TIMELESS TORAH

LECH LECHA : FAITH, IDENTITY & THE COURAGE TO CHANGE

Going Alone

Renowned Canadian geographer, Edward Relph, in *Place and Placelessness* (1976), describes home as 'the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community'. Home shapes how we see ourselves and understand the wider world. It is the starting point from which we make sense of everything beyond it.

This makes God's immortal command to Avraham, '*Lech lecha*', all the more striking. He is not simply told where to go, but where to leave: '*mei'artzecha, mimoladtecha u'mibeit avicha*' – from your land, your birthplace and your father's house (12:1).

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888) explains that these three terms describe distinct layers of identity. *Eretz* shapes our national character, the environment in which our physical, intellectual and moral influences develop. *Moledet* represents our civic identity, while *beit avicha* is the private world in which we are nurtured. Together, they form 'the soil from which human personality emerges'.

To leave this behind is no small undertaking. Yet Avraham's birthplace was where the Tower of Bavel was built, a society that sought to impose uniformity at the expense of individual worth. At the very outset of Jewish history, Avraham is taught that, precious as home may be, there are times when we must leave behind what is familiar in pursuit of higher values. The courage to stand alone becomes part of our national inheritance.

Three Altars

Avraham arrives in Eretz Yisrael only to find the land slipping away. Although Hashem has promised him descendants and the inheritance of the land, Rashi explains that the Canaanites were then taking possession of the territory allotted to Shem, Avraham's ancestor. Rather than despair, Avraham builds an altar 'to Hashem Who had appeared to him' (12:7). The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) sees this first altar as an expression of Avraham's delight at encountering Hashem in Eretz Yisrael and his love for the relationship that had begun there.

The second altar, near the town of Ai, introduces a more troubling dimension. Here the verse says, '*Vayikra b'Shem Hashem*' – he called in the Name of Hashem (12:8). Rashi explains that Avraham foresaw that his descendants would stumble at this place and prayed for them. The Book of Yehoshua (7:1–15) recounts how Achan took forbidden spoils from Jericho, leading to the Jewish army's defeat at Ai. The Mizrachi (d. 1526) explains the deeper lesson: the Canaanites posed an external threat, but Avraham was now confronting a more sobering possibility. The Jewish people could lose their land through their own failings as well as through the power of their enemies.

> **"The courage to stand alone becomes part of our national inheritance**

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 44b) praises Avraham for praying before trouble arose, teaching that prayer offered in advance of distress has particular power. Interestingly, however, the Gemara appears to refer to Avraham's prayer at this site after his return from Egypt (13:4), rather than his earlier prayer. Having experienced exile, Avraham now stands as a model for every returning Jew, conscious of how vulnerable a nation becomes when it undermines itself.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha
with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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THIS WEEK'S TIMELESS TORAH IS SPONSORED BY MICHAEL WEINSTEIN TO MARK THE YAHRZEIT OF HIS FATHER ERNEST WEINSTEIN Z'L, REB ELIYAHU BEN REB ZVI ARYEH

Yet the verse offers hope: '*Vayikra*' – he called. Rabbeinu Bachya (d. 1340) connects the word with *korah*, a roofbeam. Avraham's call, in this reading, provides his descendants with a roof of faith and confidence, something solid to look up to even in uncertain times.

The third altar, at Chevron, represents, according to the Midrash, the acquisition of the land. Having learnt how to face both external and internal threats, Avraham is ready to look ahead. He is told, '*Sa einecha*' – raise your eyes and look about you (13:17). The Or HaChaim (d. 1743) draws attention to the words '*min hamakom*' – from the place where you are (13:14). Present difficulties cannot simply be ignored, but neither should they limit our vision. The challenge is to build the future from where we stand today.

The Wider Circle

This outward vision also helps explain another key episode in the parshah. Avraham and Sarah receive new names to mark their role in shaping humanity's future. Avram, meaning 'father of Aram', becomes Avraham, understood as 'father of a multitude of nations'. Sarai, 'my princess', becomes Sarah, 'princess'. Their names express an expanding mission. Yet these changes come alongside the *brit milah*, the covenant that distinguishes their family from the rest of humanity. Why emphasise universal responsibility at the very moment the family is set apart?

The Alshich (d. 1593) offers a clue in his explanation of Avraham's descent to Egypt during the famine. Avraham could have survived in Canaan, but he would have lacked the means to give generously to others. Kindness was central to his character, and he needed a land of abundance in which to share what he had.

The new names therefore express a mission that extends beyond the Jewish people themselves. The *brit milah* marks a distinct covenant, but that distinction is not an end in itself. It carries a responsibility to help humanity live by a vision of ethical monotheism.

Relph's insight helps us understand the balance Avraham's journey demands. Home gives us our identity, our values and our sense of belonging, but it can also become the boundary of our concern, limiting our sense of responsibility to those beyond it. Avraham is asked to leave his home not because these attachments are unimportant, but because they must serve a larger purpose. The Jewish story begins with a journey away from home, but its ambition is to bring a vision of home, belonging and moral responsibility to the wider world.

"Standing apart need not mean turning inward

Avraham's journey teaches us that standing apart need not mean turning inward. Sometimes we must have the courage to go alone precisely so that, in time, the values we carry can reach far beyond ourselves.

VAYERA: Living With Tension: From Promise to Fulfilment