

Lech Lecha October 28, 2017

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ.

Genesis 12:1 *And Adonai said to Abram, go forth from your country, from your birthplace, and your father's home to the land that I will show you.*



This week's portion, like most Torah portions, draws its name from the opening words. *Lech Lecha*, “go forth,” is the well-known phrase spoken by G-d to Abram, the founder of Judaism and first to dwell in the Land of Israel (then Canaan) in response to a Divine directive and promise.

Yet a careful reading of the text raises some questions. Abram is to leave his father's house. But, the text also says that Abram is to leave his birthplace, and, according to the previous chapter, Abram has already left his birthplace, that of Ur. His father, Terach, it is reported,

has already set out for Canaan with Abram and his wife Sarai [later Sarah]. As it happens, they stop along the way, and settle in Haran. So, why was Terach, Abram's father, heading to Canaan? And, why are most Jewish people taught that Abram (later Abraham) was the first to be motivated to go to Canaan, rather than learning that this was originally the destination for Abram's father? Rabbinic interpretations attempt to reconcile the sequence of events and the departures by the two generations. Terach left for Canaan with his young family in order to pursue a better way of life than that available in Ur. Abraham left Haran because G-d called him to do so. The father was motivated by the hope of greater prosperity and his son by religious conviction and faith.

Much like our biblical ancestors, Jews who set out for the Land of Israel prior to and since the establishment of the modern state were motivated by many goals. Some respond to religious convictions; secular-oriented Jews seek to actualize their Zionist beliefs, others seek a physical connection to history and tradition, to live in their ancestral homeland, and be part of modern Zionism.

In the decades preceding 1948, the Zionist vision to create a Jewish homeland in Israel took center stage. Whether spurred by a desire to be a part of a new Jewish life that promised nationhood and self-determination or fleeing for their lives from hostile environments, thousands of Jews immigrated from all over the world. [In July 1950, Israel granted any Jew who wished to immigrate to Israel the right to do so](#), as expressed in the Law of Return, published in *Sefer HaChukkim* (Book of Laws) No. 51, p. 159. Since then, the Knesset has approved two amendments to the Law of Return. The first, added in 1954, detailed persons barred from immigration due to a proven criminal record. The [second amendment](#), accepted in 1970, granted rights to the families and spouses of Jews who wished to immigrate.

What has motivated people to move to Israel in recent years? And, what is the status of *aliyah* today? Unlike previous generations, North Americans, Australians, and those residing in Western Europe do not live in environments that are overtly hostile to Jews, where they are denied basic rights or persecuted.

Immigration trends vary depending on global politics and Israel's domestic situation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union many Soviet Jews used their new freedom to make *aliyah*, resulting in a surge of immigration to Israel. In the decades of the first and second Palestinian uprisings (1987-1993 and 2000-2005), these numbers dipped somewhat. And now, perhaps in part due to the rise of anti-Semitic incidents in cities of Western Europe, *aliyah* numbers are once again on the rise. According to Israel's Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky, "2014 was a year of record-breaking *aliyah*...this trend is evidence of Israel's attractiveness as a place where it is good to live, as well as of the success of our joint efforts to promote *aliyah* and strengthen connections between Jews around the world and the State of Israel." (Omri Efraim, YNet Jewish World, December 31, 2014) The Ministry of Immigration and Absorption reports that 29,500 new immigrants arrived during the Jewish year 5775 (September 2014 through September 2015), compared to 26,000 the previous year.

It is not easy to predict who will make the move to Israel. According to a JNS blog from April 20, 2015, it is becoming trendy and fashionable for young Americans to make *aliyah*, combining a sense of responsibility, a desire for adventure, and a dose of nostalgia for what previous generations might not have been able to do or could only achieve through great hardship. The blogger writes, "I grew up learning how my grandfather trekked to [Mandatory] Palestine on a camel. Now, I just have to get on a plane and fly there. It's easy to get comfortable elsewhere. By moving to Israel, I am able to live a part of history and tradition in a way that people two, three, and more generations back didn't have the opportunity to do." Furthermore, converts to Judaism are considering strengthening their Jewish ties by moving to Israel (see the JewishPress.com article published July 19, 2015).

The fact that Terach and his departure for Canaan is preserved in our sacred text means that this detail is significant. Our tradition teaches us that whether it is through religious observance or not, anyone who signs on to move to Israel is an integral part of the journey of the Jewish nation. Despite Israel's location, surrounded by unsupportive or hostile governments and ideologies, immigrating to Israel still maintains its appeal.

Discussion Questions:

Are there some motivations of those making *aliyah* more significant than others? If so, what are they?

Can a Jew in the Diaspora be a committed Zionist or does one need to live in the Land of Israel? What is a committed Zionist? Who defines the term?

What do you consider the role of family and friends if a loved one is considering making *aliyah*?

How might the shrinking Jewish Diaspora (76.8% of world Jewry live in only 17 metropolitan areas, of which only two are not in North America or Israel) continue to impact future *aliyah* policies and strategies of the State of Israel?

Additional Resources:

Maayan Jaffe, [Making Aliyah to Israel Becomes Trendy](#), JNS.ORG Blog, April 20, 2015

David Margolese, [Why You Should Move to Israel](#), Jerusalem Post, May 6, 2015

[African-American Converts Make Aliyah to Israel](#), JewishPress.com, July 19th, 2015

Israel's [Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption](#)