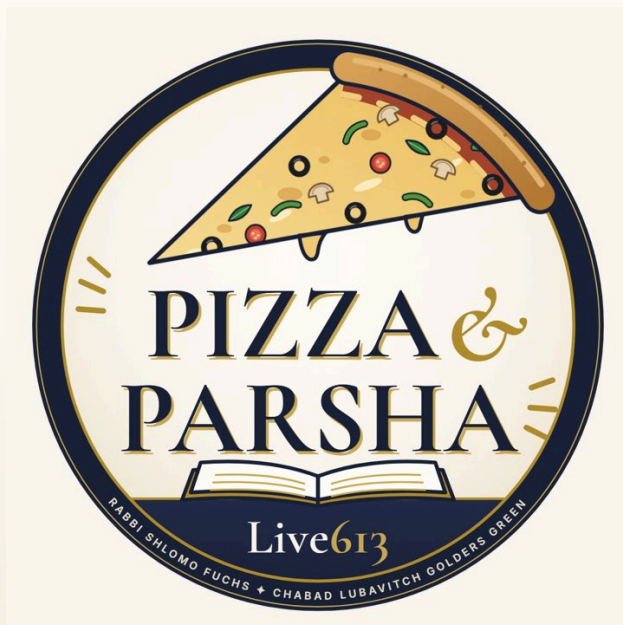




When Challenges Lead to Blessings

Avraham's journey, and the hidden purpose of life's setbacks

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TEACHINGS OF THE REBBE • PRESENTED BY

Rabbi Shlomo Fuchs

Adapted for group learning from the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. 5, pp. 57–67, as presented in *Torah Studies* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Hebrew sources and discussion questions included.

Hashem tells Avraham that his journey will be for his benefit and good. Yet his first experiences are famine, danger and the loss of his wife's freedom. How can the difficulties themselves belong to the blessing?

01

Lech Lecha — A Promise of Blessing

Our Parsha begins with Hashem giving Avraham a command:

בראשית י"ב:א'

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ עַד וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָךְ.

Hashem tells Avraham to leave his country, his birthplace and his father's home, and travel to a land that He will show him.

But Rashi explains that the words *Lech Lecha* contain something more than simply a command to travel.

רש"י, בראשית י"ב:א'

לך לך — להנאתך ולטובתך, שם אעשה לך גִּדּוּל, כאן אי אתה זוכה לבנים, ועוד שאודיע טבעך בעולם.

"Go for your benefit and for your good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not merit children. Furthermore, I will make your character known throughout the world."

In other words, Hashem is promising Avraham that although he must leave everything familiar behind, this journey will ultimately be for his own good.

And Hashem doesn't leave the promise vague. In the very next verse, He gives Avraham three specific blessings.

בראשית י"ב:ב'

וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְךָ גִּדּוּל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְתִּי שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה.

"I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."

Rashi explains why Hashem promised these particular blessings.

רש"י, בראשית י"ב:כ'

לפי שהדרך גורמת לשלשה דברים, ממעטת פריה ורביה וממעטת את הממון וממעטת את השם, לכך הוזקק לשלשה ברכות הללו, שהבטיחו על הבנים ועל הממון ועל השם.

Normally, travelling reduces three things: the opportunity to have children, wealth and one's reputation. Therefore, Hashem specifically promises Avraham blessings in these three areas.

This is remarkable. Normally, leaving your home and travelling to an unknown land involves enormous risks. A person may lose their financial security, their connections and their ability to establish a family.

But Hashem reassures Avraham that his journey will be different. He promises him children, wealth and a great name.

The very things that a person normally risks losing by travelling are the things Hashem specifically promises Avraham he will gain.

And there is an even deeper meaning to the words *Lech Lecha*. They can be understood as "Go to yourself." Hashem is telling Avraham to move towards his true purpose in life, to become the person he was created to be.

We would therefore expect the Parsha to describe Avraham moving steadily towards greater success, blessing and holiness. **But when we actually read what happens, we find something very different.**

02

But What Actually Happened?

Avraham listens to Hashem, leaves his home and travels to Eretz Yisroel. Almost immediately, things begin going wrong.

First difficulty: A famine

בראשית י"ב:כ"ב

וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִרְדָּא אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם לָגוֹר שָׁם כִּי כָבֵד הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ.

"There was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt to live there temporarily, because the famine in the land was severe."

Avraham has barely arrived in the land that Hashem directed him towards, and suddenly there is a severe famine. Instead of enjoying the blessings he was promised, he is forced to leave the land and travel to Egypt in search of food.

Rashi points out something particularly surprising.

