

O H R N E T

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

“Go for yourself...” (12:1)

Very soon, only the speed of light will limit our ability to communicate a thought, a picture, a sound or a sentence from one side of the world to the other, and beyond. The meaning of the word *distance* has changed forever.

Just as the electron has shrunk our world, so too there has been a quiet and maybe even more fundamental revolution in the way we look at traveling. We see nothing special in the fact that several hundred people can file into a large metal room and find themselves on the other side of the world in a matter of hours.

A little more than a hundred years ago, to circumnavigate the globe would have required months of arduous, dangerous and expensive effort, almost beyond our imagining. Nowadays, the major drawback in circling the earth in a plane is an aching back from sitting in a reclining chair that doesn't quite live up to its name. We have breached the last frontier. Distance has become no more than a function of time spent in a chair.

The electron and the 747 have had their impact on our culture in other ways. Our cultural mindset mandates that speed is of the essence. *How fast can I get there?* vies in importance with *Where am I going?* Immediacy has become an independent yardstick of worth. How fast is your car? Your computer?

Our age has sought to devour distance and time, rendering everything in a constant and immediate present. Now this. Now this. Now this. (Interestingly the languages of the age — film and television, computer graphics — are languages which have trouble expressing the past and the future. They only have a present tense. Everything happens in a continuous present.)

All of this makes our spiritual development more and more challenging. Spirituality is a path. And like a path you

have to walk down it one step at a time. Your fingers cannot do the walking on the spiritual path. You cannot download it from the Internet.

Everything in the physical world is a paradigm, an incarnation, of a higher spiritual idea. Travel is the physical equivalent of the spiritual road. The quest for spirituality demands that we travel, but this journey is not a physical journey. Many make the mistake of thinking that hitchhiking around the world and experiencing different cultures will automatically make them more spiritual. The truth is that wherever you go, there you are. When your travel is only physical you just wrap up your troubles in your old kit bag and take them with you.

Spiritual growth requires the soul to journey. Our soul must notch up the miles, not our feet. The spiritual road requires us to forsake the comfortable, the familiar ever-repeating landmarks of our personalities, and set out with an open mind and a humble soul. We must divest ourselves of the fawning icons of our own egos which define and confine us, and journey.

Life's essential journey is that of the soul discovering its true identity. We learn this from the first two words in this week's Torah portion. "*Lech lecha.*" "Go to yourself." Without vowels, these two words are written identically. When G-d took Avraham out of *Ur Kasdim* and sent him to the Land of Israel, He used those two identical words: "*Lech lecha*", "Go to yourself."

Avraham experienced ten tests in his spiritual journey. Each was exquisitely designed to elevate him to his ultimate spiritual potential. When G-d gives us a test, whether it's the death of a loved one or a financial reversal or an illness, it's always to help us grow. By conquering the obstacles in our spiritual path, be it lack of trust in G-d or selfishness or apathy, we grow in stature. We connect with the fundamental purpose of the journey, to journey away from our negative traits and reach and realize our true selves.

We "go to ourselves."

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits that G-d appear to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants, and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants. A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty would cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the

Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the region and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs from accepting any of the spoils of the battle. In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to Eretz Yisrael, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel Hagar returns to Avram, and gives birth to Yishmael. The weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and all his household.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PEOPLE

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

YOAV – THE GENERAL AND THE WISE WOMEN

Yoav was the commander-in-chief of King David's army and a clever diplomat as well. On two occasions he utilized the services of wise women to achieve his goals.

The first occasion was when he effected a reconciliation between David and his son Avshalom. The latter had fled after murdering his half-brother Amnon to avenge his sexual exploitation of his sister Tamar. Yoav sent a wise woman from Tekoah to David with a fabricat-



ed tale designed to convince him to allow Avshalom to return.

The second occasion was when Yoav's forces surrounded the city of Aveiloh Bet Ma'acha in which the rebellious Sheva ben Bichri had taken refuge. It was a wise woman in that city who negotiated with Yoav and convinced her townsmen to accept his terms and deliver the head of the rebel and save their city.

ISRAEL Forever

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

THE FOUR PROMISES

Four divine promises were made to the Patriarch Avraham that Eretz Yisrael would belong to him and his posterity forever. All of them are to be found in the weekly Torah portion which will be publicly read in synagogues this Shabbat.

