

Peninim On The Torah

Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parashat Lech Lecha

And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock and the Canaani and Perizi were then dwelling in the land. (12:7)

Rashi explains that Avraham and Lot were not quarreling; rather, their herdsmen were disagreeing with one another. Apparently, Lot's herdsmen lacked integrity, so that they would allow their sheep to graze in other people's pastures. They justified their nefarious actions with the notion that Hashem had promised the land to Avraham. Since the Patriarch had no direct heirs, the inheritance would go to his closest relative, Lot. Therefore, they had a claim to the land. This is why the Torah concludes this pasuk by emphasizing that the Canaani and Perizi were still in the land. Avraham had not yet become its legitimate owner.

The commentators, each in his own inimitable manner, explain why the pasuk ends with a reference to the pagan nations that continued to occupy the land. Sforno offers what I feel is a practical and timely response. He comments, "The quarrel between two relatives who were strangers in the land was odious in the eyes of the native dwellers who were led to believe that they were men who were prone to argument. This led them to assume that if they quarreled among themselves, how much more so would they dispute with the native dwellers? In other words, since they would be the minority living with a majority of pagans, they were exposing themselves to the contempt and eventual enmity of the land's inhabitants.

To put this exposition into perspective: Avraham was a tzaddik, righteous person. While Lot was clearly not on Avraham's spiritual plateau, he was far from the average pagan. The two seemed to live in harmony. It was their herdsmen, their followers, who were embroiled in controversy. Perhaps their issues were very real, and they might have even been centered upon halachic interpretation, but why should the goyim, gentiles, have to hear about it? Why should the outside world be privy to every machlokes, disagreement, within the Orthodox Jewish community? Furthermore, how are we to reach out to our own non-observant brethren when they see or hear some of the "goings-on" in the Orthodox Jewish community? This constitutes a gross chillul Hashem, desecration of Hashem's Name. We now understand what concerned Avraham. When the herdsmen quarrel, it does not remain simply between them. It becomes known outside the sheltered environs of our community, where it is exploited and publicized in the most derogatory manner. Regrettably, what concerned the Patriarch then still leaves reason for concern today.

And it happened that as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife, Sarai, "See now, I have known that you have a beautiful appearance." (12:11)

The Midrash Tanchuma contends that until this point, due to the great modesty that permeated their relationship, Avraham Avinu had not taken notice of his wife's beauty. What change transpired as they entered Egypt which brought her beauty to his attention? When he was a talmid, student, in Telshe Europe, Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, would often correspond with Horav Ezra Alschuler, zl, the Veinutler Rav. In one of his letters, Rav Gifter revealed that he was an American studying in Lithuania, a phenomenon which greatly surprised Rav Alschuler. When Rav Gifter queried him concerning his amazement, Rav Alschuler explained that the state of spirituality in America at the time did not lend itself to producing Torah students of such exemplary character.

As a result of their dialogue, and in support of this frame of reference, Rav Alschuler explained what had transpired when Avraham and Sarah reached the borders of Egypt. When an area is plagued with an epidemic, the very air of that area becomes contaminated. The closer one moves to the epicenter of the disease, the greater the contamination. The same is true concerning spiritual contamination. In the spiritual dimension, one can attest that an area which has been profaned with spiritual impurity will have a profound negative spiritual influence on the individual. The closer one gets to the source of contamination, the greater the effect upon him.

Some geographical areas in the world are infamous for their spiritual deficiencies. The excess of moral turpitude which permeates these places has a negative effect on anyone who visits its environs. Egypt was such a place. Its moral climate was quite well-known. As a center for baseness and debauchery, its level of moral decay was unique-even in a world in which such a lewd lifestyle was acceptable. The spiritual contamination that so saturated Egypt catalyzed Avraham's reaction. Unwittingly, the standards of modesty that had been his and Sarah's hallmark were lowered, so that Avraham recognized Sarah's beauty.

In his commentary to Bereishis 6:11, "Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d," the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh writes that the actual "earth," the physical environment of the planet earth, had become corrupt and contaminated. Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, explains this with an episode that took place in the city of Lomza, in which he was a student in the yeshivah. There was a hospital in the city that was a magnificent, stately structure. It had been around for many years, and it manifested the "old world" regality that characterized architecture in the early nineteenth century. During Rav Elya's tenure in the yeshivah, a major medical conference took place at the hospital. Some of the world's most distinguished physicians were in attendance. They had all gathered to solve a problem that had been bothering the administration and faculty of the hospital and was trickling down to the citizens of the community. It seemed that any ill person who spent a lengthy stay at the hospital contracted another severe illness - even after he was healed of his original illness. Everybody - regardless of his original illness - even though he had been cured - became sick all over again with some new illness. They had no clue regarding the cause of this phenomenon.

Much discussion and dialogue produced a consensus of opinion that, after so many years and thousands of patients, the germs of the diseases had simply infested the wooden walls of the hospital structure. Anyone who was hospitalized for a lengthy period of time became infected with one of these many germs. There was only one solution to the problem: the building had to be destroyed, and every piece of wood and every brick had to be carted away and decimated.

Rav Elya continued: Imagine if this could occur in a physical entity, whereby an entire structure became infected with germs, how much more so can an environment become polluted with spiritual germs? There are countries whose lifestyle is glutinous; others, where their attitude toward morality, from their leadership down to the common citizen, is perverse and debased. The list continues where attitudes toward any form of spiritual ascendance is as foreign as extra-terrestrial exploration. People simply do not care, and this affects the "environment" in which they live. It creates a negative spiritual climate which affects those who live there and even those who just visit. Avraham and Sarah sensed it as soon as they entered into the spiritual pollution that had enveloped the land of Egypt.

And he (Avraham) believed in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15:6)

Clearly, Avraham Avinu's unswerving faith had been part of his belief for quite some time. Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl, interprets this pasuk as symbolizing Avraham's total submission, placing in Him his total confidence and seeking all his understanding of life through G-d's teachings. He had no need for any other disciplines. Avraham understood that in Hashem he would find the answer to every question, the direction to navigate through every dilemma.

Perhaps this can be better comprehended through a deeper conceptualization of emunah, faith, in Hashem. It is not as difficult to believe in Hashem during "good" times, when the sun is shining and everything makes sense. Our most essential beliefs, however, are crystallized when they are most challenged. When darkness prevails, it is most difficult to perceive the guiding hand of Hashem. It is precisely at such a time that our emunah plays its most crucial role. It was not challenging for the Jewish People to believe in Hashem following the miracles that wrought havoc on Egypt, nor did it come as a struggle when they passed through the standing waters of the Red Sea.

Pain, misery, suffering, and financial instability, are the situations that test one's faith. As the Chassidic Seforim explain: Moshe Rabbeinu perceived Klal Yisrael's inability to look forward, to listen to a message of hope, when they were broken-spirited from affliction and hard labor. "They could not listen to Moshe because of their broken spirit and hard work." (Shemos 6:9) They neither faltered, however, nor gave in to depression. The suffering strengthened them. It raised their resolve and gave them the fortitude to overcome the oppression.

Every time they suffered - and endured - they became stronger. Their faith was tested, and it became stronger. What was their secret? How did they master faith? What can we learn from their *d'hemenussa*, secret of faith? They discovered freedom - spiritual and emotional freedom - through their faith. How can we do the same? Furthermore, how does this faith descend from our first Patriarch, the father of faith?

The secret of faith is one's connection to Hashem. We are surrounded by the temporal. All of us are mortal, and everything in our possession is impermanent. Regardless of an object's age, it eventually erodes or changes with age. Indeed, the only constant in our lives is change. Everything changes. How do we mere mortals transcend the ever-changing world around us? We connect with the Eternal - an entity not subject to the fleeting change that governs life.

This is how our ancestors maintained their faith in Egypt and through all of the ensuing exiles: by connecting to the Eternal. Their faith had basis in its connection, giving them the fortitude to overcome the suffering and hardship. This profound faith that was revealed in Egypt, under the most difficult and trying circumstances, was an indication of how deeply imbedded in the Jewish human

spirit it was. Their inner-connectedness with Hashem guided them through the hard times.

Faith, however, is only the beginning, the first step on the road towards developing true hope and confidence. The Seforim explain that faith, emunah, leads to bitachon, trust. While faith alone can be a passive state, in which a notion in one's mind tells him that Hashem can always change the most challenging situation, bitachon, trust, tells him that it will get better. Emunah says it could happen; bitachon says it will happen.

When one has trust, he is not complacent concerning any given situation. He believes that with his trust, he can change destiny - so resolute is his bitachon. Indeed, the Tzemach Tzedek once remarked to someone who was in need of a blessing for a refuah, healing, "Think good, and it will be good." Every fiber of his being must cry out that he trusts unequivocally, that he believes that it will be good.

When one connects with the Eternal, he has absolute conviction that good will prevail and that the power to make it happen rests in his belief. Trust is an active effort, which must be cultivated over time. After one has worked on his inner soul, he can achieve the plateau of, "Think good, and it will be good." Trust is a tool that is hidden deep within the recesses of the soul. One does not uncover it through passive belief. He must believe with a fervor, an enthusiasm, an excitement. This will lead to his "thinking good."

I think this is what the Torah is teaching us concerning Avraham. When one is passionately involved in a project; when his belief in an endeavor becomes his mission and his raison d'etre, his emunah reaches bitachon level. He is not happy with his own belief; he must convince others that he has the elixir that can change their lives. Avraham was ve'heemin, wanted others to believe. He caused others to believe. By doing this, he elevated his emunah to the status of bitachon . It became an active force in his life - and in the lives of others.

Developing a sense of connecting with Hashem is probably one of the most critical issues in today's world of chinuch, education. We live in a society - as noted by a number of popular Orthodox writers-in which some frum boys and girls, from very observant homes, no longer retain a geshmak, satisfaction and enthusiasm, for Yiddishkeit. When we raise our children in a society in which great emphasis is placed on material wealth, when the home, car or school one attends determines his status in the community, we are precluding their ability to connect with Hashem. When we bury our heads in the ground, asserting that there is no clash between secular culture and a frum lifestyle, we are creating tension for ourselves and our children.

It is essential for us to imbue our children with emunah and work towards bitachon, based upon having activated the connection with Hashem and everything that is eternal. As part of the eternal people, we ascribe to striving for nitzchiyus, eternity, recognizing that nothing else has any validity. If we place the focus of our activity and education on developing a feeling and desire for nitzchiyus within our children, we will notice a tremendous drop in the numbers of "at-risk" children. They will have developed an understanding for what is important, and, above all, they will feel that they are an intrinsic part of it.

This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you... Every male among you shall be circumcised. (17:10)

Avraham Avinu's transition/conversion to Judaism occurred when he had his Bris Milah, circumcision, as mandated to him by Hashem. Until then he was not halachically considered a Jew. As such, his circumcision marked the Jewish People's separation from the rest of humankind. Avraham's-- and subsequently the Jewish nation's-- nationalism was pronounced with this act of circumcision. It is ironic that immediately afterward, Hashem conferred upon "Avram" a name change, as he now became Avraham, which connotes his role as av hamon goyim, "a father of a multitude of peoples." This implies the Patriarch's universal mission, which is to be followed by his descendants. Thus, we see what appears to be a paradox between the disparate aspects of the Bris Milah: the Jew's nationalism versus his universalism. On the one hand, Avraham's Bris Milah and ensuing conversion represents a form of tzimtzum, an inward constriction of sorts, rather than an expansion into the world community. Yet, on the other hand, he becomes the universal "father," the leader of the world, responsible for its continued spiritual growth and development. How are we to understand this?

Horav Aharon Soloveitchik, zl, explains that this holds true only if we fail to comprehend the fundamental difference that exists between the general conception of universalism and the Torah's idea of universalism. In order to understand this distinction, it is essential that we take note of two independent aspects of the mitzvah of Bris Milah.