רש"י, בראשית י"ב:י

רעב בארץ — באותה הארץ לבדה, לנסותו אם ירהרר אחר דבריו של הקב"ה, שאמר לו ללכת אל ארץ כנען, ועכשיו משיאו לצאת ממנה.

Rashi explains that the famine was specifically in that land, to test whether Avraham would question Hashem's words. Hashem had told him to go to Canaan, and now circumstances were forcing him to leave.

Think about the contradiction. Hashem had said: "Go to this land, and I will bless you." Yet when Avraham arrives, he finds himself in a land suffering from famine.

This is supposed to be the beginning of his blessing?

— Second difficulty: Avraham's life is in danger

As Avraham approaches Egypt, he becomes frightened that the Egyptians will kill him because of Sarah's beauty.

בראשית י"ב:ט"ז

וְהָיָה כִּי יֵרְאוּ אֹתָךְ הַמִּצְרִיִּם וְאָמְרוּ אֵשֶׁתוֹ זֹאת וְהָרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאָתָּךְ יְחִי.

"When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife,' and they will kill me, while allowing you to live."

Hashem had promised to make Avraham into a great nation. Yet now Avraham is worried that he may not even survive the journey.

— Third difficulty: Sarah is taken to Pharaoh

Things become worse still.

בראשית י"ב:ט"ז

וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פַּרְעֹה.

"And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house."

Sarah is taken away from Avraham and brought into Pharaoh's palace. Imagine the situation.

Avraham had left his home because Hashem promised him a wonderful future. He was promised children, wealth and a great name. But now he has experienced a famine, been forced to leave Eretz Yisroel, feared for his life, and had his wife taken away from him.

And all of this happens while he is doing exactly what Hashem told him to do.

— The central contradiction

HASHEM'S PROMISE	AVRAHAM'S EXPERIENCE
להנאתך ולטובתך — For your benefit and good	A journey filled with hardship and danger
ואעשך לגוי גדול — I will make you a great nation	Sarah is taken away and his future family appears threatened
ואברכך — I will bless you	He arrives in a land suffering from famine
ואגדלה שמך — I will make your name great	He becomes a vulnerable stranger in Egypt

Of course, we know that Avraham was eventually blessed. But that only makes the question more interesting.

Why did the journey towards those blessings have to begin with so much difficulty?

And why is a Parsha containing so many apparent setbacks called *Lech Lecha* — a journey towards one's own good?

PAUSE & DISCUSS

If Hashem promises that something will be for a person's good, why might that journey involve so many difficulties?

03

Was It Simply a Test?

One possible answer is that these difficulties were tests.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (5:3) teaches that Avraham was tested ten times and passed every test. Perhaps the famine and the events in Egypt were opportunities for Avraham to demonstrate his faith and reach a higher spiritual level.

But this answer is not sufficient.

Avraham's mission was not simply to become a greater person himself. His mission was to spread the knowledge of Hashem throughout the world.

Indeed, the Midrash compares Avraham to a bottle of perfume that must be moved around in order to spread its fragrance.

But how did the famine, the danger and Sarah's being taken away help Avraham fulfil that mission?

To understand the answer, we need to look beyond Avraham's personal experiences and understand the greater purpose of his journey.

04

The Actions of Our Fathers — A Sign for Their Children

The key to understanding this is a fundamental principle in Torah.

רמב"ן, בראשית י"ב:ו'

כל מה שאירע לאבות סימן לבנים.

"Everything that happened to our forefathers is a sign for their descendants."

The Ramban explains that the Torah describes the journeys and experiences of the Avos because:

רמב"ן, בראשית י"ב:ו'

וכולם באים ללמד על העתיד.

"They all come to teach us about the future."

This means something deeper than simply saying that the lives of the Avos resembled the experiences of their descendants. The actions and experiences of the Avos helped prepare the way for future generations.

And now we can look at Avraham's journey into Egypt in a completely new way.

Avraham descended into Egypt because of a famine. Generations later, Yaakov and his family would descend into Egypt because of a famine.

Avraham experienced hardship in Egypt. His descendants would experience slavery and suffering there.

Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's palace but eventually emerged unharmed. Later, the Jewish people would also emerge from Egypt after a period of terrible suffering.

But perhaps the most striking similarity is how Avraham's journey ended.

בראשית י"ג:א-ב'

וַיַּעַל אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְלוֹט עִמּוֹ הַנֶּגְבָה.
וְאַבְרָם כָּבֵד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנָה בַּכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב.

"Avram went up from Egypt, together with his wife and everything he owned... And Avram was very wealthy in livestock, silver and gold."