When Avraham first entered Eretz Yisrael he was promised that the land he had already traversed would be given to his posterity (*Bereishet 12:7*) but its geographical extent was not stipulated. Only after he gained spiritual merits by dwelling in the land for a while did he receive a second promise that the entire land of Israel would belong to his posterity, which would be as numerous as the dust of the earth – and it would be *theirs forever* (*ibid. 12:15*).

The third promise contained a vision of Greater Eretz Yisrael and a guarantee that even if his posterity sinned they

would not forfeit their right to inherit the land (*ibid. 15:18-21*). When Avraham was commanded to circumcise himself as a bond between him and his Creator he received the fourth and final promise that even if his posterity should ever be exiled from the land they would inevitably return to it because it was their “eternal inheritance”. Added to this promise was the assurance that “I will be their G-d”, a wonderful description of the special relationship of the Creator with His chosen people (*ibid. 17:18*).

As we reflect upon these four promises, as detailed in the commentary of Ramban, we should keep in mind that the return to the land which we have been privileged to enjoy in our time is inextricably intertwined with the special relationship we maintain with the Creator Who gave us this land and returned it to us – and us to it – forever.

WHEN DREAMS DON'T COUNT

What is the impact of a dream on a legal matter? This question arises in our *gemara* in regard to someone who has a revelation in a dream regarding the location of money he inherited from his father. He was told the exact location and amount of money but that it was *ma'aser sheini* (second tithing of produce which can be redeemed for money) money which could not be spent outside of *Yerushalayim*.

The dream came true as he found the money at the designated location and in the amount revealed. When the Sages were asked whether he must relate to this money with the restrictions of *ma'aser sheini* he was told that dreams cannot determine the status of money and he is therefore free to use it without any restriction.

The source for downplaying the significance of dreams is a passage in *Yirmiyahu* (23:28) in which the prophet relays Hashem's sharp distinction between the true prophet who receives Divine communication and the false one who can only relate his dream. It concludes with the words "What is the straw doing with the grain?, says Hashem." What connection do grain and straw have with dreams? asks Rabbi Yochanan (*Mesechta Berachot 55a*). He quotes Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's explanation that just as it is impossible for grain to be free of straw so is there no dream without meaningless details.

Even though a dream is considered to be a sixtieth of prophecy and this particular dream came true in regard to both the location and amount of the money, we still assume that the detail about its status may be that "straw" which every dream contains.

In *Mesechta Nedarim* (8a) we find a dream being given credence in the case of someone who was the subject of a *cherem* (excommunication) and required a *minyan* of scholars to release him from it. Whether this extends to someone who dreamed that he took a vow is the subject of a dispute between *Rashba* and *Ran* to be found in the commentary of *Rabbeinu Nissim* on our *gemara*.

There is an interesting sidelight to be found in the commentary of the *Siftei Cohen* on *Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat* (333.25) in which he dismisses a *halachic* opinion which one author claims was revealed to him in a dream because in *halachic* matters dreams don't count.

• *Sanhedrin 30a*

BREAKING THE FAST

The importance of providing *tzedaka* (charity) for the needy is stressed in many places in the Talmud. In our *gemara* we are introduced to a new and startling dimension.

It is based on the passage (*Yeshayahu 1:21*) in which the prophet contrasts righteous *Yerushalayim* of the past in which justice was so prevalent with the city of his day in which there was so much bloodshed. Rabbi Elazar quotes Rabbi Yitzchak as seeing in the term "tzedek", literally translated as justice, a reference to "tzedaka" and deducing from it a warning that a community which fails to provide its needy members with food to eat at the conclusion of a public fast day is considered as virtually slaying them.

Rashi explains that it was the custom for the community to provide the poor with ready-to-eat food with which they could break their fast. Failure to provide this nourishment, to which the needy looked forward all day long, that very night, was tantamount to murder even if it was indeed given to them the following day.

The concept is similar to the statement of the Sage Mar Zutra (*Mesechta Berachot 6b*) that the principle reward for fasting is the *tzedaka* which is given to the poor who fasted that day.

A simple reading of our *gemara* would seem to indicate that prolonging the hunger of the needy fasters is what endows the withholding of *tzedaka* with a dimension of murder. But *Iyun Yaakov* offers an interesting perspective. The *gemara* (*Bava Metzia 58b*) compares embarrassing one publicly to murdering him. The hungry poor who fail to receive the food they expected from their community will be forced to go begging elsewhere for their desperately needed meal and suffer the embarrassment that goes with such activity. The community which indirectly brought such shame upon them is therefore considered to be guilty of virtual murder.