The technical bris, circumcision, is comprised of two components: krias ha'orlah, removing the foreskin; and hatafas dam bris, letting of blood which must occur during the removal of the foreskin. The reasons behind these two distinct aspects underscore the character and mission of the Jewish nation. Orlah represents imperfection. By removing the foreskin, we indicate that the physical world in general and man in particular were specifically created by Hashem in an imperfect form, so that man can focus on correcting the imperfection. This applies to the physical imperfection corrected through Bris Milah, and the moral/spiritual imperfection which one ameliorates through repentance.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that Hashem created us in an imperfect form by design. Had man been perfect, there would be no purpose in his creation. Hashem wanted man to be a "partner" with Him in building up the world. Thus, man had to be a "creator." He perfects his physical impediment, as well as harnessing his instincts, which can be the source of evil. By sublimating them to the performance of mitzvos, they become tools of virtue. This is all part of the krias ha'orlah process.

The hatafas dam bris, whereby blood is let, is an essential process which is performed even if there is no actual circumcision, as in a case of one who had already been circumcised. This procedure symbolizes sacrifice. A Jew goes through his mortal life enduring periods of suffering. Some suffer more than others, but no one escapes suffering. It is a part of the human experience. For the Jewish nation, it plays a pivotal role in our relationship with Hashem. When we couple our suffering with commitment to the Almighty, we play a role in affirming our unique Jewish identity. When Jews suffer, they must do so with dedication and commitment. It is all part of the Jewish experience. This is symbolized by the letting of blood at the Bris Milah.

As the distinguishing sign of a Jew, Bris Milah is a necessary prerequisite for a gentile undergoing conversion. The Jew is distinguished from the gentile through his dedication to the improvement of the physical and moral imperfections in the world. This is symbolized by the two aspects of Bris Milah: removal of the foreskin; and letting of the blood.

While Bris Milah was clearly a contraction for the Jew, marking what is considered the genesis of Jewish nationalism, this constriction was basically a spiritual segregation. With Avraham's circumcision came conversion to the new chosen people. The chosenness of Judaism is based upon a goal, a task, a mission. It is more burden than privilege - but clearly a "privileged burden." It is this idea

which differentiates Jewish nationalism from its worldly counterpart.

We are dedicated to all of mankind. In our Yamim Noraim, High Holiday, prayers, we pray to Hashem for the day when "all creatures will bow before You and form one group to do Your will with a full heart." We follow this prayer with an entreaty to "grant honor to Your people... joy to Your land and exaltation to Your city." With Avraham's circumcision came a new name. Avram, the name carrying local significance, became Avraham, a name which has global implications. The Jewish nation, whose members are heirs to the Abrahamitic legacy, is duty-bound to serve as the nucleus which is to preserve all of mankind. We do this through our commitment in suffering. It is only through this dedication that mankind survives. Suffering without commitment becomes a personal journey of pain. When it is coupled with commitment to the Almighty, it is a sacrifice which expiates and achieves atonement. Avraham's segregation was part of his spiritual calling, but his commitment to suffering and his advocacy for chesed, kindness, were the foundation stones of Jewish universalism, Jewish character traits that have endured throughout the millennia.

Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and from your father's house. (12:1)

Chazal tell us that Avraham Avinu was miraculously saved in Uhr Kasdim when the evil king Nimrod had him thrown into a fiery furnace. Our Patriarch emerged unscathed. Following this test of Avraham's devotion to the point of self-sacrifice, Hashem instructed him to leave his homeland, his birthplace, and his father's home. One would think that the usual method of testing, in which the testing ascends from the simple task to the more difficult, would be applied here. This does not seem to be the case concerning Avraham, who, after Hashem tested him with his life, then tested him in what appeared to be a milder test. Uhr Kasdim was a test on a grand scale, a test which Avraham passed with flying colors. His mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, surely engendered a sense of awe for the Almighty, inspiring the people of that generation to leave their idols to worship the one true G-d. To be commanded afterwards to leave his home seems anti-climactic. What purpose was served by such a test?

Horav Chaim Scheinberg, Shlita, explains that the essence of a test lies in its power to arouse in a man's dormant spirit his hidden potential for greatness and to actualize it. A test is not measured by the method in which it is presented, but rather by its potential to effect change in a person's nature. It certainly took great fortitude and tremendous resolve to choose death rather than idol worship. As supreme as the sacrifice of Uhr Kasdim was, it was an isolated event, rather than part of a process.

The Gaon zl, m'Vilna, is quoted in Even Shleimah, "The primary purpose of a person's life is always to intensify his efforts to change his character. And, if not, why live?" Apparently, change is much more important than we realize. Correcting our character flaws-- refining our character traits-- is a major aspect of our lives. We think that if we do not succeed in doing so, we can still live productive Jewish lives, observe mitzvos, carrying out acts of loving kindness, study Torah and everything else a Jew should do. The Gaon asserts that this is not true. Without growth, life is nothing for us! It is a waste! This idea is the central point of the Gaon's sefer: the entirety of avodas Hashem, serving G-d, is dependent on the rectification of middos, character traits. The changes that we make in our character are the decisive factors upon which our lives revolve. Simply, the success of our lives is measured by how much growth we can effect in ourselves. No changes - no life. It is that simple!

Change goes counter to our personalities. Indeed, the more we become accustomed to doing

something, the easier it becomes, until it becomes second nature. When it becomes habit, it is much more difficult to override. In addition to the habits that we have acquired, our G-d-given character traits and disposition, combined with that which we have learned throughout our youth, have, over the years, become a part of our essential personality. Thus, it is clear that change, while it is necessary, remains extremely elusive.

Nonetheless, it can be done. Otherwise, Hashem would not demand it of us. A person can change his nature, providing that his efforts are continual, steady and intensive. We have an obligation to battle continually, with no let-up and with all of our might. This is the meaning of the command of *lech lecha*.

Hashem first commanded Avraham to leave his country, then forsake his family, and, last, to leave his father's home. This was done by design, with Hashem's commands proceeding from the easier to the more difficult. Leaving a father's home is very difficult. This was Avraham's test - the test of change - the test of divorcing himself from the past and the familiar.

Uhr Kasdim was a unique test. It availed Avraham the "once in a life" opportunity of sacrificing his life to sanctify Hashem's Name. It is not granted to everyone. This is not, however, the only way to demonstrate our fealty to Hashem. There is also the daily test of *kiddush ha'chaim*, sanctifying life by living in accordance with His commands. Putting aside our desires and inclinations-- our personal concerns and vested interests-- for the sake of a life devoted to Hashem, is no less a sacrifice. *Lech lecha* represents the test of daily living, the unrelenting test of constant, continual and total commitment to Hashem. Some might argue that the test of self-sacrifice is the epitome of commitment. It is a one-time opportunity, which one either passes or fails. The test of life is constant. It is much greater in its potential for success, but also in the possibility of failure. Avraham was miraculously saved from the fiery furnace of Uhr Kasdim. Now came the test of change. He was now challenged to change and grow completely on his own, without the help of miracles.

Avraham's second test, the test of change, was a gradual test that increased with difficulty as he ascended from level to level. Each milestone of success developed his commitment, as it brought out deeper levels of service to Hashem. Through this test, our Patriarch grew in stature and became a *tzaddik*.

We, too, have latent potential for growth. With every day of life we face the opportunity for growth. The inevitable ordeals of life are tests of "change," tests that are also opportunity. With each test that we successfully master, we grow closer to Hashem and greater in personal spiritual stature. We must remember that when the nature of the test is the ability to change, being satisfied with partial success is tantamount to failure. Change is a complete process. To stop midway and rely on one's past laurels is stagnation, which is counter to change. It is the partner of habit, which produces the result of failure. We are not successful unless we continue to grow.

He proceeded on his journeys from the south to Bais-El. (13:3)

The implication derived from this pasuk is that these non-specific journeys were part of a larger known journey. Avraham Avinu stopped at the same places where he lodged on his original trip. Chazal comment that the Torah is teaching us proper etiquette. One should not change his usual lodging unless he has suffered abuse or humiliation there. Otherwise, he will give the impression that either he is a difficult person to please or that his lodgings had not been satisfactory. This will cause undue harm to

the host's personal feelings and reputation. In an alternate exposition, Rashi explains that Avraham stopped at all of these places to pay off the credit that he received from the hosts on his original trip. Apparently, our Patriarch fell on hard times and had to rely on the good hearts of a number of benefactors to grant him a place to lodge. He had no money, and they were kind enough to trust him.

Let us picture in our mind the Avraham that set out on his journey. Nary a penny to his name, Avraham had to rely on finding a place to sleep and eat based on the favor of kind-hearted people. Certainly, his accommodations were not going to win any awards. A poor man that goes from place to place: If he is lucky to find an open door, a welcome bed, a hot meal, it will not be of the same quality and quantity as that of a wealthy person for whom money is no object. If he would find a bench in the back of the shul, a piece of hard bread, anything, he would consider himself fortunate.

On his return trip, Avraham Avinu was world famous, powerful and fabulously wealthy. He certainly could have purchased the entire hotel! Five-star ratings for his lodging needs, and restaurants that cater to the world's effete rich, would be where he would now be expected to stay. Not Avraham. He understood the laws of proper etiquette. He was a mentch, a refined human being, the paradigm of ethical character. His sensitivity to the needs and sentiments of others was his hallmark. He stayed at the same places as he had previously. He ate the same meals with the same people. The fact that he now had money did not alter his obligation to be a mentch.

Chazal say, "Do not change your lodgings." Why? Life is part of a cycle. We have no idea what tomorrow will bring. It is possible that the one who is quite wealthy today will be seeking alms tomorrow. It happens all of the time. The one who is on top of the world, often rubbing his success in everyone's face, is suddenly on the receiving end of the line. He who made a big point about his "giving" must now "take" and be subject to the kindness of others.

Do not forget your roots, or the people that have enabled your success. This applies not only in the area of financial success; it applies equally in every area of successful endeavor, especially in the spiritual realm. How easily we forget our rebbeim who taught us with patience and put up with our tantrums, as well as some of the unreasonable demands of our parents. For those whose return to the faith was a long process, they, too, must acknowledge the many who opened their doors, welcomed them at their Shabbos tables, sat with them in the bais ha'medrash and were always there to answer questions, give support and encourage them further. Avraham Avinu taught us etiquette. This is certainly one of his many lessons that are worth emulating.

Then there came the fugitive and told to Avram, the Ivri. (14:13)

Chazal explain that Avraham Avinu was called Ivri, from the word eivar, the other side. This implies that Avraham stood on one side of the moral and spiritual divide, while the rest of the world was on the other. He was a man isolated from the world in his hashkafah, philosophic perspective, his spiritual demeanor and his moral rectitude. He was alone. He was the Ivri. Horav Eliezer M. Shach, zl, asks a very compelling question on this definition of our Patriarch's name and "position." Chazal also teach us that Avraham distinguished himself from Noach in that he did not need the support of Hashem to maintain his spiritual growth, while Noach could not do it alone. Noach needed Hashem's assistance to keep his head above water, to maintain his resolve in the daily challenges of dealing with a world filled with pagan heresy.

The commentators explain that Noach needed the support more than Avraham, because Noach

was a tzaddik in his own little world. He did not interact with the members of his generation. Thus, he did not influence them in a positive way. Avraham, on the other hand, was an ish ha'chesed, a man who was the paradigm of loving kindness. He reached out to a world that was drowning in moral and spiritual degeneracy. His kindness was nispasheit; it expanded and spread forth, from him to a pagan world. The z'chus, merit, of reaching out sustained and supported Avraham. If this is the case, then how could Avraham be considered a man "alone" in the world? How does one inspire and infuse others with spiritual verities if he remains isolated?

Perhaps, Avraham inspired a world by example. A man who represents the truth must reflect the truth in his every activity. His character and personality - indeed, everything about him-- from his relationship with people, to his discourse with Hashem-- must reflect the paragon of integrity. People are impressed by the truth. Even if they do not come into direct contact with the individual who is the source of their inspiration, his principled character, his authenticity and ingenuous nature, stand out and inspire people. Avraham HaIvri was a man alone against the world, but he represented the truth. Everything about him bespoke the truth. Regardless of how far they are distanced from the path of truth, people know deep down within themselves what it is and where it is. This is how Avraham inspired a world - by being who he was.

