

THE PORTION OF **LECH-LECHA**



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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

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A portrait of Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, an older man with a white beard and glasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, speaking.

THE PORTION OF LECH-LECHA



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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

How Weighty is The Debt of Gratitude

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1. G-d told Avraham to leave his homeland, birthplace, and family.
2. He separated himself from every member of his family including Lot.
3. Why did Avraham agree to take his nephew Lot with him?
4. When Avraham was told by Nimrod to bow to the idol or be thrown into the kiln– he chose to die.
5. Haran, Lot's father and Avraham's brother, stood by the sidelines thinking that if his brother came out unscathed, he would follow.
6. He entered and perished.
7. Haran was the first man to die to sanctify G-d's name.
8. Avraham believed that Lot, as Haran's son, was the exception to the family.
9. Avraham separated from Lot when it was revealed he was a thief.
10. Lot, with all of his possessions, moved to Sedom– the seat of all evil.
11. Before separating, Avraham made a pact with him to be there for him at all costs.
12. When Lot was taken captive by the four mightiest kings, Avraham miraculously saved him, regardless if it cost him his merits. Why?

A Metamorphosis To Begin A New Existence

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1. Avraham was told by G-d that He will make his name great.
2. Rashi: The letter Hey will be added to his name: Avraham is numerically 248, which is equal to the number of parts of the human body.
3. Before Avraham was circumcised he did not have full control over his physicality.
4. He fathered Yitzchok after he was circumcised and added Hey to his name.
5. Gemara: G-d created the world to come with the spirituality of the letter Yud and the physical world with the spirituality of letter Hey.
6. Midrash: Just as the letter "Hey" brought about all existence, when added to your name, it will cause a metamorphic change within you.
7. Avraham became a new creation; one that did not previously exist.
8. The innateness of the Jew is the equivalent of all existence.
9. Midrash: G-d said "I will make you into a great People, not one that will evolve into a great People."
10. The Jewish People coming into being is the equivalent of Ex nihilo.

Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Lech-Lecha



The Prerequisite to be Established as the Patriarch of the Jewish People

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: G-d tested Avraham, our Patriarch with ten tests. There is an argument among the commentators whether the incident of *Ur Kasdim* should be considered the first test with which Avraham was presented or was the first of the ten test “*lech lecha* - Go for yourself from your land...”

Midrash: *Ur Kasdim* alludes to the fiery kiln in which Avraham was cast. After Avraham had smashed the idols of his father, Nimrod the king had given Avraham an ultimatum either to bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. Avraham chose to give his life to sanctify G-d rather than bow to the idol. Miraculously, Avraham emerged from the kiln unscathed. Why would the incident of *Ur Kasdim* not be considered to be one of the tests of Avraham?

Midrash: Regarding the ultimatum that Avraham was presented by Nimrod, the verse states in Song of Songs, “If it is a wall we will build upon it an edifice of silver..’ G-d said to Avraham, ‘If you are similar to a wall that will remain standing even after enduring many wars, then you will be qualified to build upon you an edifice of silver.’ If Avraham is willing to give his life in order to sanctify My Name, then I will build upon him the edifice of silver. What is the edifice of silver? It is the Jewish people. If he is steadfast like a wall, then he will be worthy of having the Jewish people descend from him.

“However, if Avraham is like a door, meaning he is weak and does not have the resolve to give his life to sanctify My Name. I will then consider him a location upon which one places a plank of cedar wood. Just as something that is painted upon cedar wood can be blotted out and has no lasting value, so too will Avraham have no value in My eyes. Avraham responded to G-d,

'I am like the wall. I am willing to give my life for the sake of Your Name- not only me but also my children and the children of my children....'

The opinion that does not consider *Ur Kasdim* as one of the ten tests that were presented to *Avraham* considers it a prerequisite to determine if *Avraham* was to even be considered to be worthy of being the founding Patriarch of the Jewish people. The ten tests that followed were to actualize the potential that *Avraham* possessed. They were a context in which he could advance himself as the founding father of the Jewish people.

