



From Ordinary to Extraordinary

Mrs. Amy Horowitz

Nava Shekhter ('24)

Abby Bienenfeld ('26)

Shira Nyer ('26)

Calev Zak ('25)

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This week's parsha introduces us to our physical and spiritual ancestor, Avraham, founder of monotheism

and father of Am Yisrael. Most of us already know a lot about Avraham. He discovered God at the tender age of three (according to one midrash). He destroyed his father's idols in a dramatic attempt to disprove avodah zara. He walked through fire, uprooted himself and his family at God's command, and was ready to sacrifice his beloved son in the name of his beliefs.

Indeed, if I was asked to describe Avraham's character, I would use terms like "heroic", "intrepid", and "resolute." Yet, when the mishna (Avot 5:17) attempts to determine exactly what makes Avraham special, we discover that in order to emulate him, we simply need "a good eye and a humble spirit." In other words, Avraham was just a really good guy.

What?!?! Does the mishna even begin to do justice to Avraham's courage, his unshakeable faith, and

his undoubtable heroism?

The Slonimer Rebbe explains that, of course Avraham's good eye and humble spirit were not his only praiseworthy qualities. They were, however, the only qualities that helped him pass each and every one of his famous ten tests. Having a good eye means being truly happy for your friend, even when you may have reason to feel jealous; having a humble spirit means appreciating your talents and abilities but also recognizing your limitations. So the mishna is telling us that Avraham was utterly selfless in the sense that he truly didn't put himself first: he was capable of overcoming his sense of self and putting others first, and he understood the insignificance of his place in the universe. This selflessness, says the Slonimer Rebbe, is what helped him face and pass his tests, because each of those ten tests dealt with something that is in a person's nature to be selfish about.

Selflessness is definitely a word that aptly describes Avraham. Certainly, his selflessness is what motivated him to welcome visitors to his home despite his discomfort as he recovered from his brit milah. But the question remains: does this description do him justice? What about his courage, his great

faith, and his power to inspire?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks suggests that in fact what makes Avraham special is his very ordinariness! Of course Avraham gets the credit for all of those extraordinary acts of heroism mentioned above. But the mishna is telling us that in order to be a “student of Avraham”, in order to follow in his footsteps, we have to emulate his everyday qualities. We have to treat others with kindness and generosity. We have to act with humility and selflessness. We have to wait patiently for God to answer our prayers. In other words, we have to try to be “a really good guy.”

Most of us will not be called upon to walk through fire or to sacrifice our children, but we can still be as great as Avraham by living an ordinary life of extraordinary virtue. If we succeed, we are truly heroic!

The Right Reasons

Nava Shekhter ('24)

This week's Parsha, Parshat Lech Lecha, tells the story of Hashem instructing Avraham: “*lech lecha*”. Why is the word “*lecha*” – “for yourself” – added? Why doesn't Hashem just say “*lech*” – “go”?

Rashi explains that the extra word is meant to imply that Avraham's going to the Land of Israel will lead to personal benefit. He then tells Avraham that He will make him into a great nation. The fact that Hashem implies that going to Israel could only be for Avraham's benefit leads us to ask how this could be one of Avraham's ten tests? A test is usually a challenge, something hard, and does not lead to benefits. If going to Israel is solely for Avraham's benefit, how can it be considered a challenge? We learn in the Aseret Hadibrot, “*zachor et Yom HaShabbat l'kadsho*” – Chazal tells us to not ever forget Shabbos, but who would ever “forget” Shabbos?

When we do mitzvot, we should do them for the proper reasons and not for any other motive. Hashem commanded us to do mitzvot, and that's the only reason we should do them. However, when it comes to Shabbos there are a lot of

mitzvot that could be done for another motive such as sleeping, eating, etc. So it's possible that we could be keeping Shabbos for our own benefit and not only for the mitzvah. So remembering Shabbos means remembering why we do the mitzvot of Shabbos in order to ensure we have the right intention.

Going back to the original question: how is going to the Land of Israel a test for Avraham if it is for his personal benefit? The test is to show that Avraham would go because Hashem told him to and not only because it is for his own benefit. To connect this idea to the current situation in Israel: many of us feel helpless living in America and feel that the only way to make a difference is to make a huge gesture, for which getting credit would be a personal benefit. However, doing even the smallest things and making the smallest contributions also helps because it's the right thing to do as a member of Klal Yisrael. It's important to remember that just because we can't change the world through one big action, it doesn't mean we should not contribute with small actions that still make a difference.

