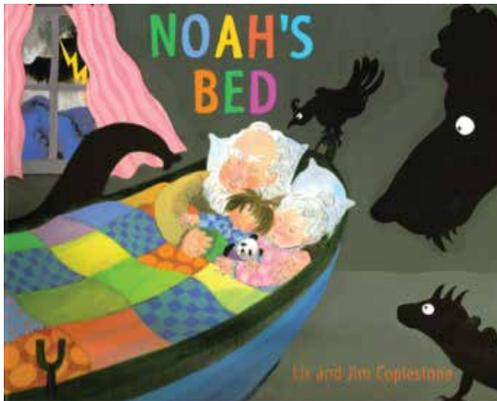




Global Day of Jewish Learning

Curriculum: Heroes and Villains, Saints and Fools



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Written by: **Danny Drachsler**

Introduction (3 minutes)

The Bible introduces us to Abraham as someone who is about to begin a journey. God's first commandment to Abraham is "Go forth!" (Genesis 12:1). This initial encounter and the beginning of the journey have intrigued and inspired Jewish biblical commentators for centuries. By exploring some of our sages' questions and some of their answers, we will consider what this short passage might reveal about the character of Abraham. We will look at how it has shaped Jewish values, such as opposing corrupt ideas and striding boldly into the unknown.

Part One: The Biblical Text (10 minutes)

- ▶ Ask your participants to form groups of two or three for the *chevruta* style of learning. *Chevruta*, or partnered learning, has the added benefit of two people sharing ideas and insights as they learn together.
- ▶ Ask your *chevruta* pairs to read Text #1 together and discuss the questions below.
- ▶ Note that Abraham was previously known as Abram—you can point this out if necessary.

Text #1: Genesis 12:1-6. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

בראשית יב, א-ו:

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמְוֹלָדְתָהּ וּמִבְּיַת אֲבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ.
 ב וְאָעֲשֶׂהָ, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, וְאֶבְרַכְךָ, וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ שְׁמִי; וְהָיָה, בְּרַכָּה.
 ג וְאֶבְרַכְךָ, מְבָרְכֶיךָ, וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ, אָאָר; וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ, כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.
 ד וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה', וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ, לוֹט; וְאַבְרָם, בֶּן-חֲמִשָּׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה, בְּצֵאתוֹ, מִחָרָן.
 ה וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת-שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לוֹט בֶּן-אָחִיו, וְאֶת-כָּל-רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ, וְאֶת-הַנֶּפֶשׁ, אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן; וַיֵּצְאוּ, לְלֶקֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן, וַיָּבֹאוּ, אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן.
 ו וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם, בְּאֶרֶץ, עַד מְקוֹם שְׂכָם, עַד אֵלּוֹן מוֹרָה; וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי, אָז בְּאֶרֶץ.

1 The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your land, and your birthplace, and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 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. 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." 4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan 6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

Abraham: Journey into the Unknown

► Ask:

1. List three questions that this text raises for you.
2. Focusing on verse 1:
 - What might be an explanation for the unusual phrasing *lech-lecha*, לך-לך, variously translated as “go forth”, “go-you-forth” or “go for yourself”?
 - What insight might we gain from considering the listing of three levels of departure—“from your land, and your birthplace, and your father’s house”? Why are they presented in this order?

Genesis 12:1–6 introduces the command for Abraham to depart and the beginning of his departure. As the discussion continues, keep in mind the questions raised by the first verse:

- What does it mean to go forth?
- In what ways is the departure challenging?
- Why is the destination unknown?

Part Two: Departure (20 minutes)

In Genesis 12:2 we see that Abraham is promised blessings and rewards if he leaves his familiar surroundings. But why can’t Abraham accomplish whatever God wants of him where he currently is? Why is a departure necessary?

Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weiser, known as Malbim, was a rabbi in Ukraine in the 19th century. He suggests that God wanted Abraham to make more than a merely physical departure.