Truthfulness is the primary ingredient of Torah. One who lacks integrity lacks in Torah. He will never succeed in imparting Torah to others, because he is missing the ingredient most necessary for its dissemination. It is the power cell that drives the diffusion of Torah to the masses. The Talmud Bava Kama 38b relates that the Romans sent two soldiers to study Torah from the scholars of the Mishnah. After learning the entire Torah, they reported, "We have learned the entire Torah, and it is all correct except for your law that if the cow of a Jew gores the cow belonging to a gentile, he does not pay, but if the cow of a gentile gores the cow of a Jew, he must pay in full." The Yam Shel Shlomo asks why the sages revealed this incriminating piece of information. After all, they did not have to blatantly demonstrate the laws that favor Jew over gentile. He answers by explaining that the Torah cannot be diluted and changed to suit someone's fancy, even under the threat of death. Once it is altered, it is no longer Torah.

Many have wondered why Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, founder of Beth Medrash Govoha, had the z'chus, merit, to establish what was to become the largest Torah center in America. While many of Rav Aharon's incredible qualities come to mind, one factor remains indisputable: his total commitment to the emes, truth. Torah and emes are synonymous; they have a natural tendency to gravitate toward each other. There are many incidents in his life that reflect the Rosh Yeshivah's integrity, but his first speech at a fund-raising affair on behalf of the yeshivah, explaining the yeshiva's raison d'etre, underscores his unfeigned nature.

The Rosh Yeshivah transplanted the concept of limud Torah lishmah, studying Torah for its own sake, to these shores. The American Orthodox perception of Torah study was quite different. A yeshivah was a place that should produce learned lay people, educated pulpit rabbis, yeshivah and day school rebbeim, but they all had a "purpose." Torah learning for its own sake: that was a European ideal popularized by the saintly Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl. It was not for America. Nonetheless, Rav Aharon declared, "I do not want you to misunderstand me; I do not want to mislead you. There is a need for roshei yeshivah in this country and elsewhere, and Lakewood will produce them. There is a need for effective teachers and for the right kind of rabbis, and Lakewood will produce them. There is a need for baalei batim, lay people, who are talmidei chachamim, Torah scholars, and Lakewood will send them forth. However, the raison d'etre of Lakewood is limud Torah lishmah. It is with this understanding and for this purpose that I am asking for your support."

This might have been a message that the guests neither expected nor appreciated. Nonetheless, if the Rosh Yeshivah were going to build a yeshivah that would serve the needs of Klal Yisrael, it had to be built upon the foundation of emes.

I share another incredible vignette, concerning Horav Yehudah Tzadakah, zl, who was mentor to a number of the most distinguished Sephardic scholars of our generation. He also taught baalei batim. Believing very strongly in educating laymen, he gave a daily shiur from four to five o'clock each morning. One day, the Rosh Yeshivah overslept and came to shul a few minutes before five o'clock. He immediately sat down, opened his sefer and was about to begin teaching. Suddenly, he closed it and instructed the men to study among themselves.

After davening, one of the men queried him, "Is not every moment of Torah learning precious?" Rav Yehudah hesitated a moment and replied, "I was afraid that the worshippers who were coming for the five o'clock Shacharis might think that I had been teaching since four o'clock in the morning. This would be a deception. I could not betray them. So I decided not to teach at all. Torah and emes are one."

Then there came the fugitive and told Avram... (14:13)

Sometimes it takes a powerful example to drive home an idea. Let me explain. Chazal relate the identity of this fugitive. It was none other than Og, king of Bashan, who had survived the flood. In the simple meaning of the pasuk, he is called the fugitive because he had just escaped the battlefield. Chazal add that Og's motives were less than honorable. In fact, they were iniquitous. He had hoped to incite Avraham Avinu to leave the safety of his home and enter into the fray of battle. Anticipating that the Patriarch would be killed and his widow would become available to him, Og put on an air of righteousness, but it was all a sham. Hashem gave Og his due: the reward of longevity for informing Avraham; and death at the hands of the Jewish people in response to his serpentine motives.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, puts this incident into perspective. Imagine seeing a person walking down the street that leads to shul, bedecked in his Tallis and Tefillin and carrying his Korban Mincha Siddur. People in a group of Jews, noticing this sight, remark "There goes so and so. Do you know where he is going? He is on his way to murder someone or commit an act of adultery. This would clearly seem preposterous, given the image of the person wearing his religious garb and walking to shul. Yet, this is what occurred with Og. Here is a man, a survivor from the battlefield, who comes running, screaming, "Help! Help! They are going to kill your nephew, Lot. Come quickly before it is too late!" He appears honorable, but so does the man who is supposedly going to shul to pray, when, in fact, he is on his way to commit a heinous act of perversion.

Rav Sholom cites his rebbe, Rav Leib Chasman, zl, who would explain this anomaly with the following pasuk in Iyov (11:12), "Let one who is (like) a wild donkey be reborn as a man!" This means that one should grab the opportunity to repent while he can. The pasuk is teaching us that when man is born, he is potentially like a wild donkey. If left undisciplined and unrestrained, he will grow up a wild donkey. There is nothing to hold him back. The pera adam, wild man, can be stopped with the nishmas chaim, soul of life, with which Hashem has imbued him. If he studies Torah and works on himself, he can turn around his potentially base character. If he does not, he will simply continue into adulthood with this wild, intemperate nature.

Rav Leib would continue, "I ask you, do you think Og studied mussar, ethics and character

refinement? Surely, not. Thus, when we see someone who is uncouth running down the street, regardless of how he presents himself to us, we can safely assume that he is about to do the worst. Nothing is beyond one who is a *pera adam!*"

Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (12:1)

In Luban, Russia, after World War I, there was a young rav who was extremely dedicated to the community. An erudite Torah scholar with an encyclopedic knowledge of Shas and Poskim, the Talmud and Codes of Jewish Law, he was also an individual of great integrity and piety. All of this, however, was overshadowed by his incredible humility. When the Russian government removed the town's shochet from his position, the rav studied ritual slaughtering and became the community shochet. When they closed the mikveh, he found a way to validate a brook that was used for swimming for use as a mikveh. He was able to convince the authorities to allow separate times for men and women to swim. Life was very difficult. Compensation for his rabbinic duties was practically non-existent. The authorities were on his case on a regular basis. He already had one foot in a Siberian labor camp. He had no choice left; he would have to emigrate. Eretz Yisrael was out of the question. The only viable option was the United States.

Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, came with his young family to these shores in search of a livelihood, in search of a place to teach Torah, in search of the American dream. This dream turned into a nightmare for many Jews. Shabbos was a memory of the past. Kashrus--was not much better. Torah and mitzvos were left behind in Europe. Rav Moshe wanted a place to study and teach Torah. That was his vocation. Instead, he was offered a position as a mashgiach, kosher supervisor. He said he would wait a little longer. Perhaps something would come up. Perhaps he would find work in a Torah-related field.

He was offered the position of Rosh Hayeshivah at Mesifita Tiferes Yerushalayim. The rest is history. Rav Moshe became the posek ha'dor, halachic-decision maker for the generation, a man who contributed to changing the image of Torah in this country. To think that he had almost become a mashgiach. It is incredible to think that the Torah world would have suffered irreparable damage had he not been prepared to wait a little longer.

Rav Moshe once remarked to those closest to him, "Do you know the difference between us and Avraham Avinu?" They were taken aback by the question, but were more surprised with his reply, "Actually, there is no difference between us."

When Rav Moshe noticed the look of incredulity on their faces, he commented, "Avraham Avinu listened to the dvar, word of Hashem. He was told, 'Go for yourself, from your land, from your relatives, from your father's home to the land that I will show you.' He did exactly what Hashem had instructed him to do. I did the same. Not only I, but hundreds of thousands of our brethren picked themselves up, left their homes, their places of birth, and went to a strange land. I am certain that our arrival at these shores was to fulfill a G-d given-mandate. Does the pasuk in Mishlei 20:24, 'A man's steps are from Hashem, but what does a man understand of his way?' not support this idea? In reality, however, there is one difference between us and Avraham. Our Patriarch was fully aware from the first moment that he was carrying out Hashem's will. We think that we are acting in our own behalf, by our own volition, because of our own motivation. It is only afterward, when we look back objectively, that

we realize that it has all been part of the Divine Plan."

Rav Moshe applied this thought towards explaining the pasuk in Bamidbar 7:89, "He (Moshe) heard the Voice speaking to him from atop the Cover." Hashem did not speak directly to Moshe. The Almighty "spoke" to Himself, and Moshe listened. This is how life is lived in this world. Hashem speaks to Himself. Some of us listen and are part of the Divine Plan from the ground floor. Others act and, only later on, realize that it was all part of Hashem's plan.

"If people would realize that everything is part of G-d's Divine Plan," Rav Moshe explained, "there would be no such thing as divorce. Chazal teach us that forty days prior to conception, it is decreed from Heaven, 'The daughter of so and so is to wed so and so.' This is Hashem speaking to Himself. Regrettably, we do not 'hear' the Voice. Therefore, the young couple meet, and a relationship blossoms which leads to marriage. Afterwards, it is realized that they are one another's bashert, predetermined mate. This was Hashem's decree from the beginning, but no one listened."

This idea applies to so many areas of human endeavor. Our financial success is determined and announced by the same Voice. Our house, our field, our position, our business - it is all declared by Hashem. If we would only trust in Him initially, then we would not have to undergo much of the anxiety that is part and parcel of every endeavor. Otherwise, we will just have to wait until after the fact to realize that, in any event, He has been in control all of the time.

Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (12:1)

It happened at the beginning of World War II that the Brisker Rav, zl, found himself in Warsaw. The city had already been overrun by the Nazi hordes, and his only chance for survival was to escape to Vilna. By the time he reached Vilna, the Soviets had already claimed this Lithuanian city as its own. He now looked towards Eretz Yisrael as a haven for himself and his family. The future certainly presented itself as being rosy in contrast to the present.

It was the week of Parashas Lech Lecha, and one of his close talmidim, students, came up to his apartment and found the Rav engrossed in thought. He overheard him saying the following, "In the Rambam's commentary to Mishnayos Avos, he counts Avraham's nisayon, challenge, of 'Lech Lecha,' having to uproot himself and wander to a strange land, as the first of his ten trials. Why is this a challenge? It was Hashem Who instructed him to leave. It was Hashem Who promised him that great things would happen as a result of this move. He would become a great nation and serve as a blessing.

For what more could a person ask? It is not as if he heard this promise from a prophet or even an angel. He heard it directly from Hashem. Is this to be considered a challenge?"

The Brisker Rav answered his own question with the obvious, "Apparently, this teaches us that galus, exile, is galus. Regardless of the wonderful future in store for a person, having to wander is a difficult and trying challenge."

While the student did not want to be insolent, he nonetheless had a question which he wanted to pose to his rebbe, who was aware of his presence during his "comments." "Rebbe, this hypothesis is correct when one leaves his home at a time of peace and calm, but, if Brisk is under the siege of the Nazis, and in Lithuania we have no idea what tomorrow will bring, it really is no nisayon. We must leave!"

The Brisker Rav replied, "You are mistaken. Do we not find Yirmiyahu Ha'Navi lauding the nascent Klal Yisrael for following Hashem into the wilderness? They were certainly not leaving a resort. They went into the desert after hundreds of years of Egyptian persecution. Yet, they are praised. After all is said and done, it is difficult to leave one's home and one's roots, even if the destination is filled with great promise and hope."