The Journey is What Matters

Abby Bienenfeld ('26)

In Parshat Lech Lecha we are introduced to Avraham Avinu and his journey. The Rambam in Hilchot Avodah Zara says that during Avraham's youth he was surrounded constantly by idol worshipers and that he lived amongst people who served avodah zara, including his parents. The Rambam then continues to say that Avraham himself served idols and that it was not until Avraham was 40 years old that he found Hashem.

There is another midrash, however, that states that Avraham found Hashem at three years old. If so, why would the Rambam choose the midrash that Avraham found Hashem at 40 and portray him as an idol worshiper who did not find Hashem until later in his life, when there is a “better” option which suggests that Avraham found Hashem at the young age of three? The answer is that when it comes to Judaism and *emunah*, we are defined by the journey we took to get to success. If we grow up in religious

households and surrounded by good influences, being religious is not an extraordinary accomplishment. Of course it is still important and commendable but it is not as impressive to be religious if your entire family is as well. The fact that Avraham struggles with *avodah zara* and his faith in God even though it did not come to him right away makes Avraham much more praiseworthy.

Facing challenges and having to endure hard times rather than having the easy way to success makes that success more honorable. As Jews we are always looking for ways to grow and improve ourselves. We need to push ourselves past our limits and always strive to be better than we were yesterday. Avraham could have easily lived his life the way all those around him did by serving idols, but instead he found Hashem and changed his ways. The reason why the Rambam portrayed Avraham as someone who served idols for a good amount of time and only later found Hashem is to show that his journey is what makes Avraham so special and that in order to become praiseworthy we need to face our challenges and overcome them.

You Matter!

Shira Nyer ('26)

God takes Avraham outside and says to him: “Look to the heavens and count the stars, if you can”. Of course, Avraham is unable to count the innumerable stars. God tells him “So (*koh*) will be your seed, your descendants.” Regarding the stars, there is a single name for the collective unit of all stars, and there are also designations for each star taken individually. Each star on its own serves a specific purpose. So too the Jewish People, when acting in unity, advance toward a certain goal. But at the same time, each Jew lives with the purpose of making a personal dream come true.

We are presently witnessing, during the war in Israel, that each Jew contributes to the physical and spiritual safety of our brave soldiers and evacuees from the South of Israel by providing them with a place to live, food, military equipment, spiritual items, singing and dancing to raise their morale, and mostly to give love.

Israel On Our Minds

Calev Zak ('25)

Obviously everyone knows what's happening in Israel. As I'm sure many of you have heard already, in last week's parsha, Parshat Noach, the word “*Hamas*” is mentioned multiple times. This is not a coincidence, and these hints continue to appear in this week's parsha, Lech Lecha, as this week is the first time in the Torah that the land of Israel is referred to at all. The first pasuk in the parsha says,

“וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאךְ”

“and Hashem said to Avram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you,’”

which is referring to Israel. We must realize that everything in the Torah is there to teach us a lesson, and I think one of these lessons is especially pertinent to the world today, in this trying time for Israel. Avram making this journey to Israel is a sign to all of us, as Jews, to follow in his footsteps and make the journey to Israel ourselves.

Now it is likely impossible for all of us to actually travel to Israel at the moment; however, the lesson that we learn doesn't have to mean physically traveling to Israel, it can mean we must be spiritually and mentally connected, as if we are physically there. We've all joined together as a community in a nearly unprecedented manner since this war broke out, and the *achdut* that we've shown as a nation has been truly incredible. However, as the war goes on and the initial shock wears off, it's easy to feel more numb and disconnected from what's happening in Israel, especially as we hear news updates from our comfortable, safe homes in America.

But Avram is literally here this week, traveling to Israel, to keep us focused; he's showing us that we can't become complacent, but must continue to “travel” toward Israel with our davening, chesed, and donations. We have to continue pouring our hearts out to Hashem and do everything we can for our brothers and sisters who

need us now more than ever. May Hashem continue to grant us the *bracha* He promised to Avram so this war can end quickly in victory, and may our *achdut* and commitment to mitzvot last forever.

Staff

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ELISHA HOROWITZ (' 25)

MEIRAV HOROWITZ (' 25)

DESIGN DIRECTOR

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EDITORS

JOSH HAIK (' 24)

RIVKA REICH (' 24)

EITAN KAMINETSKY (' 25)

FACULTY ADVISOR

MRS. AMY HOROWITZ



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ahorowitz@yeshivahs.org