Text #2: Malbim. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

מלבי"ם בראשית יב

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך מארצך, אמר לו שתכלית היציאה הוא שיפרד מדעותיהם וממעלליהם הנשחתות... וצוה ה' שעם היציאה הגופניית תהיה גם יציאה מחשביית, שיפרד מטבע ארצו שהיה מזגה רע וממדות אנשי מולדתו, וגם מאהבת בית אביו... וע"כ אמר לך לך שילך אל עצמו נפרד בטבעו מכל אלה

The LORD said to Abram ‘Go forth from your land...’ [God] told him that the purpose of his departure was to separate him from corrupt ways and ideas... And God commanded him that along with his physical departure there would be a philosophical departure, in order to separate from the way of his land, which was of an evil temperament, and from the ways of the people of his birthplace, and also from the love of his father’s house... Therefore, the text says *lech lekha* (to yourself)—he should “go into himself” to separate his ways from all of these.

► Ask:

1. According to Malbim, why does God want Abraham to leave his land, birthplace, and father’s house?
2. If, as Malbim proposes, God wants Abraham to separate from “corrupt ways and ideas,” why must Abraham physically separate himself, as well? Why could he not accomplish a “philosophical departure” without a geographical one?
3. How do you respond when encountering “corrupt ways and ideas,” or when you are confronted by a value system with which you disagree?

Malbim emphasizes the philosophical nature of Abraham's departure. Abraham is to commit to a certain set of beliefs and values, and separate himself from a different worldview. The significance of this intellectual challenge resonates with us today.

Whether Abraham's departure was to be solely physical, or also philosophical as the Malbim suggests, why does the text present the three places he is to leave (land, birthplace, father's house) in this order?

Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz lived in Ukraine from 1550–1619, and is known by the title of his most famous work, *Kli Yakar*. He suggests an answer to this question.

Text #3: *Kli Yakar*. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

כלי יקר בראשית יב

ונראה לפרש שהעתיקו הקב"ה מענין לענין כדרך שמחנכין התינוק, כי אולי יהיה קשה עליו לקבל הכל בבת אחת, על כן עשה לו שלושה חלוקות... כי מתחילה ביקש ממנו לעזוב ארצו וזה שאלה קטנה, יען כי אין לאדם תועלת מארצו יותר מארצות אחרות... ואחר כך כאשר הסיח מלבו כל ארצו אמר פן יהיה נפשו קשורה באנשי תולדתו שיש לו קצת עזר וסעד מהם... ואחר שנתפתה גם לזה חשש פן תדבק נפשו בבית אביו שיש לו שם תועלת נוסף על כל אלו והוא תועלת ממון, כי בית והון נחלת אבות.

It seems that God moved Abraham from one matter to another the way one trains a child, for perhaps it would be difficult for him to accept everything at once. He therefore prepared three steps...for initially God had asked him to leave his land, and this was a small request, since one does not derive greater benefit from one's own land than other lands ... And then, He distracted him from his entire homeland, to prevent his connection to the people of his homeland, and his reliance on them... And once [Abraham] was persuaded of this as well, [God] was concerned that his soul would cling to the house of his father, for there he had the added financial benefit, for home and possessions are inherited from parents.

➤ Ask:

1. According to *Kli Yakar*, why are the three places Abraham was to leave—land, town, father's house—presented in this order?
2. What does God think Abraham will be concerned about? What does this highlight about the nature of his departure?
3. What insight does this offer into the relationship between God and Abraham?

Kli Yakar suggests that, as a child is taught, Abraham is gradually introduced to each level of departure. From this comment we perceive a nurturing relationship between God and Abraham. *Kli Yakar* also focuses on the material sacrifice Abraham must make, emphasizing the physical nature of his departure as he prepares to abandon his familial inheritance.

Part Three: Destination Unknown (10 minutes)

The commandment is not only that Abraham must leave a place. He is to go somewhere else—but the destination is not specified. All the text says (in Genesis 12:1) is, “to the land that I will show you.” Why would the destination be kept a secret?

