

## Senior Sermon

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“Welcome home”: these were the two words spoken to me at the JFK Customs checkpoint when I returned from a family trip holding my American passport for the first time.

I was born in one country, Argentina. I grew up in a second country, Israel. I gave birth in two countries, Argentina and the United States. And, I raised my four boys in three different states in the US. I speak in one language, dream in a different language, and pray in a third one.

In Parashat Lech Lecha, God says to Abraham, “Go forth (לך לך) from your homeland to the land that I shall show you. God then continues and promises Abraham: “I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.” God is asking Abram to leave everything behind and go.

Reading the text closely I ask myself: why does the text add the word “לך” after the verb “לך”? I looked for other places in the Torah where the לך is also used after the verb, and I tried to make sense of that addition to the verse.

Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 1 reads: בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי פְּסַל־לִי שְׁנֵי לְחֹת אֲבָנִים  
“Thereupon the LORD said to me, **Carve out** two tablets of stone.”

In Numbers chapter 10, verse 2, it says: עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שְׁתֵּי תְּצִוְצוֹת  
“**Have** two silver trumpets **made**.”

Our rabbis, in Talmud Yoma (3:72), came up with the interpretation that "Make **for yourself** (לך) an ark of wood," and "Make **for yourself** (לך) two silver trumpets" means that the work does not really belong to them. Therefore, the work will benefit others.

Rashi comments on Lech Lecha -- meaning "For **your own benefit, for your own good**." It is there that I will make you into a great nation, whereas here you will not merit children. Also, I will make your character known to the world.

Rashi and our rabbis in the Talmud contradict each other. Did Abraham leave for himself? Or, did he do it for the generations to come? Why did Abram obey God, turning his back on his father's home?

I struggled for a while with the addition of Lecha, and I often thought: *who in their right mind would do something like that?* I cannot help but think of what home meant to Abraham? Where was home for him? And what did the idea of leaving his land, his homeland, and his father's home mean to him?

Throughout my life, I experienced first-hand the pain and uncertainty that the idea of “to the land that I will show you” carries. I often encountered the feeling of leaving one place and going to another without knowing where and how I was going to make it.

I was three years old when I had my first experience with Lech Lecha. My family moved to Israel from Argentina. In Israel, I faced someone else's pain for the first time. Yosef Romano, the father of one of my classmates was brutally murdered at the Olympic Games in Munich, Germany. Though I was still too young to fully grasp the concept of loss, the salty taste of my tears marked the beginning of my journey and shaped who I would become.

Every Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance, we would march with torches to remember the lives of former students of our school who had fallen in battles or terror attacks. I was just a young girl at the time but I still tremble when I think of the sound of the siren that marked the minute of silence. The piercing sound of the siren continues to echo as a reminder of the blessing of being alive.

In Israel I have experienced light and darkness, joy and anguish, calmness and fear, and all of these gave me an incredible perspective on life, happiness, and what really matters. “*Bemotam tzivu lanu et hachayim*—with their deaths they command us to live.” I learned in my early childhood that life is a privilege and how important it is to carry on the legacy of people who are not physically present anymore.

In the Etz Hayim, God's first words to Abram are translated as "Go forth," which literally means "betake yourself." This is interpreted as "go forth and find your authentic self, to learn what you are meant to be.”

After a few years of weighing the options because my mom could not adjust to life in Israel, I experienced my second Lech Lecha. My parents decided to go back to Argentina. I found myself in the middle of the Dirty War and the military era, surrounded by people who spoke a language somewhat familiar, but in which I could not communicate. I was literally like the interpretation of the Etz Chayim trying to find my authentic self.

Life happens and time passes. At the age of fifty-three, my father (Z”L) unexpectedly passed away. I was devastated and could not possibly imagine continuing my journey without him. But life doesn’t pause, and the journey continues. Two Lech Lecha experiences in such a short time is a lot, but I was yet to experience the most difficult one.

Years later, I met my husband, got married, had a child, and another child, and another child. Because of an economic collapse in Argentina and social unrest, my husband and our three children, at the time, immigrated to the United States. This was the most painful Lech Lecha. We left our country, our native land and our parents’ house. We had no family to cry with or grandparents, aunts and uncles to spoil our kids. We were brought to the United States as a Tzedakah project by a small Jewish Day School in Durham, NC.

We moved with “all the wealth that we have amassed,” \$3000 and 11 suitcases. My husband, who was a practicing pediatrician in Argentina, had to revalidate his credentials, do another residency, and gain American experience.

As a family, we have lived in four states and twelve houses. And, in the midst of all this, we had another child. I constantly wondered and imagined where we would end up next, who I would encounter, and who my children would become from this nomadic lifestyle.

I had to work countless hours to support my family while my husband was studying towards revalidating his medical license. And, my children were adjusting to new schools and neighborhoods while making new friends.

Rambam interprets Lech Lecha "Go, yourself" - "For your benefit, and for your own good, and there I will make you into a great nation.

**Here** you will not merit children.” So, I ask myself: if this is true, did Abraham really have a choice? If staying meant to fail and not being able to secure a future for himself and for his descendants, where is the choice? Did my family have a choice?

God promised Abraham three very important things: possessions, continuity and a good name.: וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְתִּיךָ וְהָיָה בְרַכְּךָ

“I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.”