• *Sanhedrin 35a*

The Weekly Daf

by RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

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PARSHA Q&A ?

1. What benefits did Hashem promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites." How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did Hashem indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace?"
17. How did Hashem fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age?"
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when Hashem appeared to him?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of Hashem.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. 12:8 - He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 - Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. 14:1 - Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 4:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - Hashem had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's king to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. 15:13 - With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

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LIVING IN ISRAEL

From: T. in Miami, FL

Dear Rabbi,

I have a small dilemma. I am 18 years old. I have a close relative now living in Israel who is very extremist when it comes to living in Israel. He has always disapproved of people living outside Israel for he never really sees them as "worthwhile Jews" or Jews who are so dedicated to their Jewish heritage.

Lately, he has criticized me for living outside of Israel, and claims that there will be a price I will have to pay for doing such a "sin." I know I want to come to Israel once I get an education so I could support myself later on in the future. Neither does he agree that this is the right way to go and they claim that by the time I will get to Israel (when I will be about 20 - 22 years of age), I will be "too old" and therefore it won't have an impact on me.

I have decided to write to you for, as a Rabbi, I would respect your opinion. I don't want to believe that I'll be too old to go to Israel at 22 or that my life outside Israel is a waste of time, yet, by the letters I receive from them, I am beginning to feel guilty.

Do you think I should work now so I could support myself in the future and meanwhile help in the local Jewish community, or should I ignore the Jews outside Israel and go to Israel now, so I won't be "too old" in a couple of years? Thank you.

Dear T.,

As you probably know, the Land of Israel is central to Judaism. It's an intrinsic part of the covenant between G-d and Abraham, and it's where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs lived and are buried. Most events recorded in the Tanach took place in Israel.

Israel is the only land conducive to developing the faculty of prophecy. All the prophets either received prophecies in Israel, or prophecies that related to the Land of Israel. For example, Abraham's only prophecy outside Israel was the command to go there.

Even today, people who live in Israel experience extraordinary Divine assistance in Torah study and spiritual growth. As the Sages said: "There's no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel;" – "The air of the Land of Israel imparts wisdom." Despite the security situation, in many ways one can experience a higher level of tranquilli-

ty in Israel than can be experienced elsewhere.

Furthermore, most of the commandments only apply when the majority of Jews are in Israel; nowadays, when most Jews live outside Israel, only 270 of the 613 mitzvot can be fulfilled.

Is there a specific mitzva to live in Israel? Many authorities say it is a mitzva to live in Israel, in keeping with the verse, "and you shall possess the land and dwell in it (*Bamidbar 33:53*)." Maimonides, on the other hand, states that "one should always dwell in the Land of Israel," yet he does not list it as one of the 613 commandments. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein explains that according to Maimonides there's no obligation to go to Israel, although it is a good thing to do.

Since living in Israel affects almost the entire range of mitzva observance, all factors should be considered. Will you be able to find work that provides you with the time and money to fulfill the mitzvot - for example, study Torah, give charity, and provide a Torah education for your children? Halachic authorities throughout the ages have emphasized that a person should come to Israel only if reasonably sure he can support his family and guarantee his children a Torah education.

However, one shouldn't seek luxuries - the importance of living in Israel outweighs driving a Ferrari and eating steak every day for breakfast.

Other factors to consider: How will you deal with living far from family? How do you feel about the security situation? How will you adapt to a new culture? What suitable marriage prospects are available? What appropriate Torah study program will you connect with? Will you be able to live in a Torah neighborhood?

G-d forbid anyone should say a life isn't "worthwhile" just because it's lived outside of Israel. A life dedicated to Torah and mitzvot is certainly worthwhile, wherever it is. Sometimes a person's contribution to the Jewish People can be even greater outside of Israel, especially a person involved in Jewish education, outreach or community matters.

Coming to Israel is sort of like getting married: Everyone should do so eventually, but not because a well-meaning relative bullies you into it. And if you do so when you want to, you're more likely to fall in love.

Sources:

• *After the Return*, Rabbi Mordechai Becher & Rabbi Moshe Newman (Feldheim Publishers). Ch. 7