

Parashat Lech L'cha, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

A few times a year I travel by Skype to a community college classroom in rural South Dakota. A friend of mine who is a retired minister teaches a religion class there. Most of his students have never met a Jew and without a Jewish community in any feasible distance, there is no rabbi whom they could invite to visit in person. As technology facilitates the diminishing of distance between people, itself a beautiful metaphor, I have become the nearest rabbi with whom there is a connection. I enjoy these visits to my friend's classroom and I respect his efforts to help his students travel beyond the boundaries of their own lives. In truth, I am often challenged as much as they are, learning from their questions, hoping that they value our exchanges as much as I do.

Having made one of my virtual visits to South Dakota this week, I was struck by the depth of the students' questions. It was a small group, all women studying to be teachers. The quality and depth of their questions suggests that they too will help their young students travel beyond the boundaries of their own lives. Even the frequently asked questions on these visits were asked this week with a refreshing sensitivity and genuine curiosity, questions about Jesus and how Jews view him, questions of Jewish belief and practice, of how I decided to become a rabbi, views about Muslims and other faiths. Reflecting knowledge of Bible and of challenges to faith, I was asked what I thought of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. Drawing on a countervailing thread in Jewish tradition, I shared my view that Abraham failed God's test, meant to see if he would defend his own as readily as he would soon defend the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, so too whether he would control the passion of his own faith. I was asked about violence in Scripture and in life, even when intended for good. I shared my view that the entire Torah is meant to turn us away from violence, giving us a context in which to wrestle with all that violates life in the sacredness of text, then going out from the Book to challenge all that violates life in the sacredness of the world around us. Tested as Abraham was, God waits to see our response, whether we will take up the knife or lay it down, and the angels hold their breath.

The very last question came as a gift, challenging me to be truly present with myself as well as with the students whom I now saw patiently waiting through the window of a computer screen; "how has your religion shaped your life?" I had to pause, not a matter of searching out text and sharing information, but of looking within. Yet the texts that transmit wisdom as gathered through the generations inform the personal journey, offering a starting point from which to move forward into the journey of our own life. "It is not so much," I explained, "that Judaism shapes my life, but it gives me the means and the encouragement

by which to shape my life." Through the cadence of daily prayer, a structure is indeed given to each day. Pausing in the flow of daily time, I am reminded to go out and see the miracles of each day, even as the days of each week come home to Shabbos and offer a vision of a world at peace. And then too, from the respite of one day, I am bidden to go out and see the world with a new sense of possibility for what might be. The ways of Jewish life offer a context for living and for striving, helping us to shape a path for the journey whose end we do not know. Bidden to wake in the morning with gratitude, the act of lifting our feet to take each new step along the way is an expression of faith.

It is the story of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Lech L'cha*, in which Avram and Sarai, are told to go forth, *Lech l'cha mey'artz'cha, u'mi'molad'itcha, u'mi'beyt avicha el ha'aretz asher ar'eka/go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your parents' home to the land that I will show you*. The words *Lech l'cha* literally mean "go to your self." These are the first steps in the journey of the Jewish people. It is a journey that is recapitulated in each of our lives, and is at the same time a reflection of the archetypal human journey. It is the journey of every person toward self-discovery and awareness, the ever unfolding process to discover the meaning of our own lives in relation to the needs of the world around us, the very reason for which we have been brought into the world.

In going forth, Avram and Sarai are told *ve'hiyeh b'racha/be a blessing*. That is the goal and challenge in the journey of our lives. On the words *Lech L'cha*, the Slonimer Rebbe offers for the first time his signature teaching, *l'chol adam yesh yi'udo v'tafkido/each person has their own unique task and purpose*. I encouraged the students with whom I spoke to find their task and their unique purpose as they become teachers, encouraging their students in turn to discover their task and purpose in life, knowing that they are each indeed a blessing. In the sincerity of a student's question, I was reminded of the beauty in sharing with others the meaning of who we are. To seek and celebrate that meaning of self is the beginning of knowing and fulfilling our task and purpose in the world, of being a blessing in the journey of our lives.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor