Upwards and Onwards
Parasha Lech Lecha
לך לך,uko מתוכו את אבראר ווד הכה

12  **General Note:**

**121** Hashem said to Abram, “Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great.”

**Rashi:**

I. For your pleasure, whereas here you do not merit having children. And furthermore, you will benefit by going, for thereby I will make your name known in the world.

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**Chazal (Avos 5:3):**

Chazal (Avos 5:3) teach that Avraham underwent ten trials and passed them all. The first of these (see Rashi there and Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 25) was having to hide underground for thirteen years from King Nimrod, who sought to kill him because of his beliefs. If Avraham had renounced his belief in Hashem, he could have lived in peace. The second trial was being thrown into a burning furnace — again because of his beliefs. The Torah itself, however, does not mention these two tests outright, and the first mention of any test is the third one — that of Lech Lecha — Avraham’s having to uproot himself and move to a new land. Avraham’s first two tests were truly great ones; why indeed does the Torah not make mention of them?

In Kiddushin 31a, Chazal teach, “Greater is the mitzvah of one who is obligated to act and does so than the mitzvah of one who is not obligated and does so.”

This is difficult to understand, for surely a mitzvah performed voluntarily displays a greater desire to fulfill Hashem’s will than an act of obligation which one has no choice but to obey.

The ultimate level in mitzvah performance is to do a mitzvah solely because it is the will of Hashem, without any ulterior motivation.(see Toldos 26:5). Although a mitzvah performed voluntarily does indeed display a greater desire to fulfill Hashem’s will, it nevertheless remains an act stemming from one’s self-motivation and not from a Divine command, regardless of how pure one’s intent may be. However, someone who is obligated to perform a mitzvah possesses the ability to fulfill that mitzvah solely because it is the will of Hashem. A mitzvah performed accordingly is the ideal mitzvah.

Returning to our original difficulty, why does the Torah not mention Avraham’s first two tests? The first two of Avraham’s trials did not involve his fulfilling Divine commands. Hashem had not instructed Avraham to sacrifice himself as proof of his belief in Hashem, and regardless of how correct his deeds were, they were ultimately the products of self-motivation and understanding. The first of Avraham’s...
Gifted with thinking minds, we may well find it tempting to seek to probe and fathom the reasons for the mitzvot, and then to remain staunchly convinced that we know their real reasons, their ultimate meanings and significance.

Here we must be very careful. While we may discern the general purpose of the mitzvot as a whole, we must beware of deciding on specific reasons or meanings for individual mitzvot and then observing them only for these reasons. We must do mitzvot not for the sake of any reward, though reward there is; nor because we believe we understand their purpose, though purpose they surely have; but essentially because they are mitzvot, the Almighty's precepts and commandments.

Judaism is suspicious of man's capacity to rationalize. When Kaiser Wilhelm invaded Belgium, he was reminded of his treaty commitments, which his action violated. The Kaiser replied, "We shall take Belgium; let the philosophers find the necessary explanations." The human being has a built in "philosopher" in his mind, which can seek to justify and explain any act to himself and the world. Reason can be a handmaiden of the will, supplying plausible and interesting explanations that are totally false, when you will not or cannot find the truth. A recent thinker once said, "Philosophy is simply the formation of bad reasons for what we believe on instinct."

The determination to keep and obey the mitzvot must emanate not from sophisticated "understanding" and intellectual assent but from a total commitment by the human being to the authority of the Almighty.
(1) You are probably aware of the well-known Jewish tenet that God created the world. It is less well-known that creation is not a one-time event in the past, but a continuous process at every moment. God recreates the world at every instant. Were it not for the flow of Divine energy, all that exists would spontaneously lapse into nothingness. As a consequence, everything that exists partakes of God’s Divinity and sanctity. This means that nothing that exists is inherently and irredeemably evil; indeed, nothing that exists is inherently and irredeemably secular. Each thing has a potential for holiness which will or will not be realized, depending upon how it is used. With respect to that potential the world exists in an unfinished state. Man is called upon to become a partner with God in completing the creation by realizing that potential.

A Roman asked R. Akiva: “Whose actions are greater, those of God or those of man?” Anticipating that R. Akiva would reply piously that God’s actions are greater, the Roman was prepared to challenge him with circumcision. The body is God’s creation. Why then do Jews mutilate it by cutting off part of it, if God’s actions are greater than man’s? But R. Akiva answered that man’s actions are greater than God’s! And he proceeded to prove it. He put raw wheat and cake in front of the Roman and asked him which he would prefer to eat. When the Roman chose the cake, R. Akiva pointed out that God made the wheat, but man made the cake! That sufficed to stump the Roman, but we are not so easily put off. How can the wheat and the cake show the superiority of man’s actions when man needs God’s wheat in order to make the cake? Furthermore, how do we make the cake? We need to thresh and winnow the wheat, grind the grain into flour, add other ingredients and apply heat so that various chemical changes will occur. All these processes depend upon the “laws of nature” as applied to the wheat, flour and other ingredients, each with its natural properties.

But if God is constantly recreating the world, “nature” is just a name for His activity. He makes possible all of the processes in the production of the cake. Even “our” actions are largely due to God’s help! How then can man’s actions be superior to God’s?

16 They can’t, and that was not what R. Akiva meant. What he meant was that the end product of man’s actions is superior to the end product of God’s actions. That is why God made wheat inedible and man made cake edible. God has deliberately left the world in an unfinished state and invited man to finish it. Thus it is consistent for us to circumcise the body which God made circumcision is our share in completing the creation of that body. In this respect, circumcision illustrates the Jewish attitude towards every part of the world. Each thing that exists is a creation; it owes its existence to a specific Divine decision. That connection to the Divine will give it its sanctity—potential which can only be realized through appropriate human actions.
Then came the divine call: Go! Go from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. Now that you have realized the full capacity of your conscious powers, said G-d to Abraham, "Go to you"—to the true you. I will show you a land that is the essence of your own self, a land that lies beyond the "land," "birthplace," and "father's house" you know.

