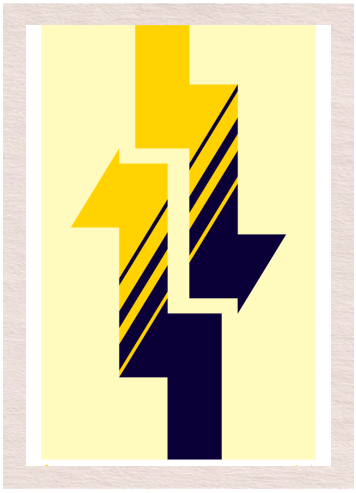
Lech Lecha: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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God speaks to Abram, instructing him to leave his home and **go "to the land which I will show you."** Abram obeys, and **God promises to make him the father of a great nation.** He and his wife Sarai, together with Abram's nephew Lot, arrive in Canaan, where Abram builds an altar to God. But famine soon forces him to depart for Egypt, where some cunning is required to save the beautiful Sarai from the lecherous Pharoah. The troubles hardly subside when the family finally returns to Canaan: Lot is taken captive by a coalition of four tyrannical kings, and Abram goes to war and rescues his kin. God, in turn, **seals the covenant with Abram**, bequeathing the Holy Land to him and his progeny in all eternity.

A decade goes by, and **Sarai, still childless, tells Abram to marry her servant, Hagar.** Abram does, and Hagar soon grows disrespectful and flees when Sarai, in return, treats her harshly. An angel appears, convincing Hagar to return and promising her a son who will become the father of a great and mighty nation. Soon afterwards, with Abram now 86, **Hagar gives birth to Ishmael.** Thirteen more years pass, and **God changes Abram's name to Abraham**, which means Father of Many, and Sarai's name to Sarah, or princess. God also promises the aged couple a son, who they will call Isaac, the one who will laugh**.** The parsha ends with Abraham, following God's commandment, **circumcising himself and all the males in his household.**

"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you; I will make your name great; and you will become a source of blessing."

Take a deeper dive

The Torah's third parsha is also, in a way, the third attempt at Genesis: The first ended with sin, and, immediately thereafter, murder. The second with wickedness, a flood, and then the chaos of the Tower of Babel. God gives it one more shot, and he lands on Abraham.

Which begs the question: Why Abe? About Noach, we're told that he was "a righteous man" and "perfect in his generations." **What was so special about Abraham that made him merit the great honor of being the only one we call Avinu, or "our father"?** That is the central question of the parsha.

As you can imagine, our finest thinkers have spent millennia grappling with the question. The Rambam, for example, the great Maimonides, in Hilchot Avodat Kochavim, delivers a pithy but stunning spiritual biography of Abraham, in which he imagines **a man born with an innate desire to know God.** At three, he begins questioning his parents' idolatrous ideas. By 40, he'd already arrived at the correct cosmology, knowing God is the source of all creation. In this explanation, **God didn't really choose Abraham; it was Abraham who chose God.**

That's lovely! But does it satisfy us? No, it doesn't, and the rabbis knew it, which is why the Talmud is chock full of legends about Abraham's righteousness, showing him smashing idols from a very young age. But the Hassidic masters offer a subtler account, one that applies to us all. The 19th Century eminence Rav Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known as the Sfas Emes, explained that **God calls all of us; Abraham was simply the only one who listened carefully enough** to hear the call in all its glory. Just look, he advised, at the first, and very famous, verse of this week's parsha: "And the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.'"

The verse, as is always true with Torah, resonates differently in the original Hebrew, which commands Abram with the very strange formulation Lech Lecha. It's one of these phrases that's very **difficult to translate; it literally means "go onto yourself."** Which, the Sfas Emes tells us, is precisely the point: you don't see God by looking at the trees, the rocks, the sky. **You see God by turning inwards,** by shutting off all the noise of the material world and tuning in to more intricate spiritual revelations.

How do you tune in to this amazing internal monologue? This, the Sfas Emes continues, is why we have the very next sentence in that same first verse. God is asking Abe for the ultimate sacrifice—leave your family and your comfortable life and go. Go where? God doesn't say. Cryptically, He speaks of "the land that I will show you," which puts Abraham to his very first test: Could he put aside his interests, his curiosity, his self-interest, and merely trust God?

Abraham, hallelujah, aces the test, and that's the secret of his genius. **He understands that to hear your self, you must first learn to silence your self.** So many distractions and diversions appear to us each day, claiming a chunk of our attention and our mind and our heart; if we want to figure out our true aim, we first need to learn to quiet down and tune in to what truly matters.

This tremendous insight, as the great Israeli Torah teacher Sivan Rahav Meir observed, made Abraham not only the first true believer, but also the first Jew, the first immigrant, and the first person to truly reshape the world.

And his example is still one we can and must follow. After all, the first words ever spoken to the first Jew were a stark and simple command: **Get out. Leave your comfort zone. Act. You have a destiny that's different from everyone else's. Seize it, or perish.**

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