We cite a verse from *Nechemia* in the *Pesukei D'Zimrah* every morning: "It is You *Hashem* the G-d Who selected *Avram*, brought him out of *Ur Kasdim* and made his name *Avraham*..." Factually, our Patriarch *Avraham* was not called "*Avraham*" when he emerged from the kiln. His name was changed to "*Avraham*" only after he was circumcised. If so why does the verse from scripture imply that his name was changed after the incident of the kiln of *Kasdim*? It was because after *Avraham* had chosen to give his life to sanctify G-d's name, rather than to bow to idolatry, he was endowed by G-d with the potential to ascend to become the Patriarch of the Jewish people known as "*Avraham*."

Avraham, the Founding Father of Existence

Torah: Regarding the blessing that G-d had given to *Avraham* if he should follow His directive, "Go for yourself from your land...And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."

Rashi citing *Chazal*: "The meaning of 'I will make your name great' is that G-d will add the letter 'hey' to the name *Avram*. *Avram* thus became 'Avraham.' The numerical value of 'Avraham' is 248 (*RAMACH*) which corresponds to the number of limbs in the human body."

King David in Psalms: "With the Name of G-d ('Yud' and 'Hey') G-d formed the worlds (*B' kah Hashem tzur olamim*)."

Gemara in Tractate *Menachos*: "The physical world was created with the spirituality of the letter "hey" and the world to come was created with the spirituality of the letter "yud." Meaning, the spiritual energy contained within each of these letters brought about the physical

and spiritual worlds. The *Gemara* asks regarding the shape of the letter 'ה' (*hey*), "Why is the opening between the legs of the letter 'hey' wide open and the opening on the left leg under the roof of the letter small?"

Regarding physical existence, G-d gave man the ability to choose between good and evil. If he should choose to abandon the path of good he can descend without any hindrance into the abyss of evil (This is represented by the wide opening between the two legs of the letter 'hey'). However, if man decides to repent, although he had already fallen, he can return through the small opening on the left of the letter 'hey.'"

Midrash: "Just as physical existence was created with the letter 'hey,' so too will the transformation that will occur within *Avraham* (as a result of the letter being added to his name) be the equivalent of bringing about a new existence." When *Avram* became "*Avraham*," although he was the same physical person he assumed another dimension of being. He became the equivalent of the entire world. This is the understanding of the *Mishna* in Tractate *Sanhedrin* which states, "One who maintains (rescues) the life of one Jew it is as if he saved the entire world." Since the Jewish people are the descendants of *Avraham*, who was the equivalent of all existence because G-d added the letter 'hey' to his name, so too each Jew possess the dimension of value that is the equivalent of the entire world.

The objective of Creation is for man to utilize the material to bring about spiritual perfection. Man must dominate and control the physical in order to become spiritualized through his deeds. Initially G-d had told *Adam* that he would be able to dominate all existence (the animals, birds, and fish of the seas). However, because he had failed by eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he forfeited this ability. It was not until G-d added the letter 'hey' to *Avraham's* name was there an individual who had the same ability of *Adam* to dominate himself and all of the physical world. The letter 'hey' enabled *Avraham* to utilize physical existence in the manner it was intended. It was to be a means to a spiritual end.

Rashi citing *Chazal*: The letter 'hey' caused the numerical value of *Avraham* to be the equivalent of 248, which is the number of limbs in the human body. Meaning, *Avraham* had developed sufficiently to be in full control of every aspect of his physicality to be utilized for spiritual advancement.

Avraham, the Beloved of G-d

Torah: "G-d said to Avram, 'Go for yourself (*Lech lecha*) from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" All of the earlier commentators agree that the test of "*Lech lecha*" was one of the ten tests that G-d had presented to Avraham, our Patriarch.