And Avram took his wife, Sarai...and the souls they made in Charan. (12:5)

Targum Onkelos explains v'es ha'nefesh asher asu b'Charan, "and the souls they made in Charan" as, v'yas nafshasa di shabidu l'Oraisa, "and the souls which they committed to Torah." This teaches us, notes Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, that the only commitment of substance, the only obligation that has value and endurance, is a commitment to Torah. "Turning someone on," getting them to enjoy mitzvah observance, attending services in shul, are all wonderful beginnings, but the nefesh has not yet been made, success has not been achieved, until there is a shibud, obligation and commitment, to Torah study. Only then is there hope that the individual who has been "turned on" will not turn around and become "turned off." Torah protects and ensures the success of the transformation. Torah catalyzes the transformation and sustains the momentum.

Furthermore, adds Rav Ezrachi, one cannot have a shibuda l'Oraisa unless it is accompanied with a lech lecha, go for yourself, me'artzecha, from your land, etc. One must leave his original environment; break his ties with the past. He is committed to one thing and one thing only: Torah. When the separation is unequivocal, as it was with Avraham and Sarah, when there is a total severance from the commitments of the past, there can be a total commitment to Torah.

In the Talmud Avodah Zarah 9A, Chazal teach us that the world will endure for six thousand years, of which two thousand will be filled with Torah and two thousand will represent the days of Moshiach. Chazal add that the two thousand years of Torah begin with the "souls they made in Charan," at which point Avraham Avinu was fifty-two years old. This was four hundred and forty-eight years before the Torah was given on Har Sinai. This is a powerful statement, since it implies that the first fifty-two years of Avraham's life, after he had "discovered" Hashem on his own and underwent the miracle at Uhr Kasdim, were all included in the two thousand years of void. Why are the early years of Avraham's life discounted? Are they to be ignored and considered for naught? Furthermore, the "making" of these souls did not just happen overnight. They were not "made" in a vacuum. What was so unique about the nefesh that they made in Charan that initiated the two thousand years of Torah?

This teaches us that it all had to come together, the commitment to Torah in association with leaving his home. At the point of total severance there developed within them a complete commitment to Torah. It was at that specific juncture they became "made"; they were recreated as a nefesh, committed fully to Torah. Moreover, while Avraham and Sarah had achieved incredible personal success, it was only after they had committed others to Torah that they initiated the period of two thousand years of Torah. The void ended when others became committed to Torah. Personal growth is to be measured by how much we do for others. Likewise, growth in Torah is quantified by how much one is able to transmit his Torah to others. Reaching out to others is more than a kiruv, outreach opportunity; it comprises the essence of Torah learning. My Torah grows when I am able to impart it to others. This is the underlying meaning of Toras chesed, a Torah of kindness. There is no greater kindness, no more impressive gift, than sharing the gift of Torah with others.

And he (Avraham) built an altar to Hashem and invoked Hashem by Name. (12:8)

Avraham Avinu preached to the world community about the unity of G-d. He taught the concept of monotheism to a pagan society. Chazal emphasize Avraham's achievements when they say in Pirkei Avos 5:2 that Hashem was very patient with the generations from Adam until Noach. They angered Him increasingly, until Hashem decided to bring the flood to wipe them out. There were also ten generations from Noach until Avraham. They also angered Hashem, until Avraham came and received the reward for them all. During the first set of generations, Hashem's patience finally gave in to the flood which destroyed the sinners. During the second set of generations, Hashem's patience simply waited for Avraham to appear and redeem the world with his good deeds. We wonder what there was about Avraham that outshone every other righteous person that had preceded him. Surely, there were other upstanding human beings who believed in Hashem and stood up for righteousness and justice. Yet, they did not succeed in receiving reward. Why was it Avraham that accomplished what no one before him had been able to achieve? What made him so unusually worthy of distinction?

Horav Yisroel Belsky, Shlita, explains that Avraham took the shortcomings of the previous generations, transforming them into opportunities to spread the knowledge of Hashem throughout the world. He cites the Talmud in Eiruvim 6A, which relates that Rav once visited a city in which the inhabitants were lax in their Shabbos observance, making light of the prohibition against carrying on Shabbos. Rav immediately made gedarim, protective safeguards, for eiruvim which became directives to serve the Jewish People for years to come. He taught us an important principle in life: a failing may serve as an opportunity for growth. A deficiency may provide the stimulus for a creative solution that will not only remove the problem, but might revolutionize the entire picture.

This is the approach employed by Avraham. He used the people's deficiencies as a mirror to reflect the truth of the one true G-d. He was able to take the failings of the preceding generations and use them as a medium for teaching positive ethical behavior. Thus, he earned a great reward for turning their inequity into good.

Avraham introduced a new relationship between man and G-d. His teachings have influenced a world in different ways. Yet, from a religious viewpoint, Judaism remains distinct and unique. Gentile religions distinguish between the cleric and the layman. The theologian immerses himself in the theory and ritual of their religion, while the layman leads a secular life, other than the few rituals involved in certain times of devotion, such as holidays. His life does not revolve around religion. His religion is, rather, a part of his life.

Judaism is based on a totally different premise. The obligation to believe, to learn and to practice is applicable to everyone. A rabbi spends more of his time devoted to Torah study and dissemination, but his obligation to study and to observe is no different from that of the layman. We are enjoined to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This exhortation applies across the board for all Jews alike, regardless of vocation or calling.

Avraham taught us that one can serve Hashem at all times. Every single moment of life affords us the opportunity to serve the Creator. Furthermore, it is the essence of life: to serve Hashem and bring the world into perfection. This is why Avraham received the reward for all those who had preceded him. He saw an opportunity in evil, and perfection where others saw failure. Everyone could serve G-d; everyone could climb out of the abyss and elevate himself. His teachings, albeit not accepted by

everyone, have at least influenced a world with a belief in monotheism and a sense of morality, regardless of how much this "sense" has changed over the years.

A Jew's greatest goal is to become an eved, servant, of Hashem. This was Moshe Rabbeinu's greatest appellation. To become an eved, one must subjugate himself entirely to his Master. Every moment, every thought, every focus, everything we do should be directed towards this goal. This can only be achieved through learning. Chazal teach us in Pirkei Avos 2:5, "A boor does not fear sin, and an unschooled man cannot be a saint." Learning is the prerequisite to knowledge, which leads to piety and virtue. Unless one is constantly striving to increase his knowledge of Torah, he cannot achieve his potential; he cannot become a true eved Hashem.

Rav Belsky concludes with a meaningful and profound thought from a young man who was preparing to convert to Judaism. When asked by the supervising Rabbi what it was about our religion that had prompted him to become a Jew, he replied, "Every religion promises a glorious future existence after death. Only Judaism offers true fulfillment here on earth." Only a Torah lifestyle takes every minute and makes it holy. We begin our day with Modeh Ani, thanking Hashem for granting us life, and we end it with Shema Yisrael, accepting the yoke of Heaven upon us. Whenever we partake in this world, we do so with a blessing. Our daily interactions are guided by halachah, Jewish law. Our philosophy of life is based upon the ethical and moral guidance of the Torah. This was Avraham's teaching: B'chol derachecha de'eihu, "In all your ways, know Him." Our lives revolve around Him.

Hashem said to Avram, "Go for yourself." (12:1)

The Midrash cites an analogy: A man was traveling from place to place. Along the way, he came across a large house that was lit up. The man said to himself, "Is it possible that this house has no owner?" Suddenly, the owner of the house appeared and said, "I am the owner of this house." Avraham Avinu was in a similar quandary. He saw a great, illuminated world which seemed to have no "owner." Is this possible? At that point, Hashem appeared to Avraham and told him, "I am the owner of this world." This is a Midrash that we have heard numerous times, going back to our elementary school days. Its simplicity, however, begs elucidation. Avraham was apparently the first person to question the "ownership" of this world. Were there no others before him who wondered and asked the same question: Is it possible that this world has no manhig, leader? We know this not to be true. There were righteous people that preceded Avraham, such as Chanoch, Mesushelach, Noach, Shem and Eivar. If so, what chidush, novelty, did Avraham add for which he has received such credit?

Horav Meir Chadash, zl, explains that Avraham developed a unique perspective of the world which previously had not been recognized. This is indicated by Chazal's analogy to a house that is all "lit up." Is it necessary to say that the house was lit up? What would be wrong if the man would have come across a large house that was not "lit up"? The answer is that the Midrash is not referring to a light that illuminates the inside of the house. Rather, the Midrash refers to a reflective light that lights the entire outer area which encompasses the house. Thus, the passerby takes note of a phenomenon unlike anything else he has seen before. Most houses have lights to illuminate the area within its confines. This house is lit in such a manner that it illuminated everything outside of it. Why would the owner of the house want to light up the area outside of his house? What benefit does he derive from this light?

Avraham Avinu realized what no one before him had comprehended. The purpose of this house was not self-serving. The owner of the house was not illuminating it for his own benefit. He was lighting the way for those who were outside, who traveled along the road past the house. This amazed Avraham. Never before had he seen a house that was built solely for the benefit of others. This house, of course, is a reference to the world that Avraham observed. He saw nature, the heavens, the entire creation. It was all there for its inhabitants, but where was the owner? He was not deriving any personal benefit from the house. This was a house built totally on chesed, kindness. The bricks and mortar of this edifice were pure altruism. How could this be? Where was this elusive owner? This is when Hashem appeared to Avraham and explained, Olam chesed yibaneh, "The world was built on chesed."

Our Patriarch realized that if this is the reason that the Creator created the world, then he must be like Him; imitatio Dei, as He is compassionate, so shall you be compassionate. Avraham then began to preach the importance of chesed for the continued existence of the world. He understood that a world that was created upon the foundation of kindness, for the purpose of doing kindness, must be a world in which acting benevolently is a constant reality: Under all circumstances, if one searches, he will find the opportunity to act with chesed. This is why, when Avraham was recuperating from his bris milah, he could not accept the fact that there was no one out there for whom he could do chesed. He was certain that the opportunity would materialize when chesed would be needed. Hashem created that potential.

Indeed, as descendants of Avraham, we understand that chesed is more than our mission in life, it is our raison d'etre. It is the reason for life itself. Chesed sustains life and serves as a catalyst for continued chesed, as evidenced in the following story:

The Dejer Rebbe, zl, was fleeing with his family from the Nazis. Their guide was to take them from their beloved home to the border of Romania. They camped in the forest for the night. By daybreak, their guide had disappeared. The Rebbe, his wife and eight children were left alone to stumble blindly through the forest. They walked at night and hid during the day. Tired, weak and hungry, they searched for food to no avail. Finally, they reached the edge of the forest where they noticed a little silo. They slipped inside and concealed themselves in the hayloft. While they now had temporary shelter, their hunger pains still had not been alleviated. It had been two days since they had last had a morsel of food. They knew that if they did not procure some food soon, they would succumb to hunger. They peered out of the silo and noticed two peasants tilling the soil. The rebbetzin and one of her sons decided they might as well take a chance, hoping that one of these men would have a kind heart.

They were fortunate that the first man they approached had mercy on them and told them not to worry. He would protect them. It happened that this man, whose name they later found out to be Tarnowan, was the village minister and judge. The rebbetzin took Tarnowan to meet her husband. The Rebbe extended his hand in greeting and graciously thanked their benefactor. "My name is Yoseph Paneth, and I understand you are Judge Tarnowan," the Rebbe said.

Suddenly, Tarnowan turned ashen, as he gazed at the Rebbe in awe and disbelief. "Did you say your name was Paneth? May I ask what was your father's name?" Tarnowan pressed on.

"My father was Rabbi Yechezkel Paneth," the Rebbe answered.

"My G-d, if you are Rabbi Paneth's son, then I owe you a debt of gratitude." The judge gave the following explanation. "Thirty years ago, our two-year-old son was struck with a strange disease for which no doctor could find a cure. We had traveled all over Europe to no success. Being religious people, we could not give up hope. We heard that there was a holy rabbi in the city of Dej who was a

miracle worker. We figured that we owed it to our son to seek this rabbi's blessing.

"I arrived in Dej and immediately proceeded to the Rabbi's house. After waiting a short while, I was ushered into the rabbi's study. This kind-hearted man listened to me and, with a gracious smile, he promised me that my son would be cured.