Judy Klitsner writes in her book, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, that God's insistent repetition of the verb “ברך” “bless,” makes G-d’s promise emphatic and sweeping.

Not only will Abraham be blessed, but so will, in his wake, the nations of the world.

כִּי אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה רֹאֶה לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּנָּה וְלְזַרְעֶךָ עַד-עוֹלָם:

for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever (Genesis 13:15).

Radak comments that “כי את כל הארץ” means that even though Abraham could not see the entire land of Canaan from where he stood, G-d told him to look in all four directions of the globe to tell him that just as the land extended beyond his range of physical vision in every direction, so G-d would give to his descendants all of this as an inheritance.

Wow! To have G-d “sponsoring” you is very reassuring. Now, I understand why Abraham left.

The Midrash in Bereshit Rabba compares Abraham to a small container of balsam oil surrounded with a fastened cover, that was placed in a corner and its fragrance did not diffuse.

So, God said to Abraham טַלְטֵל עֲצָמֶךָ מִמָּקוֹם לְמָקוֹם וְשִׁמְךָ מִתְגַּדֵּל בְּעוֹלָם “Move yourself from place to another place, and your name will be exalted in the world”

Precisely when the source of the good fragrance is shaken, it affects its surroundings, therefore the commandment to Abraham is to "go" to spread the light of faith in the world. Abraham receives the command "לך לך", and since then he does not stop walking. We can find several examples of Abraham's willingness to do what needs to be done.

וַיִּסַּע אַבְרָם הַלְוִי וְנָסוּעַ הִגְגָב

Then Abram journeyed in Genesis 12

קוּם הַתְהַלֵּךְ :

Up, walk about the land in Genesis 13

וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם

Abraham went quickly in Genesis 18

וְאֵלֵי-הַבְּקָר רָץ אַבְרָהָם

Then Abraham ran in Genesis 18

And, in the Parasha of the binding of Isaac it says: "וּלְךָ-לֶךְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה" “and **go to** the land of Moriah". And, the root **ה.ל.כ** appears seven times.

Abraham is active. He walks, and if necessary he keeps running. The description of Abraham's personality is trying to tell us that only if we keep walking, and at times even running, can we overcome the difficulties we face.

It is not easy to leave behind the familiar and embark on a path where the destination is unknown. The uncertainty of the journey can be scary and overwhelming.

This true story happened around Rosh Hashanah, a couple of weeks after we immigrated to the United States. My oldest son was in elementary school at The Lerner School in Durham. I was a teacher at the school. The day before Rosh HaShanah, I walked past a bulletin board and saw the name of my son in Hebrew and a beautiful poster saying “Eyal Baler wishes for a Nintendo.” All the students in his class had to write wishes, hopes and dreams for the New Year. At that time, we were very tight with money, and electronic games were not part of what we were all familiar with. So, I was a bit surprised to see that statement. I went to my son and said, confused: “I didn’t know you wanted a Nintendo,” and I added, “I didn't even know that you knew what a Nintendo is.” My son was even more confused and said: “What is a Nintendo?” He then explained what happened.

The teacher asked him to draw a wish and make a poster and he replied: “*No entiendo.*” He did not say he wanted a Nintendo; he just didn’t understand. “*No entiendo*” is Spanish for I don’t understand.

Time passed and this little boy who did not know a word of English graduated from Duke Law School and is now an Assistant District Attorney at the Manhattan DA’s office. We never imagined this is where our journey would have ended up.

Earlier in life, I finished my first step in the Seminario but never had a chance to complete Rabbinical School. For me, life was almost never how I dreamt it would be or planned it to go. I encountered many obstacles in my path, and my dream of becoming a rabbi was fading. Eventually, I graduated from the Seminario with a degree in Jewish Studies. I became a teacher and a lifelong learner. Many events slowed me down but never completely stopped me, and I wanted to pursue what I wanted to become. Serving as a rabbi is not just what I want to do; it is who I want to be.

After wandering around and leaving behind everything many times, we settled in Chapel Hill, NC. We bought a house, and there, we lived “happily ever after. . .” Not really! I had a midlife crisis, bought a red sports car, and I was presented with a dilemma. I could play golf and look back at everything I had left or embark on a new Lech Lecha and come to JTS and finish what I started many years ago in Buenos Aires.

Like Abraham, I chose to leave my “baggage” and all the “kvetching” and move to NYC . . . and the rest is history. Ultimately, Abraham’s journey had a happy ending. My family has also been blessed with possessions, 4 wonderful children, and a good name.

It takes a leap of faith, resilience, perseverance, and determination to journey and fulfill your hopes and dreams. Just as Abraham did, we too have the ability to follow our own callings, trust God, and work towards achieving our goals.

When the Customs officer uttered the simple statement, “welcome home,” it was made clear to me that “home” has a complex and unique interpretation for everyone. Home is *בית אביה*, *מולדתה*, *ארצה*; home is my childhood neighborhood; home is crying your classmate’s tears; home is Hebrew, Spanish and English; home is where I gave birth; home is

where we raise our kids; home is family; home is the place where you fulfill your dreams; home is moving and settling; home is life and loss.

Home is being blessed and having the privilege of being “welcomed home.” Home is our and others’ overwhelming journeys towards “the land that I will show you” and the uncertainty of what is yet to come.