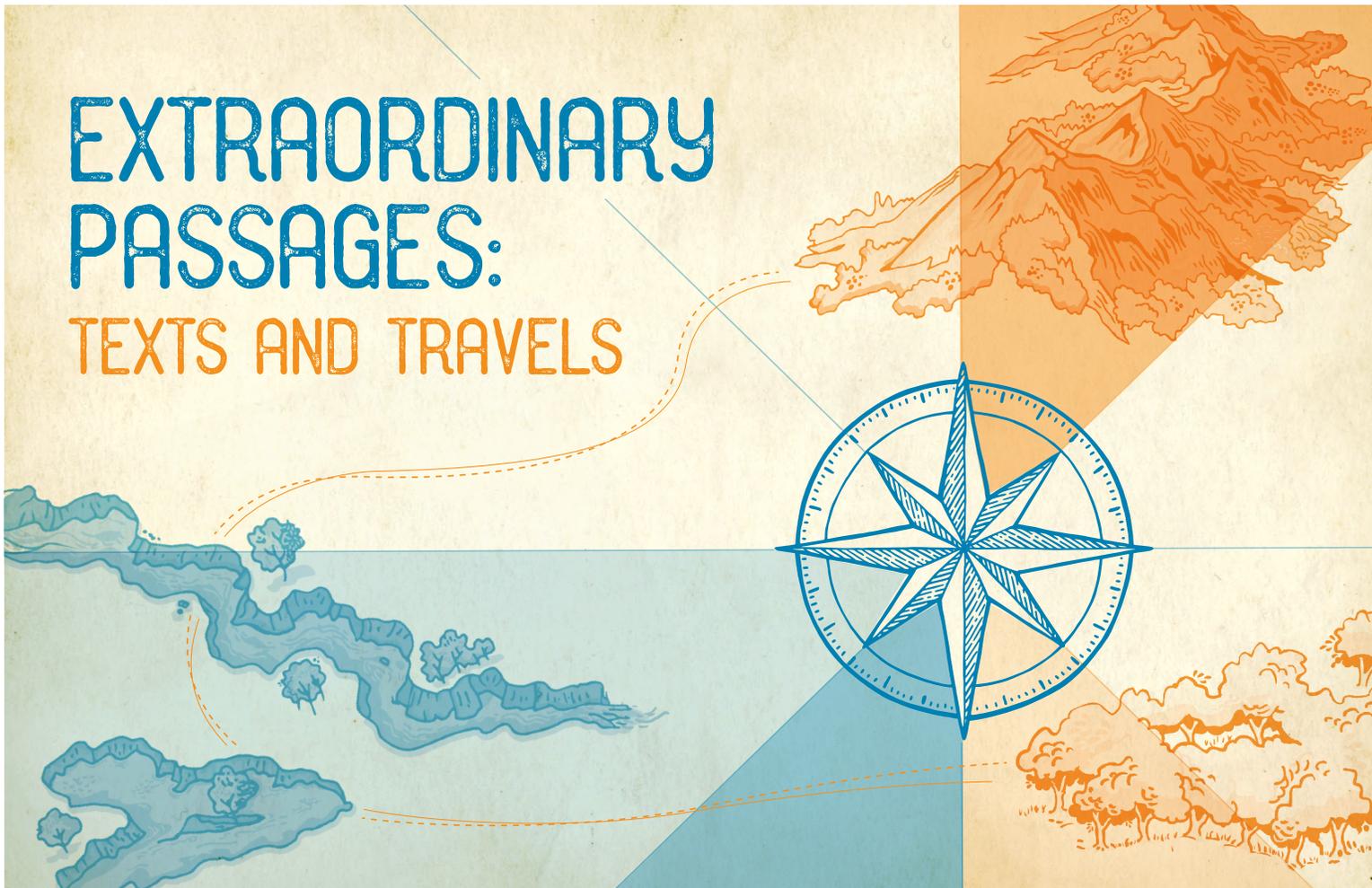


# EXTRAORDINARY PASSAGES: TEXTS AND TRAVELS



Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum



NOV. 11. 18

[www.theglobalday.org](http://www.theglobalday.org)

A Project of the Aleph Society



Based on a lesson by Danny Drachsler

## Introduction (2 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

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 journeys and how we strive to progress.