"I have one request of you, however," the rabbi said. You must promise me that whenever you see people in trouble, you will help them.

"I returned home to discover that my son's health had already miraculously improved. It could be for no other reason than the blessing I had received from your holy father. Now, thirty years later, I have the opportunity to repay that blessing."

For two weeks, the Rebbe and his family were hidden by the Tarnowans, until they were finally able to escape from that part of the country. It was the realization that an act of chesed may not go unrequited that catalyzed their salvation. For thirty years, this gentile had remembered the holy Rebbe's request: "Whenever you see people in trouble - help them."

Go for yourself, from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (12:1)

What seems to be the first dialogue in the Torah between Hashem and Avraham Avinu is His enjoinder to Avraham to leave his land, his birthplace, the home of his father, to go to a place that had yet to be announced. Certainly, there must be a singular lesson to be derived from here concerning the future of Avraham's descendants and their interaction with the world around them. At first glance, one would suggest that the message is simple: Your mission rises above land, nation and family. You must be willing to leave it all, out of a sense of conviction and dedication to Hashem; standing alone among the nations should have no effect upon your commitment. In fact, it is a requisite for spiritual success.

In his commentary to the Torah, Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, explains that while one's homeland and birthplace play a significant role in his life, Hashem is understood here to be explaining that to plant the first Jewish seed demands forsaking homeland, birthplace and paternal home. Indeed, the appreciation of these factors and their influence upon an individual underscores the isolation that Hashem demands of Avraham and, by extension, his descendants. This demand placed Avraham in complete contrast to the tendency of the culture in which he lived. Individualism was not valued; recognition of the significance of each and every individual was not the accepted norm. At that time, civilization tended towards a centralization of people, which by its very nature strips the individual of his personal value. This orientation denigrates him to being a mere subordinate, a "brick" for building the edifice called "community," a cog in the wheel of progress. This proclivity was the precursor of the misconceived notion that the majority should sway the direction of the masses. Thus, everything that is considered the most exalted by the majority, ipso facto become the most accepted and the most revered.

Certainly, the majority of every community should represent all that is truly auspicious and holy. In such a situation, Judaism also attaches a great importance to being connected to the community. Nonetheless, at the forefront of Judaism, at the basis of our belief, prominently stand the words, "Lech lecha," "Go for yourself" - you must rise above the rest. Nobody may rely on the time-honored cliché, "I am as good and as honest as everybody else." No! We must rise above the multitudes.

Everyone has his own personal responsibility to Hashem. If the majority is aggressively swayed towards this belief, then he should be a part of the majority. Otherwise, he must be prepared to swim against the tide. This is what was demanded of our Patriarch, Avraham, as the starting point of his and his future nation's mission. Hashem taught Avraham Avinu a compelling lesson, one that is with us on an almost daily basis: We must do our own thing. This is the meaning of Lech Lecha. The entire world around him was setting up shop and establishing themselves as secure nations, protected by borders and rights. He was prepared to be on the move, to be a refugee, to throw a protest against the lifestyles adopted by the pagans. Idol worship, sensuality, worshipping human power: these symbolized the spirit of the times. Avraham had the courage and conviction to fight it all, to be different, to stand in the minority, to be one man against an entire world. This is his legacy to us. It is our heritage to uphold it firmly.

Go for yourself from your land. (12:1)

Following the seminal test of Uhr Kasdim, when Avraham Avinu was thrown into a fiery cauldron because of his belief in Hashem, it would be superfluous to test him once again with leaving his home. Surely, this must be a much more facile test to pass than its predecessor. Horav Yitzchok Zilberstein, Shlita, lends some insight into the nisayon, trial, of "Lech lecha." The main point was not the move, uprooting himself from his home, from his birthplace, from his roots. Rather, the essence was the idea that he had no legitimate excuse to relate to people concerning why he was moving and to where he was moving. Indeed, he had no clue why or where. He only knew what Hashem had told him. Overcoming the stares and questions of his neighbors and friends was more difficult than the actual move.

When a person is thrown into the fire for his beliefs, he knows at least that people understand his sense of sacrifice. They are able to appreciate his commitment and justify his judgment. When a person uproots himself, however, from the place that had been his home for decades and has no answers when he is asked "why" or "where," he appears to have lost his senses. This concept explains the enormity of the test.

Go for yourself...And I will make of you a great nation... (12:1,2)

The Midrash Tanchuma notes the use of the word v'e'escha, "and I will make you," rather than v'asimch, "and I will place you." This indicates that Hashem was going to recreate /remake Avraham Avinu into a bria chadashah, new creation. Horav Moshe Shapiro, Shlita, derives from here that not only was it necessary to pull up his roots and change homes, he needed to be recreated. The reason for this is that by leaving his present environment, he was ensuring that from now on in he would no longer be in the presence of that evil atmosphere. What about everything that he had until now seen and experienced at home? Would he not take that with him wherever he went? This is why the old Avraham had to be expunged and a new Avraham had to be created. In order to serve as a Patriarch, to be the father and foundation of the Jewish People, there had to be a total separation from the past. This totality could only be achieved by a total makeover of Avraham Avinu into a new person, with a brand new beginning.

We find the same idea expressed concerning Rivkah. In Bereishis 24:60, the Torah records Lavan saying, "Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads." Targum Yonasan adds, Ad kadun havis achosach. "Until now you have been my sister." He understood that with her marriage to Yitzchak, Rivkah's status as Lavan's sister would change, as she became a new creation, similar to a ger, convert, who no longer maintains any relations with her past.

If Avraham became a new creation, why was it still necessary for him to leave his homeland? After all, he was no longer the same person that had grown up there. We derive from here that being in the environment in which he was raised, observing the idolatry and debauchery that was in vogue, could quite possibly have a continuing influence on him. Thus, it was essential that the father of our People leave his roots and become a totally new person.

*Please separate from me; if you go left then I will go right, and if you will go right then I will go left.
(13:9)*

Avraham Avinu and his nephew Lot parted ways. When Avraham saw that Lot's shepherds, with his support, resorted to stealing from the pastures of the neighboring farms, he felt that their relationship should be terminated. Lot decided to go to the lush fields of Sodom, even though the spiritual climate left much to be desired. His lust for material abundance clouded his ability to think rationally. Avraham's actions concerning Lot are enigmatic. Avraham was the original founder of the outreach movement. Thousands from all walks of life flocked to him, seeking guidance and counsel. He was known to have had four openings to his tent. Simply, this was to allow easy access for anyone to enter. On a more profound note, however, Horav Avraham Farbstein, zl, explained that Avraham's tent was open to all people from all directions and cultures. From all four corners of the world, they had an address to which to turn. Yet, despite all of this, Avraham could not come to terms with his errant nephew. He could not find a place for him in his tent. Why? Was Lot that bad? Indeed, one cannot say that his sin was that iniquitous in comparison to the sins of many others that Avraham permitted across his doorstep.

Horav Shlomo Lorincz, Shlita, in his eulogy for Horav Simchah Wasserman, zl, asked this question. Rav Simchah had a similar quality about him. His heart and home were open to so many, but there were times when he would tell an individual to "separate from me." What was the barometer for distinguishing between people? Avraham opened his tent to anyone who had not yet been exposed to monotheism, to the principles of Judaic belief, to his lovingkindness and warmth. He was patient, caring, and loving. He taught; he guided; he gave advice. When Lot's shepherds decided to pervert Avraham's teachings, however, to suggest loopholes concerning the laws of theft, to sway from the truth, he lost patience. He would not put up with those who sought to undermine his work, to impugn the integrity of his teachings in their attempt to amend and refashion their belief in the Almighty.

Rav Simchah had a big heart and an open mind - for anyone who was sincere and sought to listen. In contrast, he zealously challenged those who knew the truth, but endeavored to undermine it. He had no tolerance for those who had deserted Judaism for the verdant fields of secularism. One must be willing to sacrifice in order to demonstrate his commitment.

And Lot when with him. (12:5)

Avraham Avinu's nephew, Lot, demonstrated total commitment to his esteemed uncle by joining him in leaving his comfortable home in Charan in order to follow Hashem's directive to move to Canaan. It was a difficult journey, but Lot was an exemplary student. Where the rebbe goes, the student follows suit. Later, when Avraham was compelled to leave Canaan to go to Egypt as a result of the bitter famine that was devastating Canaan, Lot, once again, joined his uncle on the journey to Egypt and, later, on his eventual return to Canaan. In describing Lot's accompanying Avraham on his return trip, the Torah chooses a different terminology, "Avraham went up from Egypt with his wife and all that was with him, and Lot was with him" (Ibid 13:1). Interestingly, in this instance, instead of using the standard *ito*, with him, the Torah writes *imo*, which also means "with him." While both of these words basically have the same meaning, there is a subtle difference, as we shall soon see - one that must be addressed.

In his publication "Forever his Students," a compendium of inspirational lessons from Horav Yaakov Weinberg, zl, Rabbi Boruch Leff explains that while both words mean "with him," there is a definite difference in the relationship between two people implied by the two variant terms. The root of *ito* is *es*, a word used to precede a subject, in order to emphasize that subject. *Es*, in its very essence, is a word that is subordinate. *Imo* does not have this character. It reflects an equality when joining two subjects together. In other words, *ito* indicates Lot's subservience to Avraham, while *imo* connotes his seeming equality. Having distinguished between the two terms, let us return to the source in order to view Lot and his relationship with Avraham in this context.

When Lot first left Charan with Avraham, he was clearly a student. His material resources were not great. He relied on his uncle, his rebbe, his father figure. Upon his return to Canaan, the financial situation of both Avraham and Lot had changed. Both had achieved great wealth and independence. Indeed, after a dispute arose between Lot's shepherds and Avraham's shepherds over the land for grazing their huge herds, Avraham told Lot that they could no longer live together. They must separate, so that there would be sufficient grazing land for their respective flocks.

The fact that Lot accepted this separation without making any kind of amends is striking. Avraham was his rebbe, his mentor in life. Did it not bother him to be told to separate, to move away? Why did Lot not try to work things out so that he could remain in close proximity to Avraham? Furthermore, later on, when Avraham rescued Lot from captivity during the war of the Nine Kings, we do not find Lot offering any kind of gratitude, any words of appreciation. What happened to Lot that transformed him?

Rav Weinberg explains that success in life is commensurate with one's ability to know himself: his character, his talents, his ability, his prowess, his limitations. A corporal in the army who thinks that he is a general can undermine the most thought-out tactical plans and destroy his platoon. Likewise, a nurse who thinks she is a neurosurgeon can destroy a patient's life. Everybody has his unique role to play in life, a role based upon the individual's personal strengths and weaknesses. When one attempts to step outside the parameter of his individual role, he fails in two areas: his idealized role and the role in which his talent would have shined.

At one point, probably when he had amassed great wealth, Lot decided that *ito*, subordination,

was not for him. He was now an equal, imo, with Avraham. He no longer viewed himself to be ancillary to Avraham; he was his equal. Lot's power and wealth distorted his perspective. At his first opportunity, he separated from Avraham. He no longer needed his guidance. As an equal, he felt that he could give direction to others. When Avraham risked his life to save Lot from captivity, Lot still could not bring himself to pay gratitude, since this would have reflected a subtle endorsement of his weakness in light of Avraham's strength.

We should ask ourselves: How often do we act like Lot? How often are we stubborn, refusing to subordinate ourselves to those who are wiser and more experienced? We defer to our ego, rather than use our G-d-given ability to think properly. Everyone wants to be a leader, but not everyone has the talent, ability or stamina to achieve success. A true leader knows when to lead and when to be led. The mistake is to think that the only hero is the leader. This is wrong. If one fulfills his potential and acts out the role in life predestined for him, he is a hero. Hashem demands that we be ourselves - not someone else.

From there he relocated to the mountain east of Beth-el and pitched his tent, with Beth-el on the west and Ai on the east. (12:8)

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, makes a powerful observation on the text. Beth-el and Ai were not mere villages. They were large cities, metropolises which were ruled by distinguished kings. Yet, the Torah records them only as having secondary geographical significance in regard to Avraham Avinu's famous tent. The Torah says that the tent was situated with Beth-el on one side and Ai on the other, as if to say that their entire significance was their proximity to the tent and not vice versa.

