

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

GOD TO AVRAM: "GIDDIYUP"

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"Get going!" "Get a move on!" "Tally ho!" "March!" None of these expressions come close to the power of the language that God uses when commanding Avram, who will become our forefather Avraham, to leave Mesopotamia and go to an unknown land:

Said God to Avram: [1] Go from your land and [2] from your birthplace and [3] from the house of your father to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1) (Vayomer Adonai el Avram: lech l'cha mei'arts'cha, umimildtecha umibeit avicha el ha'arets asher areka.)

God's command is compounded to make it clear that Avram must set out on this journey, leaving the ways of his old country behind as well as his connections with his parents' families. The commands become ever more explicit and close to Avram's heart. One might imagine moving to a different country and even from the city of one's birth but moving and leaving all one's siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews behind would take enormous strength and faith in God's command.

This is the beginning of Avram's story. He will go on to be the father to two religions: Judaism and Islam. The command "Lech l'cha" means, literally, "Go to yourself!" but idiomatically it means, "You GO!" The letters of the words themselves seem to demonstrate the effort required to make this move. The lamed reaches up to the full height of any Hebrew letter. The final caf reaches to the lowest point of any Hebrew letter. It's almost as if the Torah is telling us graphically that this move will take everything, from top to bottom, that Avram can give to make it a success.

This phrase, "lech l'cha," is used in only one other place in Torah and in only one additional place in all of Tanach. The command "lech l'cha" is used near the end of Avraham's life, when God commands Avraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

God said: Take [1] your son, [2] your only one, [3] whom you love, [4] Isaac, and go forth (lech l'chah) to the land of of Moriyya (Seeing). (Genesis 22:2)

Just as when he set out from Mesopotamia, Avraham must dig deep within himself to answer God's command. In like fashion, God couches the command clearly...hiding nothing from Avraham about the difficulty of this mission. The sages even "fill in" the "dialogue" between Avraham and God:

"Your son"

"[But] I have two sons!" [Abraham replied]

"Your only one"

"Each is the only one of his mother!"

"Whom you love"

"I love them both!"

"Isaac." (B. Sanhedrin 89b)

The bracketing of Avraham's life, with these two expressions of lech l'cha, show, perhaps, that to begin something utterly new, one must go to the limits of all one's capabilities. This brings us to the third time this phrase is used. In

this story, some a king requests aid from the prophet Elisha and he responds in the following manner:

Said Elisha to the king of Israel: "What is it to me [if you are having problems]? Go to the prophets of your father and to the prophets of your mother. (2Kings 3:13) Vayomer Elisha el melech Yisrael mah li? Valach leich el n'vi'ei avicha v'el n'vi'ei imecha.

Elisha gives this undeserving king a sort of "photo negative" of God's command to Avraham. He tells him to go back (the vowels are changed but it is the same phrase) to the prophets of their fathers and their mothers. This is a beautiful case of midrash within Tanach; showing how interwoven these texts are and how much we can learn from even the smallest phrases.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Avraham is commanded to "lech lecha" and no other person in the Torah is? Many others are called to God's service but none of them are commanded to do this. What is the nature of "lech lecha," i.e., how would you translate it: "Go to yourself!" "You, go!" or some other way?
2. The numerological value of lech lecha is 100 (lamed = 30 and chaf = 20). Does this suggest any deeper meaning to you? If so, what meaning would that be?
3. Now that you see that midrash within the Tanach is possible, can you think of other instances in which this sort of midrash is found? Where are they?

I look forward to your responses!