### ► Have participants ask themselves:

1. What is the farthest you have ever been from home? When you left, did you know that was how far you'd go? If not, what was it like to go farther than you thought you would?
2. Do you measure distance by how far you are from home or how far you are from the last place you stopped? Why do you suppose you measure this way?

Keep these questions and your answers in mind as we learn today.

**Facilitator's Note:** Abraham was previously known as Abram; you can point this out if necessary.

## Part One: The Bible Text (10 minutes)

### ► Read text #1 aloud.

**Text #1: Genesis 12:1-3.** English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וּמְזוֹלַתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲדַרְשׁ;  
 וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְךָוּי גָדוֹל וְאַבְרָם בָּרַךְ וְאַמְנֵלָה שְׂמֵהּ וְהָיָה בְרַכְיָהּ;  
 וְאַבְרָם וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְיִבְרָכְךָ בְּכָל מְשֻׁפְּתוֹת הָאָדָמָה;

**1 The Lord said to Abram: Go you from your land**, the geographic location where you were born; **and from your birthplace**, the place for which you harbor a sense of closeness and belonging; **and from your father's house**, and travel **to the land**, currently unknown to you, **that I will show you**. You will be told only the general direction you must travel, and you will be informed when you reach your destination. **2** You embark on this journey as an individual who is merely the head of a family or tribe. Nevertheless, I assure you that in the place where you are going **I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great** as you will be renowned, **and you shall be a blessing**, meaning that people will use you as a paradigm for blessings. When they bless one another, they will say: May you merit to be like Abram. **3 I will bless those who bless you, and he who curses you I will curse; and all the families of the earth**, not only the families of your descendants or your neighbors, **shall be blessed in**, or through, **you**.

### ► Ask:

1. What do you think is the reason for the unusual phrasing “*lekh-lekha* לך-לך” which is often translated as “go forth”, “go-you-forth” or “go you from”? How do you understand “*lekh-lekha*”?
2. Consider the types of departure in the text — “from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house”. In what ways is Abraham’s departure challenging?

## Part Two: Departure (15 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?

The Malbim, Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, was a 19th century scholar and commentator and the chief rabbi of Bucharest. He suggests that God wanted Abraham to make a departure that was more than merely physical.

### 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 הגופנית תהיה גם יציאה מחשבתית, 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.

### ► Ask:

1. According to The Malbim, why does God want Abraham to leave his land, birthplace, and father’s house? What might be the consequences of staying?
2. If, as The 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?

The Malbim emphasizes the philosophical element of Abraham’s departure. Abraham is to commit to a new set of beliefs and values, separating himself from a certain worldview. The significance of this intellectual challenge resonates with us today. Yet 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 was a rabbi who lived in the 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 — his land, his birthplace, his father's house — presented in this order?
2. Kli Yakar acknowledges that cutting ties with your home is hard. How might going to an unknown destination affect one's sense of loss in leaving?

Kli Yakar suggests that, as a child is taught, Abraham is gradually prepared for the "three steps" in his departure. This shows us that sometimes big journeys need to be broken down into more approachable stages. To leave his homeland is presented as one in a series of steps, rather than a single massive leap. But the destination is still a mystery. How does that uncertainty affect Abraham?

### Part Three: Destination Unknown (15 minutes)

The commandment and journey are not only that Abraham must leave a place. He is to go somewhere else — but the destination is not specified to Abraham. All Genesis 12:1 says is, "to the land that I will show you."

#### ➤ Ask:

1. Why do you think the destination is deliberately kept from Abraham?

The Malbim and Rashi offer different explanations of why the destination was kept a secret. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

#### ➤ Read Texts #4 and #5, and ask the following questions in *chavruta*.

*Chavruta* is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

### Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 12:1-2.

