

**A Densely Packed Sheet of Comments on Selected Verses in Lekh Lekha**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet October 16, 2021 10 Heshvan 5782 Volume 2 Number 3**

**וַיֹּאמֶר ה'** – *God said*. To recap. God already spoken (either as *Elohim* or as *Y-H-V--*) to: 1. Adam. 2. Eve. 3. The Snake. 4. Kayin. 5. Noah. 6. Noah's sons. Abram is the 7<sup>th</sup> person that God speaks to. Coincidence? Maybe. Or maybe not. The 7<sup>th</sup> is always important. It is not lost on us that in the course of human history thus far, (2013 years if you follow the chronology in the Torah closely) God has rarely broken through to humanity. Either God 'waits' to break through or, God is always 'trying' and only exceptionally attuned human beings can 'hear.'

**וְאֶל-אַבְרָם** – *to Abram*. We don't know anything about Abram except that: he is the 10<sup>th</sup> in the line after Shem; his father Terah was 70 when he was born; he is from Ur Kasdim and has two brothers: Nahor and Haran. His youngest brother Haran, dies before Terah, an epoch-changing event, leaving a fatherless nephew, Lot. Abram is married to Sarai who is unable to have children. Abram's other brother Nachor is married to Haran's daughter, Lot's sister, Milkah, making Abram both her uncle and her brother-in-law. He is 75 when God speaks to him. He has wealth, possessions, and *people*, ie. a retinue of servants and others. Later we will discover that his wife Sarai is his half-sister from another mother. We have no idea why God calls him. All the stories relating to his childhood and "idol smashing" (literary rabbinic masterpieces worthy of their own serious study) are not in the Torah.

**לְךָ-לֵךְ** – *Go forth* These iconic words appear only twice in the Bible, once here and once more at the Binding of Isaac. *Go! Go forth! Go to yourself! Go for yourself!* It's impossible to render these words adequately in English. This is a *boundary moment* with a *before* and an *after*. All journeys begin with a single step. This is where the Torah's universal story of humanity gives way to the particular story of the Jewish people. Embedded in these two words is a precious idea: all journeys are personal and transformative. Ironically, while directed to Abram alone, but they will have consequences for all humanity.

**מֵאֶרֶץ** – *from your land* How does land shape identity? Topography, climate, resources, *land*, by which we mean the defined physical location of our lives, exerts an untold influence on our lives. Abram is being told to *dis-locate* himself from all of that.

**וּמְקוֹלְדָתְךָ** – *and from your birthplace* As a pairing word to *land*, *birthplace* intensifies the idea that there are forces outside of the individual that shapes identity. Culture, language, folkways, relationships, history,

narratives, legend, lore, all the intangibles that influence who you become. Abram is being told to *dis-connect* himself from all of that.

**וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ** – *and from your father's household* The most intimate sphere of influence in a person's life. Parentage, siblings, family, the closest set of relationships a person can have; for the bible, the **בֵּית אָב** – *the father's household*, is the basic building block of society. Abram is being told to *dis-attach* himself from all of that.

**וְאֶל-הָאָרֶץ** – *to the land* Of course, we know what land he is going to, but Abram doesn't know. This is what makes the Torah great: we are all in on this. We know which land, because we have read the story hundreds of times. But we also know because the word **הָאָרֶץ** (to this day!) is coded Hebrew for only

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לְךָ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמְקוֹלְדָתְךָ  
 וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:  
**The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth  
 from your native land  
 and from your father's house  
 to the land that I will show you.**

two things: *the entire earth* and *the specific Land of Israel*. Speculation: While he doesn't exactly know his destination, Abram may have had his curiosity piqued by his father who, according to the previous chapter, undertakes a self-initiated journey to Canaan, only to stop in Haran. Aware of his genealogy, Abram knows that Terah is the 10<sup>th</sup> in line from Noah making him a mini-Noah. Abram knows that Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Yafet are the main branches of the human tree populating the three distinct regions (roughly what is now Mesopotamia, Africa and Europe, respectively). Terah/Mini-Noah, might have been trying, on his own initiative, to set up his three sons Abram, Nahor and Haran, to populate specific sub-regions in the area of what is now Israel, Syria, and Jordan, respectively. That is what happens. Except that Lot takes over the area that would have been Haran's. While God doesn't tell him, Abram may have had a premonition.

**אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ** – *which I will show you*. These are the most important words of the verse. It is one thing for God to talk to Abram. It is another thing for God to *show* him something. Not too long ago, on Simchat Torah, we read that God *showed* the land to another individual: Moses. It's the first thing that God does for Abram and the last thing that God does for Moses. The entire Torah after Noah, is bracketed by these two *showings*. *Showing* is relational. No other characters are *shown* land, suggesting the intimacy of both of those relationships. In biblical theology, *the earth is the Lord's*, but *the Land of Israel* is holy to God, that is, it is separate, distinct, treasured. The *showing* of the Land underscores the intimacy of both of these relationships.