Abraham: Journey into the Unknown

Rashi, an 11th century French scholar and rabbi, and Malbim offer different explanations.

➤ Reads Texts #4 and #5 aloud.

Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 12:2.

רש"י בראשית יב, ב

אל הארץ אשר אראך - לא גלה לו הארץ מיד, כדי לחבבה בעיניו...

To the land that I will show you: He (God) did not reveal the land to him (Abram) immediately, in order to make it dear in his eyes...

Text #5: Malbim. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

מלבי"ם בראשית יב, א

ואמר אל הארץ אשר אראך. שזה היה מן הנסיון שיקל לאדם לעזוב ארצו ומולדתו אם יודע מחוז חפצו.

And He said, **to the land I will show you**, for this was part of the test—for it is easier for a person to leave his land if the destination is known...

➤ Ask:

1. Rashi says that not knowing the destination will make it “dear” to Abraham. Why might that be? What would this indicate about the character of Abraham?
2. According to Malbim, what does Abraham prefer? To know the destination, or not to know?
3. What do we learn about Abraham from his willingness to go forth into the unknown?
4. Are you excited by the unknown or do you find uncertainty stressful? How does the example of Abraham give us guidance in dealing with the unknown?

Rashi imagines an Abraham eager to venture into the unknown, while Malbim proposes that Abraham would be reluctant to begin a journey without knowing the destination. In both of these sages’ views, Abraham courageously moves forward despite the uncertain future he faces. His example encourages us to be willing to leap—to take the first step of any journey—whether or not we have faith in our ability to reach the destination.

Part Four: Journey (15 minutes)

We’ve addressed questions concerning Abraham’s origin, as well as his destination. What about the part in between—the journey? The first and central commandment to Abraham is the curiously-phrased, *lech-lecha*, “לך-לך” —“go forth”, “go-you-forth” or “go for yourself” (Genesis 12:1). What does this mean?

Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “There are No Final Answers.” *Parabola* 1 November 2006.

Leaving home is an important part of growth. ...[T]his notion of home means, among other things, comfort—security, safety, even warmth. In many ways, symbolically, home means the womb.

You may say that home is almost the opposite of spiritual. Spiritual usually means a going out, not a staying home. There is a sense in which home is the opposite of pilgrimage, which means you are going out of home. When you go on a pilgrimage, or when you go on a spiritual search, isn't it also fair to say that you are looking for a new or different type of home?

Home is, in one way, the safe ground, the family—warmth, softness, safety, shelter.

But there is another view of home, in which home is the end, not the beginning. You leave your present home, and you are searching for a new home.

The old home is dead for you. It is not enough for you now. When I leave home, it's about search. The man with the thirst—what does he want? Where does he want to get? Now there are surely some searchers who leave home and want to become, spiritually speaking, gypsies. They are going on a perpetual search that never stops. When is the wandering of a gypsy done? When he dies. You are going to find new things, you are going to find new treasures, but you're not going to stop. Spiritually speaking, there are lots of such people, perpetual wanderers who are going on a way that doesn't have any kind of a stop. So there is the person who is searching for another home—a higher home, a better home, a more luxurious home. And then there is the person who would say, “For me staying is dying.”

➤ Ask:

1. In your own words, how would you characterize the two types of people Rabbi Steinsaltz describes?
2. Which type of person was Abraham? Explain why you think so.
3. With which person in this text do you identify? Which is more important to you—the journey or the destination?

Rabbi Steinsaltz describes two types of searchers: those who seek in order to find a new home and those whose goal is to keep seeking. Yet he does not say one is preferable; his central point is that the search is important.

Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (the Gerrer Rebbe), a 19th century Polish rabbi, agrees that there is value in wandering. He writes in his book, *Sefat Emet*, about the value of being in motion. This book became so well known that the Gerrer Rebbe is often referred to simply as Sefat Emet.