Midrash: The location "*Ur Kasdim*" alludes to the fiery kiln into which Avraham was cast. Avraham's father, Terach, had informed Nimrod that his son Avraham had committed an act of blasphemy by smashing his idols. As a result Avraham was given an ultimatum by Nimrod to bow to the idol or die in the fiery kiln. Avraham chose to die to sanctify G-d's Name. Miraculously, Avraham emerged from the kiln unscathed. Prior to this, Avraham became a fugitive and was hunted to be killed because of his espousal of monotheism. He hid in a cave from his countrymen for thirteen years.

Avraham was considered to be a pariah by his family and his community. If this is so, why is G-d's directive to leave his land (*Charan*), relatives, and father's house considered to be a test? In addition, G-d promised Avraham that he would have children, which he did not have, he would also have wealth, which he did not have, and he would have renown. One would think that leaving such an evil location for Avraham would have been considered a blessing and not a test.

Gemara in Tractate *Yomah*: "At what age did Avraham our Patriarch recognize His Maker?" One opinion is, that he recognized G-d at the age of three. The other opinion is that he recognized G-d at the age of fifty-two.

Reb Chanina: Avraham recognized his Maker at the age of three. G-d had said to Avraham, "Since you have heeded My Voice (*Eikev asher shamata beKoli*)" *Reb Chanina* explains that the numerical value of "*Eikev*" is 172. Avraham had lived 175 years. He thus heeded the Voice of G-d for 172 years. Therefore, he was three years old when he initially recognized G-d.

There were ten generations between Noach and Avraham. Until Avraham, no one had recognized G-d. G-d had been regarded as "the G-d of the heavens (*Elokei haShamayim*)."

However, because of Avraham, G-d was introduced to existence to be known as "the G-d of heaven and earth (*Elokei haShamayim v'etHaaretz*)."

What did Avraham possess that allowed and compelled him to come upon the existence of

G-d? The world from the time of Noach until Avraham, did not discover what Avraham had.

The human being was created to have the innate ability to recognize when he is the beneficiary of the goodness of another to reciprocate as a demonstration of appreciation. The act of reciprocation in Hebrew is known as "*HaKaras haTov*." If one does not reciprocate after being the beneficiary of something that is good, it is an indication that he does not sufficiently appreciate what was done for him. If one believes that the good that was done to him was actually done to his detriment, then he is considered to be an ingrate "*Kafui tova* – one who inverts the good."

Torah: After Adam had eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, "G-d said to Adam, 'Have you eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat? Adam responded, 'The woman whom You gave me– she gave me of the tree, and I ate.'"

Chazal: Adam was an ingrate because he had blamed his sin upon G-d. He believed that G-d had given him a wife that had caused him to fail. Rather than acknowledging that the woman was a blessing through which he could achieve spiritual perfection, he regarded her as the cause of his failing. Thus, Adam did not appreciate what G-d had created on his behalf because his perception was flawed and distorted.

Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: Adam was considered a heretic because he had eaten from the Tree of knowledge. With his dimension of clarity, Adam could not have transgressed unless G-d did not exist for him at that moment. The failing of Adam was rooted in his not fully grasping the good that G-d had bestowed upon him. Avraham, our Patriarch, in contrast recognized the good that was bestowed upon him and all existence. He understood that he had all existence available to him.

Mishna in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: "Why did G-d create man as a single entity? It is so that he should declare, 'For me the world was created.'" Avraham believed that if the world was created to accommodate man's needs, then he must in turn seek out his benefactor to demonstrate his appreciation to Him. He therefore continuously sought out to come upon "Who is the One to whom I must serve?"

Who is the Creator of existence Avraham had rejected all the explanations of the contemporary thinkers of his day because they did not satisfy his quest for truth. He

could only express his indebtedness to the One who is his true benefactor. *Avraham* thus rejected all the forms of pagan belief. Because of *Avraham's* intense desire to pay his indebtedness to the proper source, he rejected falsehood.