Indeed, this is really the way it should be. Avraham's tent was the spiritual center of the world. The foundation for monotheistic belief was established there and disseminated throughout the world. The genesis of the Jewish nation, Avraham's descendants, was in this tent. The great cities of Beth-el and Ai have been lost to antiquity, while the Jewish People thrive, becoming stronger in their conviction and belief in Hashem. In fact, even when these cities were in their full prime, what were they? Anything that is not founded in spirituality lacks a stable foundation. Avraham's tent symbolized the eternity of Torah, its precepts, values and lessons. The enduring nature of the Torah has sustained the Jewish People throughout the millennia. No, this was not merely a tent. This was the bedrock of Torah civilization.

That it may go well with me for your sake. (12:13)

Simply, this means that if the Egyptian nobility were to shower Avraham with gifts in order to win his "sister's" hand, the rest of the people would respect him and be afraid to harm him, thereby assuring Sarah Imeinu's safety. The commentators question Avraham Avinu's statement. First, as Shlomo HaMelech declares, Sonei matanos yichyeh, "One who hates gifts will live." In other words, the Torah frowns upon one who is beholden to others for their favors. Second, why was Avraham inclined to take gifts from the king of Egypt, while he refused to accept even the slightest courtesy from the king of Sodom?

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, gives a pragmatic, but profound, response. Avraham's

purpose in life, his *raison d'etre*, was to disseminate the Name of Hashem throughout the world. He would seize any opportunity that was availed to him. He taught the world that following the path of Hashem, believing in Him and cleaving to His precepts, would only engender benefit and good fortune.

Chazal teach us that one should be meticulous in giving proper honor to his wife, for she is the source of all good fortune in the home. They substantiate this statement by noting that, according to the Torah, Avraham was the recipient of great benefits because of Sarah. The Talmud adds that Rava told the people of Mechuza, "Learn to appreciate and value your wives. As a result, you will become wealthy."

Avraham accepted Pharaoh's gifts, so that he could proclaim to the world that his success and wealth were because of his wife. She was his source for fomenting blessing in their home. This is what Avraham means when he says, "That it may go well with me for your sake." He used this as an opportunity to teach others that the woman is the source for blessing in the home. Avraham did not care about gifts. He sought an opportunity to teach the world a lesson. If that opportunity availed itself as a result of his taking gifts from the Egyptian king - so be it. This would inspire others to cherish and appreciate their wives. Avraham's overwhelming love for Hashem stimulated him to do whatever was in his power to publicize the daas Torah, wisdom of Torah, that he who is good to his wife, who appreciates her, will reap great material benefit.

Avraham had no reason to accept a gift from the king of Sodom, since there was no objective to be derived from it. He did not believe in taking presents from anyone, unless a greater good was to be taught as a result.

Then there came the fugitive and told to Avram, the Ivri. (14:13)

The Midrash identifies Og, the king of Bashan, as the fugitive who came with a malevolent intention to spur Avraham to battle, in the hope that he would be killed. This would free Sarah, so that Og could marry her. Og was rewarded with longevity for his positive actions, but was punished for his wicked motive in that he ultimately met his fate at the hands of the descendants of Avraham Avinu.

When Moshe Rabbeinu was confronted with having to battle with Og, he was concerned lest Og's merit would protect him. This fear was realistic, despite the fact that Og's positive action was clouded by a nefarious motive. This should inspire us. For, if Moshe and all of Klal Yisrael were concerned with Og's *zechus*, merit, despite his malevolent motives, how much more so should we take into consideration the incredible reward which is stored away for us when we perform a mitzvah with the correct and proper intentions.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates that he heard a similar thought from Horav Meir Sonnenfeld, Shlita. In the Talmud Rosh Hashanah 33b, Chazal derive the obligation to blow one hundred tekios, sounds with the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, from the mother of Cisro, the general who fought with Klal Yisrael. When she saw that her son was late in returning from battle, she became disconcerted and moaned one hundred times. In order to "balance the scale," we blow one hundred tekios on Rosh Hashanah. The question that confronts us: Who was counting? Who is really concerned with how many times his mother moaned? After all, we are talking about the mother of a wicked person who was late in returning from pillaging Yerushalayim and murdering its inhabitants. She was probably comforted with the claim that Cisro was late because he discovered more Jews to murder. The answer is that a special angel is assigned to count every moan, every bit of suffering that a person

sustains - even if she is the mother of a wicked person. A mother is a mother, and her moans are meaningful sounds.

Let us now take stock of this. If Hashem appoints an angel to count a mother's tears, even if it is for a son who is evil, how much more so does He count each and every tear shed by a Jew who weeps for kavod Shomayim, Hashem's Glory, for Moshiach Tzidkeinu, may he come soon. Do we have any idea of the value of these tears and the merit that they engender? Everything that we undergo or give up in order to perform a mitzvah is counted in our favor.

Then came the fugitive and told to Avram, the Ivri. (14:13)

The Midrash says that the fugitive was Og, the future king of Bashan. They add that he was called Og because when he came to Avraham, the Patriarch was busy making ugos, little cakes of matzah, for Pesach. He is therefore called Og because of the ugos. The Sifsei Tzadik wonders why a person should receive a name based upon something he saw. What relationship is there between Og's witnessing matzah baking and his name? He explains that when Og saw Avraham preparing matzah with extreme devotion and great fervor, he himself became so inspired that this experience was engraved in his psyche. It became an intrinsic part of his personality. Hence, the Torah calls him Og as a result of this experience.

Veritably, comments Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, this is the responsibility of every ben Torah, to inspire others with his behavior and demeanor. He relates a powerful story in which Rav Shimon Galei, who was critically injured in a traffic accident, was able to influence a young couple - who were not Shabbos observant - to change their lifestyle. While he was crossing the street one afternoon, Rav Galei was struck by a car whose driver had lost control. Lying on the ground in extreme agony and bleeding profusely, he was approached by the driver of the car who happened to be a policeman, "What can I do to help you?" asked the driver, as they waited together for the emergency medical services to arrive. Amidst the overwhelming pain, the rav turned his head toward the driver, looked into his eyes, and said, "If you really want to help me, then take it upon yourself to observe the Shabbos."

Incredible! All he cared about was how he could influence another Jew to observe Shabbos! At the time of the accident, a young, not-yet-observant couple was walking by and witnessed the accident and the ensuing interchange between the driver and the rav. They were so taken aback by the rav's response that it planted a seed of spiritual inspiration within them. So great was the impression, that they felt compelled to visit the rav in the hospital and to follow up on the conversation which was subtly impacting their spiritual perspective. Standing there at his bedside, they could not utter a word. It was difficult for them to believe that a person could be so selfless that his only concern, even at a moment of extreme personal pain, would be the spiritual welfare of another Jew. They finally spoke in what was to become an ongoing dialogue that eventually led to their adopting an observant lifestyle. Their exposure to a ben Torah left an enduring impression, one that changed their lives dramatically.

He said to him, "I am Hashem Who brought you out of Uhr Kasdim." (15:7)

Nothing is really mentioned in the Torah concerning Uhr Kasdim and Avraham's being miraculously saved from the fiery furnace. In contrast, the story of Akeidas Yitzchak takes up a

significant chapter in the Torah. One would think that walking into a fiery furnace, being prepared to give up one's life for his convictions, deserves a little more space than was granted. Uhr Kasdim occurred when Avraham was still young, at the beginning of his spiritual awareness. He was alone in his belief in Hashem, alone against an entire world obsessed with pagan ritual. The Akeidah, on the other hand, took place when Avraham was at an advanced age, distinguished, and had a multitude of followers. Last, the Akeidah involved Yitzchak Avinu, while Uhr Kasdim involved only Avraham. Why does the Torah not record this miracle in greater detail?

Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, teaches us an important lesson to be derived herein. Avraham Avinu acted on his own commitment at Uhr Kasdim. He was not commanded by Hashem to give up his life. He went forward solely on his own sense of conviction, based upon his personal recognition of Hashem as the Creator of the world. Every person is prepared to sacrifice himself for his beliefs, for what his mind cogently deduces and believes. The Akeidah, however, was irrational. It was totally incongruous with reason and rationale. Avraham went forward and displayed a willingness to sacrifice his son for his belief, although it was against anything he had previously believed.

In an alternative explanation, the Shlah Hakadosh comments that one should not "seek" the opportunity to be moser nefesh, sacrifice himself. Self-sacrifice reflects an incredibly high level of service to Hashem. It is reserved and available to anyone who is under duress and forced to comply. Otherwise, a Jew should seek every opportunity to live Kiddush ha'chaim, sanctifying life, as this is the way a Jew should serve Hashem. Mesiras nefesh is part of the Jewish psyche, but it is something we are prepared to do only when we are compelled to do so. Had the Torah written a significant commentary on Avraham's rescue from Uhr Kasdim, there might be those who would misconstrue that this is an acceptable way of life. Thus, it is downplayed and to be viewed as a last resort for the Jew.

Go for yourself from your land. (12:1)

Chazal note that "Lech Lecha" is repeated a second time, when Hashem once again instructs Avraham Avinu to go forth. This time he is to go to Har Moriah to offer his son, Yitzchak, as a sacrifice. They add that the second Lech Lecha was more beloved to Hashem. What are Chazal teaching us? Is there a question about the relative significance of Akeidas Yitzchak compared to Avraham's moving from his home to go out into the world?

In his sefer, Simchas HaTorah, Horav Simcha Hakohen Sheps, zl, distinguishes between the two commands, offering a practical insight into Chazal's query and response. Both commands to Avraham had a definite purpose: to sanctify Hashem's Name in the world. The difference between the two concerns the immediate focus of the Kiddush Hashem. When Avraham was told to leave his home, his family, his past, and go forth to build the future of Monotheism in the world, the goal was Kiddush Shem Shomayim b'rabim, public sanctification of Hashem's Name throughout the world. Akeidas Yitzchak also centered on Kiddush Hashem, but it was intended for a different audience. It was for Yitzchak alone. The next link in the chain of transmission of belief in the Ribbono Shel Olam had to concretize his own beliefs.

Chazal wonder which trial is more beloved to Hashem: sanctifying His Name to the world, chinuch, teaching and transmitting emunah, faith, in the Almighty to his son. They respond that chinuch - transmitting the message of Hashem's Oneness to one's own flesh and blood - eternalizes it,

guaranteeing its continued application. Avraham Avinu converted many people, reaching out to the world. How many remained committed to his teachings? How many followed in his pathway? Very few, if any, continued on the road charted by the first Patriarch. His son, however, not only adhered to his father's teachings, he became the next Patriarch, assuring that the Kiddush Shem Shomayim that he experienced was disseminated to the next generation.

Teaching a world is all-important. For some, it is their lifelong ideal. One should not focus on, however, at the expense of his own children. Many educators have successfully transmitted the message of Judaism to the wider community, but regrettably have neglected to reach their very own. There are also individuals who refuse to go out and teach the world for fear that they will harm their own children. This selfish excuse has kept some of the most talented potential teachers from spreading Hashem's Torah to the greater community. There is no doubt, chinuch of one's own children takes precedence, but how should he weigh the relative importance of the two goals? Educating one's own children does not take the place of chinuch ho'rabim.

Avram passed into the land as far as the site of Shechem. (12:6)

Rashi explains that Avraham Avinu went to Shechem by design. He prayed there for Yaakov's sons, Shimon and Levi, who would wage war there. Interestingly, it was necessary for Avraham to go into Shechem to pray for them. Could he not have prayed elsewhere for his descendants? Horav Shmuel Walkin, zl, derives from this that in order to pray appropriately for another person's anguish, it is critical that the individual himself experience the pain. Prayer is the result of sensitivity. This idea is manifest in a number of places.