Text #7: Sefat Emet. Commentary on Genesis 12:1. English translation by Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth*.

שפת אמת

"לך לך" – לעולם צריך להיות מהלך. "אל אשר אראך" – תמיד השגה חדשה. לכן נקרא האדם מהלך. שכל העומד בלי התחדשות, מיד הטבע שולט בו. ולכן מלאכין למעלה, שאינם תוך הטבע, נקראים "עומדים" (ישעיהו ו: ב). ובעולם הזה נקרא האדם מהלך.

"Get you out of your land"—a person should always keep walking. **"To [that which] I will show you"**—always some new attainment. This is why the person is called a walker. Whoever stands still is not renewed, for nature holds him fast. The angels above are beyond nature; they can be said to "stand" (Isaiah 6:2). But the person has to keep walking.

➤ Ask:

1. Describe what Sefat Emet means by "a person should always keep walking."
2. What do you think "whoever stands still is not renewed..." means?
3. How do you "keep walking?" Do Jewish cycles, rituals, and traditions provide opportunities for renewal? If so, how?

Sefat Emet proposes that progress itself is a value, stressing the importance of challenging ourselves and of never being complacent. He encourages us to make progress even though we may not reach the goal, "renewing" ourselves by engaging in a process of continual improvement.

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Our study of the beginning of Abraham's journey into the unknown enables us to better understand the challenges of departure, whether that is from a physical, philosophical or spiritual place. As we pursue our own life journeys, will we be excited by the prospect of a journey, or will we have to overcome our fear of the unknown?

Part One: The Biblical Text

Text #1: Genesis 12:1-6. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

בראשית יב, א-ו:

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאֲרָץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה.
 ב וְאָעֲשֶׂה, לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְאַבְרָכָה, וְאֶגְדֹּלָה שְׁמִי; וְהָיָה, בְּרָכָה.
 ג וְאַבְרָכָה, מְבָרְכֶיךָ, וּמְקַלְלֶךָ, אָאָר; וְנִבְרָכוּ בְּךָ, כָּל-מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה.
 ד וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם, כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה', וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ, לוֹט; וְאַבְרָם, בֶּן-חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה, בְּצֵאתוֹ, מִחָרָן.
 ה וַיֵּקַח אַבְרָם אֶת-שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לוֹט בֶּן-אָחִיו, וְאֶת-כָּל-רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ, וְאֶת-הַנֶּגְפֶשׁ, אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן; וַיֵּצְאוּ, לְלֶקֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, וַיָּבֹאוּ, אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.
 ו וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם, בְּאֶרֶץ, עַד מְקוֹם שְׂכָם, עַד אֵלּוֹן מוֹרְהָ; וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי, אִזְ בְּאֶרֶץ.

1 The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your land, and your birthplace, and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 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. 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." 4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan 6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

Part Two: Departure

Text #2: Malbim. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

מלבי"ם בראשית יב

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מארצך, אמר לו שתכלית היציאה הוא שיפרד מדעותיהם וממעלליהם הנשחתות... וצוה ה' שעם היציאה הגופניית תהיה גם יציאה מחשביית, שיפרד מטבע ארצו שהיה מזגה רע וממדות אנשי מולדתו, וגם מאהבת בית אביו... וע"כ אמר לך לך שילך אל עצמו נפרד בטבעו מכל אלה

The LORD said to Abram 'Go forth from your land...' [God] told him that the purpose of his departure was to separate him from corrupt ways and ideas... And God commanded him that along with his physical departure there would be a philosophical departure, in order to separate from the way of his land, which was of an evil temperament, and from the ways of the people of his birthplace, and also from the love of his father's house... Therefore, the text says *lekh lekha* (to yourself)—he should "go into himself" to separate his ways from all of these.