Notice the language. At the beginning of the story, the Torah tells us *Vayeired* — Avraham went down. Now the Torah tells us *Vaya'al* — Avraham went up.

And he did not leave Egypt empty-handed. He left with great wealth. The same thing would later happen to his descendants.

When Hashem told Avraham about the future Egyptian exile, He promised:

בראשית ט"ו:י"ד

וְאַחֲרֵי כֵן יֵצְאוּ בִּרְכָשׁ גָּדוֹל.

"And afterwards they will leave with great wealth."

Avraham went down into Egypt and came out with great wealth. The Jewish people went down into Egypt and eventually came out with great wealth.

Avraham's experiences were preparing the way for the future redemption of his descendants.

What appeared to be a personal setback was actually part of something much greater.

05

The Descent Was Part of the Blessing

We can now see the deeper meaning of Avraham's journey.

Avraham's journey into Egypt was not simply a difficulty that he eventually overcame. It was part of the greater purpose of his mission.

Avraham had been sent into the world to spread the knowledge of Hashem. But that mission could not be accomplished by remaining only in places of holiness.

He also needed to bring holiness into places that were far removed from it. And Egypt represented such a place.

By entering Egypt and ultimately leaving with its wealth, Avraham began a process of taking things from a spiritually low environment and bringing them into the service of Hashem.

His journey also prepared the way for the Jewish people to experience their own descent into Egypt and eventual redemption.

The Jewish people would later leave Egypt with great wealth, including gold and silver that could be used for holy purposes, particularly the construction of the Mishkan.

This is the deeper meaning of:

ירידה צורך עלייה

A descent for the sake of an ascent.

But the lesson goes beyond saying that Avraham went through a difficult time and things worked out in the end.

The descent itself helped make the greater ascent possible.

Had Avraham remained comfortably in Eretz Yisroel, he could have continued his own spiritual growth.

But through his journey into Egypt, his mission reached somewhere it would not otherwise have reached in the same way. And his experiences prepared the way for future generations.

This is why even his descent into Egypt belonged to *Lech Lecha*.

The journey that appeared to be taking Avraham away from his purpose was actually helping him fulfil it on a much greater level.

06

Returning to the Original Promise

We can now return to the beginning of the Parsha.

לך לך — להנאתך ולטובתך.

Go for your benefit and for your good.

At first, these words seemed to promise Avraham a straightforward journey of success and blessing.

But that is not what happened. He experienced famine, danger and the taking of his wife.

And yet, when we look at the complete picture, we see that Avraham did indeed receive Hashem's blessings.

He left Egypt with great wealth. Sarah was returned to him. He continued his journey and eventually became the father of the Jewish people.

But there is something even deeper to understand.

Avraham didn't simply receive blessings despite his difficulties. His difficult journey itself contributed to the greater good that Hashem intended.

Through his descent into Egypt, he accomplished something that extended beyond his personal life, preparing the way for future generations and ultimately the redemption of the Jewish people.

And this is the lesson for each of us.

We all experience challenges, setbacks and situations that don't seem to make sense. Sometimes, even when we are trying to do the right thing, life seems to move in the opposite direction from what we expected.

Naturally, we wonder why things aren't going as planned.

But Avraham's story teaches us that **what looks like a setback may actually become part of something much greater.**

There may be opportunities for growth, achievements and acts of goodness that become possible specifically through a difficult experience.

Of course, we cannot always understand why Hashem allows particular difficulties, and we should never assume that another person's suffering is easily explained. Unlike Avraham's story, we may not get to see the full picture.

But *Lech Lecha* gives us a different perspective on the challenges of life.

A difficult journey is not necessarily a failed journey.

And sometimes the path towards our greatest blessings takes us through places we never imagined we would have to go.

That is the deeper meaning of Lech Lecha: Even when life appears to be taking us backwards, it may be preparing us to reach somewhere greater than we could have reached before.

FINAL DISCUSSION

- ◆ Can you think of a time when something that appeared to be a setback ultimately led to something positive?
- ◆ Is there a difference between something good happening *after* a challenge and something good becoming possible *because of* that challenge?
- ◆ How might this perspective change the way we respond when life doesn't go according to plan?

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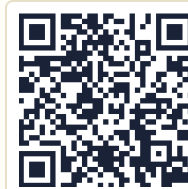
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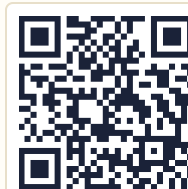
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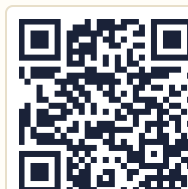
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