Rachel Imeinu was buried on the road near Bais Lechem, not in Chevron, which would be her rightful burial place, so that she would be able to help her descendants when Nevuzaradan exiled them. They would pass by her tomb, and Rachel would go out onto her grave, weeping and seeking mercy for them. Why did Rachel have to "go out" of her grave to weep? Certainly, she was aware of her children's travail. She could have wept from within her grave. Once again, we see that in order to empathize, one must observe, one must sensitize himself to the pain.

Likewise, we see that when Moshe Rabbeinu went out to his brethren, the Torah writes, "Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens" (Shemos 2:11) Rashi comments that Moshe went out to see their suffering and grieve with them. It would have been so natural, so practical, even so understandable for Moshe to remain secure and protected within the confines of the palace. He could have chosen not to notice his brothers' travail, to claim no kinship with the Jewish slaves. Moshe's growing "up" was really his act of going "out." Growing up is growing out, going out of ourselves and identifying with the needs of others, reaching out beneficently to others. Regrettably, many of us become self-absorbed as we grow older, failing to recognize that as one matures, he should begin to shoulder greater responsibility from without.

Avraham Avinu knew that Shechem was to be a place prepared for punishment; the evil permeated the air. It suffused the environment. By going there, by being within the confines of the area, he could identify with and sensitize himself to the future needs of his descendants. This is the essence of empathy.

A poor man once approached Horav Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa, and asked him for a donation. Rav Bunim immediately gave him a considerable amount of money. As the poor man began to leave, Rav

Bunim called him back and gave him some more money. Overcome with curiosity, the man asked Rav Bunim why he had called him back.

"The first donation was in response to the pity I felt for you," said Rav Bunim. "The second one was to fulfill Hashem's command to give to the poor."

One has to give tzedakah to fulfill the mitzvah. One must also understand and empathize with the needy. In fact, it is especially important that one give to suit the needs of the recipient, not simply as a response to his own feelings of guilt.

Giving does not always have to be of a material nature. There was once a famine in Russia. People literally starved to death. One day a poor, emaciated beggar came up to a man and begged for alms. The man searched his pockets for a coin, to no avail. He did not have even one copper coin in his possession. Taking the beggar's worn hands between his own, he said, "Do not be angry with me, my brother, I have nothing with me." The thin, lined face of the beggar lit up as from some inner light, and he whispered in reply, "But you called me 'brother'! That was a gift in itself."

People are starving all around us - not for bread, but for recognition. I would suggest that much of the depression that we see could have been prevented had the individual been exposed to kindness. While we readily give a check to the poor, how many of us have the time, thoughtfulness, or compassion to say a kind word, perform a gracious act, or actually give a piece of bread to an emaciated spirit?

Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl, imbued in his students a sense of responsibility for their fellow Jew. No subject so dominated his teachings as the obligation imposed upon every Jew towards his brother. Among the most important words in his lexicon were Klal Yisrael. His constant question was: "What are you doing for Klal Yisrael?"

Rav Shraga Feivel would interpret the pasuk in Tehillim (145:4), L'dor va'dor yeshabach maasecha, "One generation will praise Your creations to another," to mean that each generation has an obligation to improve Hashem's world, rendering it more praiseworthy. He emphasized that a Jew may not make himself the primary focus of his own life. To concern oneself only with himself - apart from the community - is wrong.

In Pirkei Avos 2:18, Chazal say, "Do not judge yourself to be a wicked person." Rav Shraga Feivel interpreted this to mean that anyone who limits his efforts to himself alone - who is bifnei atzmecha, for himself - is derelict in his obligation. Torah is called Toras chesed, the Torah of kindness. This is Torah that is taught to others, not just kept selfishly to oneself.

The Sefas Emes teaches us that a Jew must be prepared to sacrifice everything, even his personal share in the World to Come, on behalf of Klal Yisrael.

Rav Shraga Feivel sensitized his students to the needs of other students. Younger students in the Mesivta learned to be sensitive to the needs of those sitting next to them in the bais hamedrash. Better students were "encouraged" to study with weaker students.

He once noticed two talmidim carrying chairs to a classroom. He asked one of them, "For whom are you bringing this chair?" The student answered, "For myself." He then asked the same question of the other boy, and the response was the same. Rav Shraga Feivel chided, "You brought a chair for yourself, and you brought a chair for yourself. So you are both shleppers. Had each one of you brought a chair for the other, each of you would have performed a chesed."

Mesivta Torah Vodaath students were never allowed to forget that, regardless of how happy they

personally were to be able to sit and study Torah in the bais hamedrash, they represented a small fraction of the Jewish world - a world that regrettably was far-removed from the walls of the bais hamedrash. This situation has lamentably not changed significantly. While the number of students in the bais hamedrash has certainly increased, the Jewish world outside the bais hamedrash has also grown. As bnei Torah, we have a moral obligation not to ignore that world. Indeed, what greater act of chesed, kindness, is there than bringing a Jew back into the spiritual fold?

And I will uphold My covenant...to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you. (17:7)

"To be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you." Why could the Torah not simply have said, "To be a G-d to you and to your offspring?" It seems that the two do not necessarily go together. Rather, Hashem must first be a G-d to the father, and then afterwards, He can be a G-d to the son. That is the natural order. A child observes a role model in his father. He senses his father's level of commitment, and he becomes inspired. Regardless of whether it is a parent or a gifted rebbe, a child/student needs a positive role model, someone that inspires him, infusing him with a desire to grow in Torah. We never know when that inspiration will occur or who will be the source, but invariably it is an important part of the child's growth process.

The Ben Ish Chai, Horav Yosef Chaim, zl, m'Baghdad, was a brilliant Torah giant, who inspired thousands with his writings and lectures. Each Shabbos, he would lecture in the main shul in Baghdad to thousands of Jews for two hours. The pearls of wisdom that left his mouth were treasured by his listeners. Among those who came to listen was a young boy, Sulamon Mutzafi. His father, Rav Tzion Meir, was one of Baghdad's known Torah scholars. Every Shabbos, the young boy came with his father to hear Rav Yosef Chaim.

After the drashah, lecture, the child held onto his father's cloak as the assemblage went over to the rav to receive his blessing. It was finally Sulamon's turn to greet the rav. Shaking with awe and trepidation, holding onto his fathers' sleeve, the child went forward and kissed Rav Yosef Chaim's hand. This was the high point of the week. "It should be the will of Hashem that you grow up to become great in Torah," said Rav Yosef Chaim, as he placed his hands on young Sulamon's head. Everyone responded with a resounding Amen! This was no mere brachah, blessing - this was inspiration at its apex. Sulamon was already on the path to gadlus b'Torah, distinction in the field of Torah erudition.

On the thirteenth day of Elul, 1898, Rav Yosef Chaim's pure soul returned to its Maker. The funeral cortege left from the shul on Motzoei Shabbos, followed by thousands of broken-hearted Jews. Their beloved rebbe, their leader, mentor and guide, was gone. The eulogies were powerful portrayals of his life of dedication to Torah. Unparalleled mourning and grief were manifest. The Mutzafi family also attended, everyone but young Sulamon. He was too young.

Sulamon Mutzafi could not remain in his home. He had to attend the funeral of the rebbe that had left such a powerful impact on him. He had to say good-bye. He joined the assemblage of grief-stricken mourners. Like a young orphan, his cries shattered the sounds of silence, as he stood there watching Rav Yosef Chaim's mortal remains being lowered into the earth. At that very moment, he accepted upon himself greater sanctity, greater sublimity and purity. Torah would be his guide, his friend with whom he would share every minute of the day. He began to study every night from midnight until dawn. His parents attempted to dissuade him, claiming that such practice was set aside for great tzaddikim. Yet, the child was not swayed. He was not deterred from his mission. He was

inspired to achieve greatness.

Our children have many such opportunities for inspiration. If they do not find it at home, they find it in the yeshivah, or in stories of Gedolim - who achieved distinction because they followed their own inspiration. When you bring up the subject of achieving greatness to a parent, the immediate response is, "Today is different." Heintiga tzeiten, today's times/society has greater demands. It is more difficult to get inspired. I recently read a story which was related by the Voideslaver Rav, zl.

When the Voideslaver was a young boy, he met an elderly rebbetzin who was a granddaughter of the Chasam Sofer, zl. She explained that as a young girl she would often eat the Shabbos meal with her grandfather. She remembered that once the Chasam Sofer spoke at the meal. He asserted that in each generation the yetzer hora, evil-inclination, takes on a new identity. This is done for a practical reason, since in each ensuing generation, people become increasingly aware of the dangers of associating with known evil, so they stay away. As they become aware of one evil disguise, the yetzer hora quickly dons a new one, so that his evil is always one step ahead. He then added that in their generation, the disguise/yetzer hora's new name could very well be heintiga tzeiten, today's world.

The Voideslaver continued his story, saying that he asked the rebbetzin what she felt was the yetzer hora of their day. At first, she demurred, claiming that she was nothing more than an elderly woman. Then after some cajoling, she said, "It may very well be l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven."

In other words, deception is all around us. We find excuses for our children's lack of inspiration, rejection of discipline, and absence of respect. In truth, however, it is all part of the yetzer hora's deceptive powers. This is similar to those times when we are prepared to resort to anything, even character assassination, all in the name of l'shem Shomayim.

The woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. (12:15) Pharaoh's palace has been recorded in Jewish history as a place of infamy. Sarah Imeinu was taken there. Years later, her great-grandson, Yosef Hatzaddik, was taken there. Moshe Rabbeinu was raised there. This home was a source of much weeping by Jewish leaders. For a kadosh v'tahor, holy and pure individual to be brought into the home of a heathen, a home which was a center of idol worship and immorality, was a tragedy. How do Chazal perceive this experience? Do they view it as negatively as we do?

To respond to this question, let us go back in time to another great Jewish leader, Mordechai HaYehudi, to examine how he reacted to a similar situation. We know that after Haman's diabolical plan to destroy the Jews was thwarted, and he was unmasked, Achashveirosh gave Haman's mansion to Mordechai, who proceeded to move in. It later became a bais hamedrash.

Now, imagine, if you will, the government decides to give away the home of the country's greatest villain, a person whose cruelty is matched only by his evil: Would we expect a gadol hador, Torah giant and preeminent spiritual leader, to accept the offer and move in? The average person would probably spit or throw stones at the house when he walks by, and we expect a gadol to move in? This was a home that was the source of terror and murder against the Jews. How could a tzaddik live there?

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, asks this question, and consequently, derives from here that apparently the Torah's perspective is different than ours. The Torah teaches us that specifically such a home, which was the source of so much anguish for the Jewish People, should be the place where a tzaddik should now live. The tears that it catalyzed, the pain that it caused, the persecution that it instigated, eventually brought Klal Yisrael closer to Avinu she'ba'Shomayim, our Father in Heaven. It brought home the realization that we have no one to rely on but Hashem. He is our only Savior.

Indeed, Chazal teach us that, Gedolah hasoras tabaas, "Greater is the removal of the ring" -- a reference to the moment Achashveirosh removed his ring and gave it to Haman, signifying his agreement to kill out all the Jews -- "than the admonition of forty-eight prophets," who reproached the Jewish People in an attempt to bring them back to teshuvah, repentance. Yes, Haman's house was a house of evil, but it catalyzed much good. It brought about the return of the Jewish People to Hashem. Pharaoh's palace was the cause for shedding many a tear, but it also was the house that brought Klal Yisrael to look up to Hashem and the consequent Exodus. The Torah looks at the end, the positive results. Perhaps, we should take our cue from the Torah and view life from a different perspective.

And when Avram heard that his kinsman (his brother, Lot) was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house. (14:14)

Empathy for another person is a character trait we should learn from Avraham Avinu. As soon as he heard that his nephew, Lot, was taken captive, he immediately assembled a small army and risked his life to save him. From a cursory perspective, it seems like the right thing to do. My nephew is in trouble - I go out to save him. Is that what we do? How often do we find a way to rationalize away our responsibility to our fellow man? Avraham had every reason to turn his back on Lot. It is not as if Lot did not ask for this by moving away from Avraham and seeking the lush, fertile land of Sodom. Lot was greedy; he received what he deserved.