Text #3: Kli Yakar. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

כלי יקר בראשית יב

ונראה לפרש שהעתיקו הקב"ה מענין לענין כדרך שמחנכין התינוק, כי אולי יהיה קשה עליו לקבל הכל בבת אחת, על כן עשה לו שלושה חלוקות... כי מתחילה ביקש ממנו לעזוב ארצו וזה שאלה קטנה, יען כי אין לאדם תועלת מארצו יותר מארצות אחרות... ואחר כך כאשר הסיח מלבו כל ארצו אמר פן יהיה נפשו קשורה באנשי תולדתו שיש לו קצת עזר וסעד מהם... ואחר שנתפתה גם לזה חשש פן תדבק נפשו בבית אביו שיש לו שם תועלת נוסף על כל אלו והוא תועלת ממון, כי בית והון נחלת אבות.

It seems that God moved Abraham from one matter to another the way one trains a child, for perhaps it would be difficult for him to accept everything at once. He therefore prepared three steps...for initially God had asked him to leave his land, and this was a small request, since one does not derive greater benefit from one's own land than other lands ... And then, He distracted him from his entire homeland, to prevent his connection to the people of his homeland, and his reliance on them... And once [Abraham] was persuaded of this as well, [God] was concerned that his soul would cling to the house of his father, for there he had the added financial benefit, for home and possessions are inherited from parents.

Part Three: Destination Unknown

Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 12:2.

רש"י בראשית יב, ב

אל הארץ אשר אראך - לא גלה לו הארץ מיד, כדי לחבבה בעיניו...

To the land that I will show you: He (God) did not reveal the land to him (Abram) immediately, in order to make it dear in his eyes...

Text #5: Malbim. Commentary on Genesis 12:1.

מלבי"ם בראשית יב, א

ואמר אל הארץ אשר אראך. שזה היה מן הנסיון שיקל לאדם לעזוב ארצו ומולדתו אם יודע מחוז חפצו.

And He said, **to the land I will show you**, for this was part of the test—for it is easier for a person to leave his land if the destination is known...

Part Four: Journey

Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. "There are No Final Answers." Parabola 1 November 2006.

Leaving home is an important part of growth. ...[T]his notion of home means, among other things, comfort—security, safety, even warmth. In many ways, symbolically, home means the womb.

You may say that home is almost the opposite of spiritual. Spiritual usually means a going out, not a staying home. There is a sense in which home is the opposite of pilgrimage, which means you are going out of home. When you go on a pilgrimage, or when you go on a spiritual search, isn't it also fair to say that you are looking for a new or different type of home?

Home is, in one way, the safe ground, the family—warmth, softness, safety, shelter.

But there is another view of home, in which home is the end, not the beginning. You leave your present home, and you are searching for a new home.

The old home is dead for you. It is not enough for you now. When I leave home, it's about search. The man with the thirst—what does he want? Where does he want to get? Now there are surely some searchers who leave home and want to become, spiritually speaking, gypsies. They are going on a perpetual search that never stops. When is the wandering of a gypsy done? When he dies. You are going to find new things, you are going to find new treasures, but you're not going to stop. Spiritually speaking, there are lots of such people, perpetual wanderers who are going on a way that doesn't have any kind of a stop. So there is the person who is searching for another home—a higher home, a better home, a more luxurious home. And then there is the person who would say, "For me staying is dying."

Text #7: Sefat Emet. Commentary on Genesis 12:1. English translation by Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth*.

שפת אמת

"לך לך" – לעולם צריך להיות מהלך. "אל אשר אראך" – תמיד השגה חדשה. לכן נקרא האדם מהלך. שכל העומד בלי התחדשות, מיד הטבע שולט בו. ולכן מלאכין למעלה, שאינם תוך הטבע, נקראים "עומדים" (ישעיהו ו: ב). ובעולם הזה נקרא האדם מהלך.

"Get you out of your land"—a person should always keep walking. **"To [that which] I will show you"**—always some new attainment. This is why the person is called a walker. Whoever stands still is not renewed, for nature holds him fast. The angels above are beyond nature; they can be said to "stand" (Isaiah 6:2). But the person has to keep walking.



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