



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

לך לך תשע"ט  
Lech Lecha 5779

### Four Dimensions of the Journey

#### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

*Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition* is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. Each element of the *Family Edition* is progressively more advanced; *The Core Idea* is appropriate for all ages and the final element, *From The Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, is the most advanced section. Each section includes *Questions to Ponder*, aimed at encouraging discussion between family members in a way most appropriate to them. We have also included a section called *Around the Shabbat Table* with a few further questions on the *parsha* to think about. The final section is an *Educational Companion* which includes suggested talking points in response to the questions found throughout the *Family Edition*.

To receive the *Family Edition* together with the main *Covenant & Conversation* essay each week in your inbox, please join Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



#### PARSHAT LECH LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

God calls on Abraham to leave the land of his birth, and in response he and Sarah begin their journey to a new land and a new kind of faith, that will become the background and location of the adventure of Jewish history.

There are some setbacks at first. There is a famine and they have to leave the Land of Israel. There is an argument between Abraham and his nephew Lot's households, and

they part ways. Lot is then captured in a local war, and Abraham has to fight a battle to free him.

God then makes a covenant with Abraham, who has not yet had a child. He has a son by Sarah's handmaid Hagar, but God tells him this is not the heir to the covenant. The sign of this covenant is *Brit Milah* (circumcision).



#### THE CORE IDEA

Our *parsha* begins with the puzzling words *Lech Lecha* as God commands Abraham to leave his birthplace and settle in the Land of Israel. The words literally mean "go to yourself", and as this is a confusing phrase, many of the commentators interpret them differently. Here are four possible interpretations:

1. Rashi has a tradition that the words mean "Journey for yourself." According to him, God is saying "Travel for your own benefit and good. There I will make you into a great nation." Sometimes we have to let go of our past in order to embrace the future, and trust in God's plan. Abraham was about to say goodbye to the things that mean most to us – land, birthplace and parental home, the places where we belong. He was about to make a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a leap into the unknown. At the end of it, however, Abraham would discover that he had achieved something he could not have done otherwise. "Go for yourself" – believe in what you can become.

2. The Midrash takes the phrase to mean "Go with yourself" – meaning, by travelling from place to place you will extend your influence not over one land but many. Abraham was commanded to leave his place to show that God was not limited to one place (as many believed their ancient Gods were). Abraham's God was Creator and Sovereign of the entire universe. Abraham and Sarah were to be like perfume, leaving a trace of their presence wherever they went. *Lech Lecha* according to the Midrash means "Go with yourself" – your beliefs, your way of life, your faith.

3. A more mystical interpretation takes the phrase to mean, "Go to yourself" – take a journey of self-discovery. Abraham was being asked to leave behind all the things that make us someone else – for it is only by taking a long and lonely journey that we discover who we truly are. "Go to yourself."

4. There is, however, a fourth interpretation: “Go by yourself.” Only a person willing to stand alone, singular and unique, can worship the God who is alone, singular and unique. Only one able to leave behind the things we are born into, that influence who we become – home, family, culture and society – can form a relationship with God who stands above and beyond nature.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do these four interpretations having anything in common?
2. Which of the four interpretations of the words *Lech Lecha* do you like most?
3. What are the things that make you who you are? How much of this is nature (from within you) vs. nurture (outside factors influencing you)?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

When Reb Zushya of Hanipol was lying on his deathbed, surrounded by his Hasidim, he began to softly weep. His students also began to cry and through their tears they called out “Reb Zushya, Reb Zushya, why do you weep? You are about to meet your Creator and be welcomed home into *shamayim* (heaven) as a *tzaddik* (righteous man)”.

The old and frail Rebbe slowly shook his head. “My Hassidim I fear what the heavenly court will ask me” he gently whispered. The men surrounding his bed rocked back and forth in puzzlement. “What could you possibly fear, our great and holy leader?” they questioned him. He replied “I fear not that the court will ask me why I did not

manage to become an Avraham, or a Yaakov, or a Moshe, for who could reach the level of our saintly forefathers?! But I fear they will ask me a much harder question. What will I answer if they ask me: Reb Zushya, why did you not become a Zushya?!”

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think is the message of this story?
2. How can we find out our true potential? What do you think your potential is?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

*Lech Lecha* means: Leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable and unfree. Leave behind the social forces, the familial pressures, the circumstances of your birth. Abraham’s children were summoned to be the people that defied the laws of nature because they refused to define themselves as the products of nature. That is not to say that economic or biological or psychological forces have no part to play in human behaviour. They do. But with sufficient imagination, determination, discipline and courage we can rise above them. Abraham did. So, at most times, did his children.