רש"י בראשית יב, א-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. What do you think that means, and why would that be a good reason not to know?
2. According to Malbim, what does Abraham prefer? To know the destination, or not to know? Why?
3. How could these aspects of Abraham's journey offer us guidance in dealing with the unknown?

Rashi imagines Abraham as 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: Go Forth (10 minutes)

We've addressed questions concerning Abraham's place of 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, *lekh-lekha* (לך-לך), "go forth", "go-you-forth" or "go for yourself" (Genesis 12:1). What does this mean?

One possible understanding comes from Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, a 19th century Polish rabbi and the Gerrer Rebbe, who believed that wandering is good. His book about the value of being in motion, the *Sefat Emet*, became so well-known that people simply called him Sefat Emet.

### Text #6: Sefat Emet. Commentary on Genesis 12:1. *The Language of Truth*, English translation by Arthur Green.

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.

## Journey Into the Unknown

“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. What do you think 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”? How might Jewish cycles, rituals, and traditions be opportunities for renewal?
4. Do you think a journey is something that you return from or something that you are always on?

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 (8 minutes)

In Text #7, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz also explores how we progress. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

### Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “One Step Forward”.

Yes, each of us is at a different point, both geographically and on the chart of his or her own life. Truly, it doesn’t matter exactly where people are in terms of time and achievement, nor is the ratio between what they are capable of doing and what they have actually done all that important. Every person has a different personal graph, a whole different world map. What for one person is the past, for another is a still-distant future.

But one thing that people can do wherever they are — and they can do it in a consistent, ongoing, defined and focused way — is to take one step forward. Each person can move just a tiny bit, but still a tiny bit forward. The essence of all movement is that one does not remain in the same place. Whatever does not progress, regresses, and whatever does not ascend, descends. That which does not improve, deteriorates; and that which does not become more alive, becomes more dead.

The decision to make time and move one step forward is not the solution to all problems; it is merely a decision to move one step forward, and to keep moving. Wherever you may be, move just a little bit forward. There are people who will progress by learning a new thing; one who today knows only one letter but next week knows two, has taken one step forward. This is so much to ask — and yet, so little.

### ➤ Ask:

1. What does progress mean to you? What are some small steps that you can take to progress?
2. Rabbi Steinsaltz writes that we can all “take one step forward.” How might this change the way you approach the unknown?
3. What would be one step forward in your Jewish journey that you are ready to take for your own sake (remember *lekh lekha*)?



## Part One: The Bible Text

**Text #1: Genesis 12:1-3.** English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לְהֵלֶךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמְוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲדַרְשׁ;  
וְאֵנְשֵׁי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאַבְרָם וְאַמְרָלֵה שָׁמָּה וְהָיָה בְרִכְיָהּ;  
וְאַבְרָהָם מִבְרִיךְ וּמְבָרָכִים אָרֶץ וְנִבְרָכִי בָהּ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה;

1 **The Lord said to Abram: Go you from your land**, the geographic location where you were born; **and from your birthplace**, the place for which you harbor a sense of closeness and belonging; **and from your father's house**, and travel **to the land**, currently unknown to you, **that I will show you**. You will be told only the general direction you must travel, and you will be informed when you reach your destination. 2 You embark on this journey as an individual who is merely the head of a family or tribe. Nevertheless, I assure you that in the place where you are going **I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great** as you will be renowned, **and you shall be a blessing**, meaning that people will use you as a paradigm for blessings. When they bless one another, they will say: May you merit to be like Abram. 3 **I will bless those who bless you, and he who curses you I will curse; and all the families of the earth**, not only the families of your descendants or your neighbors, **shall be blessed in**, or through, **you**.

## Part Two: Departure

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

מלבי"ם בראשית יב  
וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ, 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.

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## Part Three: Destination Unknown

### Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 12:1-2.

רש"י בראשית יב, א-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...

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מלבי"ם בראשית יב, א  
ואמר אל הארץ אשר אראך. שזוה 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: Go Forth

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"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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## Conclusion

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### Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “One Step Forward”.

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