The countless factors involved in making us what we are can be generalized under three categories: the natural, the impressed, and the acquired.

We begin life already programmed with drives and inclinations that form an inborn psyche and character. Then begins, from the moment of birth, the influence of our environment, as parents, teachers and peers impress their manners and attitudes upon our souls. Finally, a third and overriding influence comes with the attainment of intellectual maturity: man, alone in G-d's creation, has been granted an objective intellect with which he can, to a great extent, choose the stimuli to which he is exposed and the manner in which they shall affect him. With his mind, he is empowered to develop himself beyond—and even contrary to—his genetic and conditioned self.

This is the deeper significance of the words "your land," "your birthplace" and "your father's house" in G-d's call to Abraham. Eretz, the Hebrew word for "land" and "earth," is etymologically related to the word ratson—"will" and "desire"; hence, "your land" also translates as "your natural desires." Your birthplace—moladtechba—is a reference to the influence of home and society. And beit avicha, "your father's house," refers to man as a mature and rational being, forging his mind-set, character and behavior with the transcendent objectivity of the intellect.

By conventional standards, this constitutes the ultimate in human achievement: the development of one's natural instincts, the assimilation of learned and observed truths, and the remaking of self through the objective arbiter of mind. In truth, however, the intellect is still part and parcel of our humanity, remaining ever subject to the deficiencies and limitations of the human state; while it may surmount the confines of the inborn and the impressed, the intellect is never truly free of the ego and its prejudices.

But there is a higher self to man, a self free of all that defines and confines the human. This is the "spark of G-dliness" that is the core of his soul: the divine essence that G-d breathed into him, the "image of G-d" in which he was created. The eretz that G-d promised to show Abraham.

In his journey of discovery, Abraham must obviously depart the "land, birthplace and father's house" of his native Mesopotamia; he must obviously reject the pagan culture of Ur Kasdim and Charan. But this is not the departure of which G-d speaks. Abraham received this call in his eighth decade—many years after he had renounced the pagan ways of his family and birthplace, recognized G-d, and had a profound impact on his society. Still he is told: Go! Depart from your nature, depart from your habits, depart from your rational self. After rejecting your negative, idolatrous origins, you must now also transcend your positive and gainful past. Reach beyond yourself, however perfected it is.

Human perfection is simply not enough. For anything human—even the objective, transcendent intellect—is still part of the created reality, ever subject to and defined by it. Yet G-d invites us to experience that which transcends all limit and definition—Himself. But first we must "go away."

This was G-d's first command to the first Jew: Go away from your finite self, to come to the "you" that only I can show you—the you that is one with Me.
The ways of God are straight. There should be no possibility of taking the wrong turn. There are no turns. But if one does not want the truth... If one rebels... Even the ways of God, even the precious gifts of God can lead to failure.

When one is making progress in the life of the spirit many doors open before him. But there is no standing still. If one thinks one is standing still, in truth he is falling. This is our situation. We are falling continuously, but we don't know it. There is nothing worse than this.

The very "ways of God" used by the tzaddik as a means of progress lead to failure when used by the rebel. Everything in life is a challenge. Everything is a test. The very means given by God to achieve "ley-lyah"—spiritual ascent—can be used by the yetzer ha-ra for the opposite.

The mitzvot cover a wide range indeed: they are extensive, applying to all kinds of activities, and they are intensive, directing themselves to every part of the human being. This great range suggests something about the general purpose of mitzvot. Although most of them are overt physical acts, they work their effect subtly, slowly, cumulatively, to transform our hearts, our minds, our very lives. The mitzvot are designed to inspire, ennable and elevate man; to inform and imbue his life with the divinity that is latent in him. To achieve this, the mitzvot must reach every area and walk of life, every sphere of human activity, to hallow it. And the mitzvot must penetrate into the far reaches of human consciousness.

How appropriate and meaningful is the Hebrew word "Tzavvot" (to make pure, meritorious), for it also means to cleanse. The mitzvot are indeed for spiritual cleansing. We live in a world of temptation and brutality. Our senses are constantly assailed by an array of banality and obscenity. Our mass media seek largely to cater to the lowest common denominator, the worst instincts and interests. Who knows how much of the invidious "fallout" is absorbed by our nature? Exposed to so much "dirt," we need frequent cleansing with "a strong detergent that has deep-down cleansing action" (to borrow or paraphrase some of Madison Avenue's scintillating language). The Almighty wanted Israel to be cleansed and pure; and so He gave us a comprehensive Torah and surrounded us with mitzvot.

But aren't knowledge and action in conflict with each other? After all, knowledge involves the development of self, while action may mean putting aside self-oriented instincts for the task at hand. So when we have a free hour, how should we use it? How does a person cross over this difficult divide from the sublime world of thought to the material world of deeds?

By recognizing why you were put here in the first place—to serve your creator. Personal growth is necessary but not an end in itself. When we humbly acknowledge our role in life, and recognize that the world does not revolve around our ego, we put aside our vanity and act responsibly. We realize that each of us is integral in shaping the world but that none of us has the power—or the responsibility—to do it alone.

Summary:
- Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven
  - Trial: Obeying Hashem's will for His sake only
    - Brit Mila; Perfecting this world, partnership
  - Moving towards ones destination and purpose
    - Trial: Everyday, transcending our physical limitations
      - All stages of life constantly moving forward
  - Lesson: Way to fulfill Hashem’s desire & actualize self = Action