Since the basis for *Avraham's* coming upon G-d was rooted in his quest, yearning, and desire to locate his benefactor, he therefore corrected *Adam's* deficiency of being the ultimate ingrate. *Avraham*, purging himself of this deficiency, was able to assume the stature and potential of the original human being that was created by G-d, who was meant to bring the world to a state of spiritual perfection. As the *Rabbis* state in Tractate *Yevamos*, "You are classified as *Adam* and they (the nations of the world are not.)"

Mishna in Tractate *Bava Metziah*: "If one finds the lost article of a stranger and the lost article of one's father, one is obligated to return the item of his father first because the father was responsible for bringing the child into existence." We see that regardless of what the father had done to the child after facilitate him coming into existence, the child must acknowledge be grateful to his father because he is a beneficiary of the father's actions.

Regardless of the fact that *Avraham's* father was an idolater, evil, and tried to have him killed *Avraham*, being one who appreciates being the beneficiary of good, could not easily leave his father behind as per the dictate of G-d. He felt the need to reciprocate and demonstrate gratitude to his father, despite his evil ways. This is the reason "*Lech lecha*" is considered to be one of the ten tests of *Avraham*.

The Accountability of Mankind

Mishna in *Ethics of our Fathers*: G-d tested *Avraham*, our Patriarch with ten tests.

Midrash: "...Blessed is the Name of *Hashem* because He wanted to test that *tzaddik*. Why is this so? To make his good deeds known to the world. Thus a famine came upon the land and *Avraham* descended to Egypt." One would think that the objective of the tests that G-d had presented to *Avraham* were to see if he was worthy of being the Patriarch of the Jewish people. We see from the words of *Chazal* that the purpose of the tests were, "to make his good deeds known to the world." Why does the world need to know the good deeds of *Avraham*, our Patriarch?

Gemara in Tractate *Yomah*: After one passes away one will be asked by the heavenly court, "Did you set aside time to study *Torah*?" The wealthy man will answer, "How could I have had time to study *Torah* when You endowed me with so much wealth and blessing which carries with it so much responsibility?" The heavenly court will answer, "Were you wealthier than *Rav* and owned a thousand cities on land and a thousand ships at sea and still found time to study *Torah*?"

The destitute man will respond to the heavenly court by saying, "How could I have had time to study when I was so deprived and destitute? I was busy eking out a livelihood to maintain my families existence." To this the heavenly court will respond, "Were you more needy than *Hillel*? *Hillel* was intensely involved in the study of *Torah* although he earned only two pennies a day."

We see that standards must be set for the wealthy and poor in order for mankind to understand what is expected of him. *Avraham*, our Patriarch, who introduced G-d into existence needed to set the standard for the human being regarding his dedication to G-d. G-d identifies Himself as "the G-d of *Avraham* (*Elokei Avraham*)." It was only because of *Avraham's* initiative that He was introduced to the world and became "the G-d of heaven and earth."

After one acknowledges that G-d exists, one needs to accept a standard of service to which mankind is held. The test that were presented to *Avraham* established the standards for the world. It is understood that *Avraham* was the beneficiary of the tests because he demonstrated his dedication and reverence to his Maker. However, the value of the tests was to establish a standard for the world.

The Depth of Avraham's Gratitude

Torah: When *Lot* had returned from Egypt together with *Avraham*, he possessed great wealth. There was a quarrel between his shepherds and those of *Avraham*. The shepherds of *Lot* were grazing their flocks in fields that were not theirs. They were in fact stealing from others. When *Avraham* became aware of the dispute between his shepherds and those of his nephew, the *Torah* states, "So *Avraham* said to *Lot*, 'Please let there be no strife between me and you...for we are kinsman... Please separate from me: If you go left I will go right...'" Although *Lot's* integrity was corrupt, *Avraham* pledged to come to his aid if he should be in need of him.

