Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Lech Lecha

Go Forth?

Lech Lecha opens with God's command to the seventy-five-year-old Abram—later known as Abraham—to leave his homeland and found a new nation in a land that God would show him:

בראשית יב:א-ד (א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ: (ב) וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה: (ג) וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרֲכֶיךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה: (ד) וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־חָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מֵחָרָן:	Genesis 12:1-4 God said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." Abram went forth as God had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

- **Why do you think God specifies that Abram must leave both his native land and his father's house?**
- **God tells Abram to go to "the land that I will show you," without giving him a specific destination. Have you ever begun a journey or process without knowing where it would lead? What gave you the courage to take that first step?**

The words that give this portion its name are most often translated as "go forth," as in the source above. However, many commentators interpret them more creatively because of their unusual grammatical construction. One is Rashi, the influential medieval commentator on the Torah and Talmud, whose explanation adds a deeper layer of meaning to the verse.

רש"י על בראשית יב:א לך לך. לַהֲנָאָתְךָ וּלְטוֹבָתְךָ, שָׁם אֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, כָּאן אִי אַתָּה זוֹכֶה לְבָנִים, וְעוֹד שֶׁאוֹדִיעַ טִבְעֲךָ בָּעוֹלָם:	Rashi on Genesis 12:1 Get thee out (literally, go for thyself)—for your own benefit, for your own good: there I will make of you a great nation whilst here you will not merit the privilege of having children (Rosh Hashanah 16b). Furthermore, I shall make

	known your character throughout the world (Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 3)

- **Do you think there is a difference between "for your own benefit" and "for your own good"? If so, what is it?**
- **Can you think of a time when you were asked to do someone else a favor, and only later realized that you were really the one benefitting?**

But not all commentators agree with this reading. The sixteenth-century Polish rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, in his Torah commentary Keli Yakar, explicitly rejects Rashi's interpretation of the verse:

כלי יקר על בראשית יב:א מַה הָיָה הַמִּקְרָא חָסֵר אִם הָיָה אוֹמֵר "לֶךְ לְךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ", וְלָמָּה הִזְכִּיר פְּרָטִים אֵלּוּ "מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ"? גַּם מִלַּת "לְךָ" צָרִיךְ בֵּאוּר, כִּי אֵין מַשְׁמָעוּתוֹ "לְךָ לַהֲנָאָתְךָ". ... וְנִרְאֶה לִי שֶׁהֶעְתִּיקוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מֵעִנְיָן לְעִנְיָן כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁמְּחַנְּכִין הַתִּינוֹק, כִּי אוּלַי יִהְיֶה קָשֶׁה עָלָיו לְקַבֵּל הַכֹּל בְּבַת אַחַת. עַל כֵּן עָשָׂה לוֹ שָׁלֹשׁ חֲלוּקוֹת וְהֶעְתִּיקוֹ אֶל עִנְיָן רְבִיעִי. כִּי מִתְּחִלָּה בִּקֵּשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ לַעֲזֹב אַרְצוֹ, וְזֶה שְׁאֵלָה קְטַנָּה... וְאַחַר כָּךְ, כַּאֲשֶׁר הֵסִיחַ מִלִּבּוֹ כָּל אַרְצוֹ, אָמַר: פֶּן יִהְיֶה נַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּאַנְשֵׁי מוֹלַדְתּוֹ ...וְאַחַר שֶׁנִּתְפַּתָּה גַּם לָזֶה, חָשַׁשׁ פֶּן תִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּבֵית אָבִיו... וְסָף עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה מִינֵי קְרָבָה אֵלּוּ, יֵשׁ קְרָבָה רְבִיעִית, כִּי אָדָם קָרוֹב אֵצֶל עַצְמוֹ יוֹתֵר מִכָּל שְׁלֹשָׁה מִינֵי קְרוֹבִים אֵלּוּ. עַל כֵּן נֶאֱמַר "לֶךְ לְךָ"—לְעַצְמוּתְךָ, כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לְאָדָם שֶׁיֵּלֵךְ לַעֲבֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר לֻקַּח מִשָּׁם.	Keli Yakar on Genesis 12:1 What would the verse have been lacking if it had simply said "Go forth to the land that I will show you"? Why did it need to specify these details from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house? Also, the word lecha [for yourself] needs explanation, as it doesn't mean "go for your benefit."... It appears to me that the Holy One, Blessed be He, moved him from one matter to another, like how we educate a child, because perhaps it would be difficult for him to accept everything at once. Therefore, He made three divisions and moved him to a fourth matter. Initially, He asked him to leave his land, which was a small request...Then, after he removed his whole land from his heart, He addressed the possibility that his soul might be bound to the people of his kin... After he was persuaded of this too, there was concern that his soul might cling to his father's house...A person is closer to their own essence than to all these three types of relatives. Therefore, it says lech lecha [go to yourself]—to your essence, just as it was said to Adam to work the ground from which he was taken.

