matriarchal stories into their lives, their time and place. (The great medieval rabbi, mystic, and commentator Moses Nahmanides went even further to argue that the actions of the Patriarchs have inscribed patterns into the cosmic order, which future generations of Jews are compelled to follow). By depicting the Patriarchs as human (at times, all too human) rather than as saintly, it seems that the Torah almost invites us to conflate our fears and hopes, travails and achievements, with those of our mythical fathers and mothers.

In the past seven decades, a new form of temptation has emerged: to interpret the biblical promises and narratives regarding the Land of Canaan as anticipating the history of the Zionist movement and the sovereign State of Israel. As the addressee of many such promises, Abraham became a central figure in this trend.

To be sure, the astonishing evolution of the Zionist movement and its enormous success as epitomized by the sovereign State of Israel does indeed invite interpretations of a miraculous nature. Furthermore, Zionist leaders from left and right have long relied on the yearning of traditional Jews for Zion. The temptation to view this modern democratic state as a fulfillment of the divine promise to Abraham in this week’s parashah is quite understandable. Yet this exegetical act, although tempting, is also perilous.

It is perilous not only because it can lead to a failure to recognize that all the peoples of this land—Jews and non-Jews alike—are entitled to live with freedom and dignity within its borders. It is also perilous because conflating the biblical promise with modern statehood can be the cause of a hubris which leads to forgetfulness: it's easy to forget that Israel's independence owes just as much to the support and recognition of the international community of nations as it does to the historical connection of Jews to Zion. Such moral blindness and false political belief may lead the State of Israel to weakness, isolation, and—ultimately—even to real danger. We saw the terrible results of these fallacies in 1994, when a US-born Jewish physician named Baruch Goldstein entered the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron and massacred 29 Muslim worshipers, wounding 125 others. In so doing, he committed a horrendous act of *Hillul Hashem* (profaning the name of God).

Is it possible to connect the Israeli present with biblical lore without falling into a fetishization of Land and without succumbing to a chauvinism that is confident of God standing unconditionally on its side? I believe that this is possible, and that it is Abraham himself—through his conduct and actions—who provides us with the correct path:

Abraham, the Torah tells us, is a newcomer to the land of Canaan, and he acts accordingly. From his first day of arrival to his last day, Abraham walks the land as a nomad, not a landlord. He takes special care, indeed painstaking care, to avoid any quarrel with his neighbors, family members like Lot (Gen. 13:8-9), and foreigners alike (Gen. 21:22-34). He also instructs other members of his household to follow this practice (Gen. 13:8). Abraham does not hasten into war; he chooses the path of force rarely, only when no other option is available. Finally—and most importantly—Abraham's moral standards lead him to engage in a debate with God Himself, wishing to prevent a divine verdict which will result in great violence and bloodshed. When trying to persuade God to defer the verdict of annihilation of Sodom, Abraham invokes an astonishingly provocative question:

הַשֵּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט?

Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly? (Gen. 18:25)

The promise given to Abraham that he shall inherit the Land may therefore be regarded as a conditional promise, one that is predicated on the first

patriarch's upholding of a moral standard and backbone. Without this moral standard, the promise is void. It seems that the prophet Ezekiel understood the divine promise pertaining to the Land of Israel in precisely this way. These are his words of rebuke to those Israelites who believed that God promised them the Land unconditionally:

O mortal, those who live in these ruins in the land of Israel argue, "Abraham was but one man, yet he was granted possession of the land. We are many; surely, the land has been given as a possession to us." Therefore say to them: Thus said the Lord God: You eat with the blood, you raise your eyes to your fetishes, and you shed blood—yet you expect to possess the land! You have relied on your sword, you have committed abominations, you have all defiled other men's wives—yet you expect to possess the land! (Ezek. 33:24-26, NJPS translation)

When we read the story of Abraham, if we find ourselves caught by the allure of interpreting the divine promise about inheriting the Land as referring to current Israeli reality, we will do well to remember what also can be derived from Abraham's character and story—that independence, sovereignty, and power are a political and moral test, not a possession inherently belonging to the Jewish people.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### A Land of Promise

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Abraham continually inspires us, his descendants, in his ability to place trust in the journey. God's command to "[j]ourney forth from your country, from your birthplace, and from your father's house" (Gen. 12:1) is striking: Leaving one's country is doable. But to journey from one's birthplace and familial connections is jarring—with the potential to transform one into an aimless wanderer. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his roots for an indeterminate future—for the place that God will show him. A promise. And nothing more.