Those who live within the laws of history are subject to the laws of history. Whatever is natural, said Maimonides, is subject to disintegration and decline. That is what has happened to virtually every civilisation that has appeared on the world’s stage. Abraham, however, was to become the father of an *am olam*, an eternal people, that would neither decay nor decline, a people willing to stand outside the laws of nature. For other nations land, home and family are a given. They precede the nation. In Judaism, however, these are subjects of religious command. They have to be worked at. They involve a journey. They are not

given at the outset, and must not be taken for granted. Abraham was to leave behind the things that make most people what they are, and lay the foundations for a land, a Jewish home and a family structure.

*Lech Lecha* in this sense means being prepared to take an often lonely journey: “Go by yourself.” To be a child of Abraham is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age. In an era of polytheism where there are many gods, it meant believing in one Creator who is also the God of history – life is therefore not meaningless but meaningful. In an era of slavery it meant refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, but instead challenging it in the name of God. When power was worshipped, it meant constructing a society that cared for the powerless, the widow, orphan and stranger. During centuries in which the mass of mankind was sunk in ignorance, it meant honouring education as the key to human dignity and creating schools to provide universal literacy. When war was the test of manhood, it meant striving for peace. In ages of radical individualism like today, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what we share; not what

we buy but what we give; that there is something higher than appetite and desire – namely the call that comes to us, as it came to Abraham, from outside ourselves, summoning us to make a contribution to the world.

To be a Jew is to have the courage to travel alone if necessary, to be different, to swim against the tide, to speak in an age of relativism of the absolutes of human dignity

under the sovereignty of God, that was born in the words *Lech Lecha*. To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Abraham’s journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Abraham was not a king or a warrior, or a man of superhuman strength. For the most part he and Sarah lived quietly, far from the arenas of power and fame. What was special about them was that they had the courage to be different. They did not worship the idols of their time, but instead pledged their loyalty to the one God, creator of heaven and earth. When their neighbours were threatened they prayed for them and fought for them. But they did not live like their neighbours. They had their own values. They kept to “the way of God, doing charity and justice.” This was the way they taught the members of their household and their son Isaac. Unlike those around them, they did not worship nature or power, they did not believe that the world was simply the arena of blind and clashing forces, and they rejected the myths and pagan practices of their time. As later tradition put it, “The whole world was on one side, and they were on the other.” There were times when their faith was put to the test, but they persevered, staying true to the voice they had heard.

Jews were always a tiny people, yet our ancestors survived by believing that eternity is found in the simple lives of ordinary human beings. They found God in homes, families and relationships. They worshipped God in synagogues, the first places ever to become holy because of the mere fact that people gathered there to pray. They discovered God in the human heart and in our capacity to make the world different by what we do. They encountered God, not in the wind or the thunder or the earthquake but in words, the words of Torah, the marriage contract between God and the people He took as His own. They studied those words endlessly and tried to put them into practice. They brought heaven down to earth, because

they believed that God lives wherever we dedicate our lives to Him.

And somehow that small people did great things. They produced some of the greatest visionaries the world has ever known. They transformed the civilisation of the West, teaching it to abandon myth and magic and see human history as the long, slow journey to freedom and justice... they held firm to the belief that God had a purpose for humanity and that the Jewish people had a unique role in bringing it about... The Jewish people would be the bearers of God’s presence in a sometimes godless, often unjust and violent world. In eras that worshipped the collective – the nation, the state, the empire – they spoke about the dignity and sanctity of the individual. In cultures that celebrated the right of the individual to do his or her own thing, they spoke of law and duty and mutual responsibility... The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.”

*Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 49-52*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Abraham was the original *iconoclast* (a person who attacks cherished beliefs). How have we his descendants continued in his path?
2. Do you feel the message and values of Judaism are at odds with those of the society in which we live? Do you feel you need the “courage to journey alone and swim against the tide” in the way that Rabbi Sacks describes Abraham in this source and in this week’s *Covenant & Conversation*?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

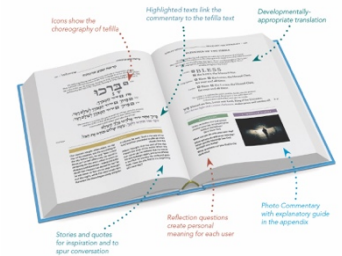
1. What is it that makes you who you are? How much of that is innate and how much comes from your surroundings (including your family and friends and society in general)?
2. Do you think the focus and main beneficiary of the command to Abraham of *Lech Lecha* was Abraham himself, or others (such as his descendants, or the world in general)?