יב:ב וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

12:2 *And you shall be a blessing.* This is the encapsulation of the Jewish Mission. But this verse can also be read as follows: *as a consequence of being a great nation and My divine blessing, and Me making your name great, you, your name, shall become a blessing.*

י"ב:ד' וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט

12:4 *and Lot went with him.* Abram left without Lot but Lot followed him. Why? Lot realized he has no future in Haran. His uncle Nahor was married to his sister. His grandfather, Terah, was no longer a force. His father was dead. His wealthy, childless uncle Abram had the prospect of a future, and Lot could inherit his wealth.

י"ב:ו' וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאֶרֶץ:

12:6 *The Canaanites were then in the land.* A small but significant item. The Land that God promised is not empty of inhabitants. Does God's promise include displacement of Canaanites? What would it have meant for God to promise the Land to Abram under these circumstances? The promise has political dimensions.

י"ב:ט' וַיִּסַּע אַבְרָם הַלֹּךְ וְנִסְוֵעַ הַנְּגָבָה:

12:9 *Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negeb.* And why does Abram move from place to place in the Land? On the one hand, this is what pastoral nomads do. On the other hand, by moving from inhabited places to less inhabited places, he could establish himself more securely and avoid potential conflicts. Driving this is a theological question: is political geography ordained by God or by humans? Or by natural population growth? י"ב:י' וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וַיֵּרֶד אַבְרָם מִצִּירְיָמָה לְגֹר שָׁם כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ:

12:10 *There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* God's promise of the Land conflicts with God's promise that Abram will become a great nation. You can't become a great nation when you're dead. So Abram chooses life, ie. survival, postponing the fulfillment of God's promise. God has shown him the Land, but going to Egypt is Abram's choice for survival. י"ב:י"א וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לָבוֹא מִצִּירְיָמָה וַיֵּאמֶר אֶל־שָׂרָי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנְהִינָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יִפְתֹּמְרָאָה אֶת:

12:11 *As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "Look, I know you are a beautiful woman..."* Is he just noticing that? Is he complimenting her? Does he love her? Is he trying to protect her or protect himself? Is her acquiescence agreement? Does this strategy for survival outweigh the risks?

י"ב:י"ג אַמְרִי־נָא אַחְתִּי אֶתְּ לַמַּעַן יִיטְבְּלִי בְּעַבְדֹרְךָ וְחַיְתָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְדְּךָ:

12:13 *Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive because of you.* After all, technically, she is his half-sister, or according to some, his niece. Abram wants to stay alive but this strategy will leave its scars.

י"ב:י"ז וַיִּנְגַע ה' אֶת־פַּרְעֹה וְגַעֲמִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ עַל־דְּבַר שָׂרָי אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם:

12:17 *But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.* Maybe there is a deeper significance to this story, in that it is a foreshadowing of the Exodus.

י"ג:ו' וְלֹא־יָשָׂא אַתֶּם הָאָרֶץ לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו כִּי־הָיָה רְכוּשָׁם רָב וְלֹא יִכְלֹו לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו:

13:6 *so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.* Fascinating to note that Abram does not have any conflict with the neighboring peoples. But he does have one with his nephew, who is now touted as his *brother*. Genesis has primed us for fraternal conflict from Cain and Abel, and this theme constitutes one of the great longings of the biblical tradition. An echo of this text is found in the song we love to sing, taken from Psalm 133: הֲבָה מִזֶּה־טוֹב וּמִזֶּה־נְעִים שְׁבֹת אֶחָיִים גַּם־יַחְדָּו *How good and how pleasant it is, that brothers dwell together.* Why? Because it's a disaster when they cannot.

י"ג:ז' וַיְהִי־רִיב בֵּין רַעֲי מִקְנֵה־אַבְרָם וּבֵין רַעֲי מִקְנֵה־לוֹט וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי אָז יָשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ:

13:7 *And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle.—The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.* Note that the principals, Abram and Lot, do not quarrel themselves, but their subordinates do. In diplomacy, corporate life, family life, the supporting cast fights the battles more demonstratively than the principals. On the chessboard, the Kings hardly move, but the pawns and supporting pieces duke it out. The comment about the Canaanites and the Perizzites alludes to the precariousness of Abram's situation. *A house divided against itself cannot stand.* An unstable political entity invites aggression from malevolent forces. Abram is already seen by the inhabitants as an interloper. He knows he has to solve this situation or else he will be vulnerable to annihilation.

י"ז:י"ז וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל־פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֵּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלָבֹן מֵאֵה־שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם־שָׂרָה הִבְתִּיתְשָׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד:

17:17 *Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"* Wait. His own father was 70 when he was born. And he is aware that all of the generations before the Flood came into existence when their fathers were 117.3 years old, on average. He's saying, *God, first of all, I'm old and my wife is old. But really? Are You trying to make me like the people before the Flood? Not only did You uproot me from my land, my birthplace, and my father's household, but do You want to uproot me from my era?*

I wish we had another sheet! Shabbat Shalom!