

Lech-Lecha - Nov 1, 2025

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This is the second Drash that I've ever given; the first was 41 years ago at Fabrangen when I was Bat Mitzvahed here. And I want to thank Lucy Steinitz and David Goldston for helping me and others to learn how to prepare a Drash.

In today's parsha, we see God tell Abraham to leave his home in Babylonia with the words *Lech Lecha*—"go forth." According to Midrash, this is God telling Abraham to go forth for the benefit of others, to become a blessing by sharing the knowledge of God and living as an example of righteousness.

The Chabad website explains that Abraham's mission was to gather adherents to his faith—sounds like proselytizing to me which we Jews are not supposed to do, but that's a topic for another discussion. In return for Abraham spreading the word, God promises to make of him and his descendants a great nation.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, among others, offers another interpretation: that *Lech Lecha* means "go to yourself"—that God is telling Abraham to embark on an inner journey, to discover his truest self and the purpose for which his soul was created. Rabbi Sacks writes that the Jewish journey is a journey to the root of the soul, echoing Rabbi Zushya of Anipoli, who said, "When I get to Heaven, they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Zushya, why were you not Zushya?'"

I love this teaching because it speaks to our lifelong challenge of being our authentic selves rather than living according to the expectations of others—our parents, our neighbors, our friends, or our society. And the assumption is that being more authentic means being a better person as we are born good inside.

Together, these interpretations reveal a beautiful duality: God's call to Abraham is both inward and outward. He is told to improve himself and to improve the world—to grow spiritually and to help others grow as well.

My profession, social work, is based on this balance. Social work helps individuals achieve well-being while also seeking to improve the systems that shape people's lives. Students often specialize in "micro" work (helping individuals and families, as in mental health therapy) or "macro" work (advocating for social policies that improve lives on a larger scale). At its best, social work bridges both: it keeps in mind the vital connection between personal well-being and collective well-being and justice.

I was first drawn to social work because I wanted to understand and heal my own emotional struggles—and I hoped to help others with theirs. But over time, I found individual therapy work to be too slow for my temperament and too emotionally painful. So I shifted from “micro” to “macro” social work—advocating for social change and representing impoverished and otherwise oppressed communities like migrant and seasonal farmworkers and other groups that face discrimination. It was a way of turning outward, to serve others by helping to create more just systems, but not at the expense of ignoring the inner life.

Like Abraham, who was told to “go forth,” we all face the ongoing challenge of balancing inner growth and outer action—caring for ourselves while also caring for others. Judaism speaks directly to this balance. As Hillel said: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?”

Yet it isn't always easy to know when to put ourselves first and when to prioritize others. In this same parsha, Abraham seems to err toward self-protection when he goes to Egypt with Sarah. Fearing for his life, he tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister, and she is taken into Pharaoh's household. Later, Pharaoh learns the truth and expels them. Abraham's decision may have protected him in the short term, but it endangered his wife and compromised his integrity. And if Pharaoh had not found out the truth and Sarah had stayed with Pharaoh, Abraham would also have had to endure the internal sorrow of living without Sarah. And who knows what Sarah would've had to suffer. But Abraham was afraid of being killed if Pharaoh knew that Sarah was Abraham's wife, so we are not judging here.

Later, however, Abraham chooses righteousness over self-interest. After rescuing his nephew Lot in battle, he refuses the spoils of war offered by the King of Sodom. He will not enrich himself from others' suffering because he reasons that the victory was g-d's, but he does ensure that his troops and allies receive their due. In turning down material reward, Abraham seems to grow spiritually closer to God—an act of inner refinement expressed through outer action.

The Jewish practice of *Mussar* offers one way to navigate this balance between self-care and service. *Mussar* teaches that ethical self-improvement is inseparable from the obligation to “bear the burden of the other” and to help build a just world. Through cultivating traits such as patience, generosity, and humility, we develop the capacity to serve others with joy and integrity. A better society begins with the ethical growth of individuals.

At the same time, *Mussar* reminds us that compassion must be bounded by self-care. My own teacher once described this as maintaining “semi-permeable walls” around the self—allowing love and connection to flow in and out, but

filtering what might harm or overwhelm us. Perhaps if I had learned that earlier in my therapy work; it might have helped me to better hold others' pain.

Still, it is through connection with others that we come to know ourselves most deeply. Rabbi David Jaffe teaches that if we wish to practice *Kavod*—honoring others as beings created in the divine image—we must also honor the *Kavod*, the holiness within ourselves. The inward and outward journeys sustain each other.

For me, these reflections on *Lech Lecha*—on journeying both within and without—feel especially relevant now, as I enter a new stage of relationship and prepare for marriage with my partner, John.

Our relationships invite us constantly to balance self-love and love of others, to protect our own integrity while opening ourselves to the sacredness in another.

I'd love to hear your thoughts: How do you see the relationship between self-love or *Kavod* and treating others with *Kavod* thru kindness, honor, respect and care?