

**Lech Lecha: A D'var Torah
in Honor of Rabbi Fischer's 80th Birthday**

*Vayomer Adonay el-Avram lech lecha me'artsecha
umimoladetecha umibeyt avicha el-ha'arets asher ar'eka:
God said to Avram, "Go away from your land, from your birthplace,
and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."*

Genesis 12:1

This is the first verse in today's parshah, and it raises a lot of questions. Had Abraham no doubts about this command, no questions about leaving his home and family for some unknown destination? No road map, no GPS. Then again at the end of next week's parshah, once more God commands Abraham to leave, this time to go to Moriah, to sacrifice his son Isaac. What kind of man acquiesces so quickly?

The Sfas Smes contends that the uncertainty of Abraham's destination is important, an essential feature of the story. He says the journey on which God commanded Abraham to go, was a *spiritual* journey, as well as a geographic one. Knowing where one is going gives a false sense of control. Instead, Abraham gave up that control and placed his trust in God. But that raised only more questions for me. What does it mean to place your trust in God?

To answer that question, I want to share an interpretation by a former Beth El member. Marcia Lind, may her memory be a blessing, was a philosophy professor at Duke until she decided in her mid-40's to leave to attend the rabbinic program at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Two years into her study she was diagnosed with cancer. During her illness, Marcia struggled relentlessly (and Marcia knew how to struggle, as those of you who knew her know!) to make sense of her illness. She read Kubler-Ross and Steven Levine. She studied midrash and mishnah with the best scholars in the conservative movement.

Then one night several months before she died, she phoned me, her voice filled with new energy. "Go. Right now. Get you chumash and turn to Lech Lecha," she commanded. "Listen." She read me the words, "*Go away from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house.*" Marcia went on to explain that Lech Lecha was a model for thinking about dreadful things. This model, she later wrote, "*Is characterized by the demand that the agent do everything that is unfamiliar to her, and nothing that is not. God is showing us something, but we know not what or where, and must simply trust...watch how in this model there is a shift, no more talk about unfairness or comparison. Why? Because all of us have our own Lech Lecha, have our own time when something is demanded by a force larger than we can understand. That is what it is to be*

human. We leave everything we know and follow that pull without knowing what the outcome will be. And every one of us will be terrified when confronted with that."

"Abraham's response to God has much to teach us," Marcia continued. When he responds to God's commands with "*Hineni*/I am here," as he does three times in the next few chapters of the Torah, Abraham teaches us how to stand up straight and accept what has been handed to us. "Entymologically," Marcia wrote, "*Hineni* is interesting because of its emphasis on the Now." Not, I **will** do it, but I am here, present, **now**. And this emphasis on the now, being fully present in the moment, rather than fearing an unknown future, is perhaps what led Abraham to his gracious acceptance of God's commands.

Today, we're celebrating Rabbi Fischer's 80th birthday, and I can't imagine a more perfect parshah for this occasion. Many of you know that Rabbi Fischer and his family left their homeland in Germany in 1939. It's an amazing story that you should ask him about. But instead of focusing on the command to journey into the unknown, I want to focus on the *acceptance* of that command because I can think of no one that better personifies what it means to say "Hineni" when called than Rabbi Fischer.

I remember years ago, a group of people complained that they were lost in the Shabbat morning service. "We'll make a Learners' Minyan," Rabbi Fischer declared. He and Pat met Shabbos morning in the Freedman Center, taught a small portion about the service, and then led their students back into the sanctuary, the students clearly more comfortable.

I remember when a young boy from our community was interested in continuing his studies after his Bar Mitzvah and Rabbi Fischer mentored him until he became a Shaliach Tzibbur. And then quietly continued on as the boy's chevruta partner until the young man went off to college this fall.

And I remember this past spring, when we wanted to support Rabbi Greyber's opportunity to study in Jerusalem yet worried about a year without a Rabbi and Rabbi Fischer stood up and said, "Hineni" once more and offered to be our interim rabbi.

What Rabbi Fischer has taught me, what he has **modeled** for me, is how important it is –whether visiting the sick or comforting a mourner or just listening as good friends do-to be fully present in the moment, to listen and watch carefully for what is needed, and then to step in and do it.

Several summers ago, Roger and I were in Israel and visited the Fischers in Haifa. After we walked around the neighborhood, Rabbi Fischer suggested we take the bus

home, one of those things we tourists promise our families in America we won't do. "You can't give in to the fear," Rabbi Fischer advised, and I boarded the bus.

As I've learned from this morning's parshah, we will all have our own fears, our own Lech Lechas to face. It might be a serious illness, or a new job, or other changes in our lives. But as frightening as that might be, I've also learned that our tradition provides us with a model, a way to say "*Hineni*," and accept the unknown and move forward. The Torah helps us with this once more. Following the verse in which God tells Abraham to leave his homeland, the parshah continues,

I will make you a great nation.

*And I will **ble**ss you.*

I will make your name great.

*And you shall be a **ble**ssing.*

*I will **ble**ss those who **ble**ss you*

And curse him that curses you

And all the families of the earth

*Shall **ble**ss themselves by you.*

Genesis, 1:2-3

Rabbi Sager has taught me that making a blessing is a way of being fully present in the moment, a way of making the moment momentous-perhaps, a way of saying "*Hineni*, *I am here.*"

And as we honor our Rabbi, our teacher, and our friend today on his 80th birthday, I know you join me in feeling truly blessed.

Kathy Bartelmay
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