3. The journey Abraham took was from the most developed society at that time (Mesopotamia) to an underdeveloped obscure part of the world (Canaan). Having read the *Covenant & Conversation* essay this week, can you suggest a reason and message for this journey?
4. Do you think Judaism is counter-cultural today? Can you give examples of how?
5. Do you have the courage to be different? Would you say you need the courage to be different in your life? Why?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Each of the four interpretations assumes there is some benefit in Abraham leaving his birthplace (the command is not just for its own sake but rather has some benefit to it). This could be of direct benefit to Abraham himself (interpretations 1 and 3) or to the world (interpretation 2). The final interpretation seems like it is to benefit both Abraham and God, who will have a stronger relationship through the result of the journey (interpretation 4) but in fact once the whole *Covenant & Conversation* has been read it becomes clear that Abraham going “by himself” will ultimately be for the benefit of the world.
2. Each one has something to teach us. The final interpretation is Rabbi Sacks’ own, and the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week is based on it.
3. We are a mixture of our own genetic selves (which in itself is also influenced by who our parents are, but not fully determined by this) together with the influences from our upbringing and society around us. This is the classic nature (genetics) vs. nurture (social influences) debate. Judaism believes firmly that we have free choice to be whoever we want to be, and we are not limited by either our nature (genetics) or our nurture (our social milieu and upbringing). This is one of the messages of Abraham’s journey – the journey meant that he would not be defined by who his family was or which country he lived in.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The message of this classic Hassidic story is that each and every one of us has our own potential and our own destiny. We are not expected to be someone we are not, but we are expected to live up to our full potential. God has a plan for each and every one of us and it is our life’s journey to discover this and become the best people we can be.
2. This is the hardest question, and from the story we can see that even at the end of our life we may not know the answer. But the journey is the story of our life and we are the only people that can make that journey and answer that question.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Judaism and Jews have always lived apart and walked a different path. Rabbi Sacks gives examples of both Torah values by which Jews have lived throughout the centuries, as well as individual Jewish contributions to society throughout history that have been contrary to the majority of the masses in society. Either way, these are examples of how the Jewish people have inherited this approach to life from Abraham – not to follow the masses or the fads and trends of the time, but rather to live our lives and build society based on the eternal values of the Torah, even when they are at odds with what is popular and the accepted norms of society.
2. Judaism’s values have often been at odds with the norms of society and this has never been truer than in this generation. The radical individualism and deep materialism of society today can be viewed as antithetical to many of Judaism core values. We need to have the courage to take tough positions, even if these are unpopular and difficult messages for society to hear.

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. We are a mixture of our own genetic selves (which in itself is also influenced by who our parents are, but not fully determined by this) together with the influences from our upbringing and society around us. This is the classic nature (genetics) vs. nurture (social influences) debate. Judaism believes firmly that we have free choice to be whoever we want to be and we are not limited by either our nature (genetics) or our nurture (our social milieu and upbringing). This is one of the messages of Abraham's journey – the journey meant that he would not be defined by who his family was or which country he lived in.
2. Only one of the interpretations really focuses on the benefits Abraham himself will accrue (Rashi, the first one). All the other interpretations involve Abraham having some larger cosmic impact on the Jewish people and the world through his journey. This journey is the beginning of Jewish history, and the initiation of God's plan for the world that has the Jewish people playing a role with a national mission.
3. Journeys of migration in history normally follow the same pattern – an upwardly mobile economic direction. Abraham's journey however was in the opposite direction. Mesopotamia was the most developed society in the world at that time, culturally and economically. Abraham's migration pattern is not logical. However, the message inherent in it is that the values of the economic and cultural giant of Mesopotamia were at odds with the values by which God wanted Abraham and his descendants to live by. This was the message in his journey. The other great migration in Tanach, the Exodus from Egypt, has a similar message.
4. While many of the values that our western liberal democracies are built on are not only compatible, but in fact come from biblical Judaism, our societies have taken many of these values to an extreme. The radical individualism and materialism of society in the West today are, many would argue, antithetical to many of Judaism core values. Judaism is the national code of how to build a society based on the values of the dignity of each human being, with a particular focus on protecting the weak in society. These values are often in contrast with the direction society is taking today.
5. This question can be approached on a more personal level and is a particular poignant one for teenagers/students who are dealing with the difficult task of finding themselves and yet at the same time fitting in socially with their peer group and parent communities. Sometimes children/students can find the courage to overcome these challenges if they feel the support and love from their parents, teachers, and community.