- **Why do you think this text so emphatically rejects Rashi's reading of the verse?**
- **In this reading of "lech lecha," Abram is called to go to his essence, which implies that when the command was given he was disconnected from**

himself. Have you ever felt disconnected from yourself, and what helped you find your way back?

The Sulam is a 20th-century Hebrew translation and commentary on the Zohar by Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, based on the teachings of the early Kabbalsitic thinker Rabbi Isaac Luria. Rabbi Ashlag's treatment of the verse bears some similarity to that in the Kli Yakar, but it also differs in significant ways.

סולם על הזהר, לך לך יב:א ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך וגו': א"ר אלעזר, לך לך, לך היינו לעצמך, כלומר, לתקן את עצמך, לתקן את המדרגה שלך. לך לך,כי אין לך להמצא כאן בין הרשעים הללו.	Sulam on The Zohar, Lech Lecha 12:1 Rabbi Elazar said: Lech lecha—lech means to yourself, that is, to repair yourself, to perfect your own level. Lech lecha—for you have no place to remain here among these wicked ones.

- **How would you describe the relationship between Rabbi Elazar's two explanations? Are they separate reasons or two aspects of the same idea?**
- **Have you ever realized that you had outgrown a place or community to which you once belonged? What led you to that realization?**

Tamar Biala, a modern-day Israeli author and educator, provides yet another possible reading of "lech lecha," focusing on the relationship between Abram and God.

דרשוני חלק ב, בין אדם למקום, ב ביקש הקדוש ברוך הוא לידבק באברם, אמר לו 'לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך וגו'' (בראשית יב, א). ולא קרא לו כדרכו של עולם שכשמבקש אדם לידבק ברעהו, אשה ברעותה קוראים הם: 'בואי אליי', 'בוא אליי'. ואין 'לֶךְ לְךָ' אלא לשון שילוח, כמי שאומר לו 'צא מאצטגנינות שלך' וכדומה.ג אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא 'לֶךְ לְךָ', שידע שאברהם לא בא אליו מבור ריק אין בו מים. שאין אדם מגיע לקדוש ברוך הוא בלא שנושא בקרבו ביודעין או שלא ביודעין את ביתו, את הוריו, את עמו ואת אמונותיו. ואף הקדוש ברוך הוא מביא אתו בבואו להיפגש עם אותו אדם את אמונתו שלו, את רצונו ואת תקוותיו. ובשעת החיבור ביניהם, בוכה כל אחד מהם שנפרד מעולמו הקודם, ונכנס לעולם אחר שאין לו בו שליטה על חברו, ויכול אהובו לכזב בו. וביודעין ושלא ביודעין משאיר כל אחד מהם בלבו הד לנשמתו, כפי שהייתה עד לאותה הברית	Dirshuni II, Between Man and God, II The Holy One, blessed be He, sought to cleave to Abram. He said to him: "Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you, etc." (Genesis 12:1). And He did not call to him in the way of the world, that when a person seeks to cleave to his friend, or a woman to her companion, they call: "Come to me," "Come to me." Rather, "Lekh Lekha" is an expression of sending away, like one who says to him "Go out from your astrology" and the like. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him "Lekh Lekha," for He knew that Abraham did not come to Him from an empty pit without water. For a person does not reach the Holy One, blessed be He, without carrying within himself, knowingly or unknowingly, his home, his parents, his people, and his beliefs. And even the Holy One, blessed be He, brings with Him when He comes to meet that

	person His own faith, His will, and His hopes. And at the moment of their joining, each of them weeps for being separated from his previous world, and entering another world in which he has no control over the other, and his beloved may prove false to him. And knowingly and unknowingly, each of them leaves in his heart an echo of his soul, as it was until that covenant.

- **Does this midrash change your understanding of God's command to Abram?**
- **Biala writes that "a person does not reach the Holy One, blessed be He, without carrying within himself, knowingly or unknowingly, his home, his parents, his people, and his beliefs." What is one thing from your past that you knowingly carry with you?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Reread sources two through five, putting yourself in Abram's shoes. How might his emotional response to God's command differ depending on the interpretation of lech lecha?
2. Although God's words are addressed to Abram, his wife Sarai and nephew Lot also leave their home and embark on a journey to an unknown land. How might the different interpretations of lech lecha apply to them?
3. While all the commentators presented on this sheet interpret lech lecha creatively, others read it more plainly, as a simple command to leave one place and go to another. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches—both to this verse and to biblical texts more generally?
4. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Lech Lecha, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Lech Lecha page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Lech Lecha topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Abraham, Travel, and Blessings.

Both the Kli Yakar and the source from Tamar Biala are excerpts from longer works. If you would like to read the entire pieces, you can click on those links to find them on Sefaria in both the original Hebrew and an English translation.

Enjoyed this sheet? Receive a new one in your inbox every week by subscribing at simchattorahchallenge.org.