Torah: When *Lot* separated from his uncle *Avraham*, he rejected all that *Avraham* valued, including his beliefs. *Lot* had become a heretic. In addition, *Lot* chose to settle in a community that is quantified as the most wicked, as it states, “Now the people of *Sodom* were wicked and sinful towards *Hashem*, exceedingly.” Despite the fact that *Lot* has assumed a posture of evil, when *Avraham* was informed that he was taken captive by the Four Mighty Kings, he immediately went to battle with them in order to rescue his nephew. He needed to rely on many miracles in order to single-handedly defeat the mightiest kings in existence.

After *Avraham*’s victory over the Four Kings, G-d came to him and said, “Do not be afraid, your reward is great...” *Avraham* was concerned that all of his merits had been depleted because they were needed to bring about the miracles that were necessary to defeat the Four Kings. G-d reassured *Avraham* that not only were his merits not depleted, but his reward is great for vanquishing these evil kingdoms. *Avraham* had risked his entire life’s spiritual accomplishments in order to save *Lot*, although he was a corrupted and evil person. Why was *Avraham* committed to the safety and welfare of his nephew *Lot* at all costs?

It is interesting to note that when *Sarah*, the wife of *Avraham*, had told him that *Ishmael* needed to be driven from their home because his behavior was inappropriate, *Avraham* was pained and anguished. G-d told *Avraham*, “All that *Sarah* tells you, you should heed her voice.” Meaning, *Avraham* should listen to the prophetic words of his wife, *Sarah*. It had been confirmed by G-d that *Ishmael* had assumed certain characteristics that represent the beginnings of evil behavior. *Avraham* had sent away *Ishmael*, with his mother *Hagar*, with a small amount of provisions to survive in the desert.

Midrash: The reason for this was, “*Avraham* hated his son *Ishmael* because of his despicable behavior.” Why did *Avraham* not demonstrate concern for the welfare of his own son *Ishmael*, as he had for his nephew *Lot*? *Lot* had demonstrated a level of evil that went beyond

anything that *Avraham* had seen in *Ishmael*.

Before *Avraham* had left *Kasdim*, *Nimrod*, the king, had given him an ultimatum to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. *Avraham* chose to die rather than bow to the idol. He emerged miraculously unscathed. *Haran*, *Avraham*’s brother, the father of *Lot*, was also given the same ultimatum to bow or be thrown into the fire. He decided that if his brother *Avraham* emerged alive then he would not bow. Because *Avraham* had come out alive, *Haran* chose not to bow and thus was cast into the kiln. *Haran* perished in the fire.

Although *Haran*’s entering into the fire was with the intent to come out alive, as his brother *Avraham* had, nevertheless because he perished as a result of not bowing to the idol, his death is considered a sanctification of G-d’s Name. He chose to give his life rather than bow to the idol. *Avraham* felt that he had a debt of gratitude to his brother for bringing about such a sanctification of G-d’s Name. He thus took upon himself the responsibility to raise and protect his nephew *Lot*. In addition, *Avraham* had a personal debt of gratitude to *Lot* himself. The *Torah* states, at the time of the destruction of *Sodom*, “And G-d had remembered *Avraham*.”

Midrash: G-d had remember that when *Avraham* was in Egypt with his wife and had presented her as his sister, *Lot* did not reveal her true identity. He remained silent. In the merit of that silence, he was extricated from the destruction of *Sodom*. Because of this exceptional accommodation, *Avraham* had a debt of gratitude to *Lot* himself.

Avraham was committed to the safety of his nephew *Lot*, not as an indication of his goodness, but purely as a debt that had to be paid – regardless of *Lot*’s evil status. *Avraham* was a debtor to *Lot* and his father *Haran*. Even if he needed to put his spiritual accomplishments of his life at risk, he was not deterred from his responsibility. However, regarding his own son *Ishmael*, he was not indebted. Therefore, when it was confirmed to him that his son had assumed certain evil characteristics, he drove him from his home with a minimal amount of provisions.



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