Yet, Avraham did not act this way. He sought every reason to justify Lot's move and to risk his own life to rescue him from captivity. All too often the response to the suffering of another is apathy. Whatever happened to the "Jew" in us, as descendants of Avraham Avinu, who could not tolerate an injustice, even if the person on the receiving end probably "asked" for it? As Jews we are all part of one unit - one people - one nation. When another Jew in any part of the world suffers, we should feel it.

Life goes on. We hear constantly of Jews suffering throughout the world. Whether it is illness or persecution, they are suffering. We respond with some Tehillim, which we at first recite with feeling. After awhile, however, the emotion dissipates, and the feeling becomes less intense.

The Nazis that exterminated six million Kedoshim, martyrs, in the most inhuman manner were, for the most part, considered normal people. They did not look like beasts. For all intents and purposes, they did not act like beasts. They believed that Jews were a subculture and, therefore, a threat to the human race. They were indifferent to the persecution of innocent people, because they did not consider them people. They rationalized away their indifference. Thus, they were able to continue their dirty work without a heavy heart. It begins with rationalization, progresses onto indifference, and ends with downright cruelty. I recently read some poignant, but compelling, remarks made by a German Protestant minister, who, after himself being released from a Nazi concentration camp, said the following:

"In Germany: they first came for the Jews, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the gypsies, and I did not speak up, because I was not a gypsy.

Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Catholic. Then they came for me. And by that time, there was no one left to speak up."

Avraham Avinu taught the world, imbuing his descendants that the empathy we have for another person defines our humanness. Lot was Avraham's nephew. Yet, the Torah calls him his brother. When another Jew is in need, we do not dismiss our responsibility. He is our brother, and for a brother there is no rationalization - we just do it.

In an incredible mussar shmues, ethical discourse, delivered to an audience of elderly rabbis, Horav Yitzchak Aizik Sher, zl, reiterated the theme of kavod ha'briyos, heightened sensitivity to human beings and the importance of empathy. On a visit to America shortly before Rosh Hashanah of 1939, he addressed the august assemblage. He began by posing a question: "What are you worried about? Yom Ha'din, the Day of Judgement? You observe Shabbos and Kashrus; your integrity is impeccable; you do not speak lashon hora, slander, of anyone. So what is it that worries you?"

After a lengthy discourse, Rav Sher arrived at his response, "My friends, you are all fine, upstanding Jews, and you do not sin. Yet, you pick up the New York Times in the morning, read that a man was killed, and you continue to drink your coffee. How can you drink coffee when you read that a woman just became a widow and children lost a father? You should faint in anguish, but you do not. Why? Because you do not care how death affects other people. As long as it is not you or yours, you simply continue with your coffee. Yes. You have something to fear on the Yom Hadin, for the Ribono Shel Olam is stricter with the righteous than with ordinary people. On the Day of Judgment, you all have to be careful."

Rav Sher's message is timeless. Are we any different today? We read the paper; we listen to the news; the korbanos in Eretz Yisrael increase steadily, and to us it is a mere statistic. True, we recite Tehillim, but has our lifestyle been altered in any way? Do we continue with our cup of coffee, rationalizing our lack of empathy with our brethren throughout the world - and at home? When I recently asked this question of an individual, his response was, "Things are so bad, I can no longer read the paper with my breakfast; it is so depressing." This person simply has no clue. Are we any different?

Her mistress was lowered in her esteem. (16:4) Hagar's lack of emunah, belief, in Divine Providence, coupled with her insensitivity to others, resulted in her brazenness. She arrogantly called attention to the fact that she was able to conceive and bear Avraham's child, while Sarah, her mistress, despite having been with Avraham for so many years, still had no success in bearing a child. Obviously, from her perspective, she was more righteous than Sarah. Her first reaction was to claim superiority. Never did she allow herself to entertain the notion that there was a reason for Sarah's barrenness. It certainly could not have been Sarah's lack of virtue.

A similar episode occurred concerning Chana, the mother of Shmuel HaNavi. The Navi relates how she came to pray for a son. Eili, the Kohen Gadol, observed the peculiar manner in which she was praying, and he suspected her of imbibing a bit too much wine. He then proceeded to criticize her for her inappropriate demeanor. Her response was that she was bitter and was praying for a son. Immediately, Eili blessed her and wished her well. The rest is history. Horav Asher Kalman Baron, zl, Rosh Yeshivah in pre-World War II Ponevez, asks a penetrating question. Let us imagine that we witnessed this episode. Chana was praying strangely, acting like she was drunk, while her prayer was actually perfect, to the point that it pierced the Heavens and catalyzed Hashem's favorable response. She, nonetheless, at first glance gave the impression of being drunk. Eli, with all of his Ruach HaKodesh, Divine Inspiration, was taken aback by her prayer. He immediately rebuked her behavior and told her to leave. After she explained herself to Eli, should Chana have renounced him as Kohen Gadol? What kind of Kohen Gadol was he if his Ruach HaKodesh did not give him a "clearer picture" of Chana's prayer? At best, his reaction was certainly unbecoming a man of his stature. Yet, Chana

overlooked his error in judgment and accepted his blessing with utmost faith.

Rav Baron derives a very important principle from here. Even though at times we might have a question about a gadol's, Torah leader's, behavior, it does not in any way give us license to renounce him. He does not lose his credibility as the result of a single lapse. Regrettably, this is the case in the eyes of so many simple people. As soon as the gadol acts in a peculiar manner or issues a statement that might be a bit out of character, they immediately pounce on him and make disparaging comments.

Such behavior is to be expected of a Hagar - not a ben Torah! As soon as Hagar saw that she had conceived while her mistress, Sarah, had not yet been blessed, she immediately felt that Sarah's credibility had been impugned. Horav Nosson Wachtfogel, zl, supplements this, noting how people often prejudge an individual's character and religious persuasion by his external appearance and behavior. Rarely do they delve into the individual's atzmus, original and independent character. What they see is what they accept as belief. Let us ask ourselves, how many shidduchim, marriage negotiations, have been ruined because of what one saw and did not like? We have to see beyond what "appears", to observe what "is", before determining the nature of a person.

At the age of eight days every male among you must be circumcised. (17:12) The mitzvah of Bris Milah is a critical mitzvah which inducts the young boy into the Jewish People. Throughout the millennia our people have been willing to sacrifice their lives, so that this mitzvah may be fulfilled properly. Many stories have been recorded detailing the selfless devotion our People have demonstrated to this mitzvah. I recently read a story that poignantly portrays the lengths to which one Jewish mother actualized her perception of the mitzvah of Bris Milah.

It occurred in Soviet Russia at a time when the Communists were in power. Their disdain for any religion was overshadowed by their revulsion of Judaism. They made every attempt to extinguish whatever observance they could. Bris Milah was at the top of their list of mitzvos which they sought to abolish. Fearing for their lives, people adhered to the terrible decree. As usual, however, a few dedicated Jews were moser nefesh, risked their lives, to circumcise their sons clandestinely. The story is about a Jewish mother who, afraid for her life, refrained from circumcising her son. One day, she heard that another woman had a Bris performed for her son. She decided at that point that she, too, would have her son circumcised.

The Bris was performed, and they brought the infant back to the mother. Suddenly, she fainted. After a few minutes, they were able to revive her. The people who had assembled to share in this august experience looked at her incredulously and asked, "Why did you faint now? The Bris is over. If you were going to faint due to anxiety, you should have done so before the Bris." Her response should cause each of us to tremble. She said, "When my son was born, I wanted to hug and kiss him, but I could not. Every time I was about to kiss him, I held myself back, reasoning, 'How can I kiss my baby if I have not yet given my baby a Bris, thereby demonstrating my appreciation to Hashem for giving me this beautiful gift?' It was only after the child was circumcised that I allowed myself to kiss him. The experience was too much to handle, and I fainted."

Can we begin to grasp the depth of this woman's resolution and strength of character? She waited for this child and carried him in her womb for nine months. After she delivered a healthy baby, she did not kiss him until she had shown her appreciation to her Benefactor. This is the type of Jew that lives on, the Jew whom the Russians could not break: the Torah Jew.

Avraham Avinu rose to the occasion. Hashem tested him when He told him to leave and go to another home. It was a significant test, but Avraham passed it. Certainly, to pick oneself up, to leave one's roots, takes incredible conviction. Avraham heard the call, however, and he listened. Interestingly, Lot, Avraham's nephew, also left with Avraham, even though he personally did not hear the call. In effect, Lot withstood a much greater trial than Avraham did. If this is the case, what happened to Lot? He ended up in Sodom, the city that established the standard for evil. In other words, Lot went to the extreme opposite of Avraham. What happened to cause such a transformation?

Horav Yehudah Leib Chasman, zl, notes that this phenomenon is not uncommon. Indeed, we see well-meaning individuals who seek the truth and strive to change their ways, to no avail. What is it? Why do some succeed, while others just simply cannot effect any change in their habits? The difference, explains Horav Chasman, lies in the "clean-up job" one is prepared to undertake prior to attempting to reach a higher moral/spiritual plane. One who seeks to acquire the attributes and virtues, the fear of G-d, and the character refinement that comprise the characteristics of a Torah Jew must first purge himself of his "old" habits, his tendency to evil and his base moral behavior. Only then can he acquire the "good" that a life of Torah has to offer.

One cannot mix the two together. Studying Torah and performing mitzvos just do not coincide with contemporary moral values. What is normal for today's society is generally not in-sync with the Torah's viewpoint. Consequently, Hashem told Avraham, "Lech lecha m'e artzecha," "Go for yourself from your land." Although one first leaves his home, then his city and only as a last resort does he leave his land, Hashem suggested a departure from the norm. He was addressing the habits and tendencies that had become ingrained in Avraham as a result of his environment. It was much easier for Avraham to distance himself from the traits which were not intrinsic to him. Thus, the effect of "his land" would be much easier to expunge. Hashem wanted him to work his way up. First, he was to rid himself of the easy habits, those that had not really taken hold of him. Afterwards, he was to focus on the effect of the "city." Last, he was to free himself of the effect most integral to him, the immediate environment of his home. Only then, could he strive to achieve spiritual perfection in "the land that I will show you."

This is the difference between Avraham and Lot: Avraham left everything when he turned towards Hashem. Lot, on the other hand, took along all of his baggage.

Go for yourself from your land. (12:1)

Horav Nachum, zl, m' Chernobul spent a good part of his life involved in the special mitzvah of Pidyon Shevuiim, redeeming those who have been taken captive by gentiles. He went from door to door, constantly seeking support from the wealthy Jewish householders so that he could continue his holy work. Once, when the Rebbe was in Zitomir, the gentiles in the community libeled him, causing his arrest by the police and consequent incarceration. While he was languishing in prison a tzaddik visited him. During their conversation, he shared with him a pshat, practical explanation, of the above pasuk.

Avraham Avinu exemplified devotion to the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim, welcoming the wayfarer. He would seek out every opportunity to assist and reach out to the traveler or anyone who did not have a permanent place in which to live. He always wanted to do more and more. Hashem told him, "Go out on the road. Start traveling from place to place. Become a wayfarer yourself. You will then

know and become acutely sensitive to everything the traveler or the homeless person needs."

The tzaddik looked at Rav Nachum and said, "You too, Rebbe, are a great redeemer of captives. Hashem has 'granted' you the opportunity to learn first-hand what it means to be a prisoner among the gentiles, so that you will have even greater sensitivity to their needs." The lesson we derive from this narrative is powerful. What is no less significant, and should be emphasized, is how these people viewed every incident that occurred in their lives. In their minds everything was for a purpose and provided a lesson.

Go for yourself from your land... to the land that I will show you. (12:1)

This is considered one of the ten nisyonos, trials, which Avraham Avinu underwent as a demonstration of his unequivocal faith in Hashem. Apparently, when Hashem told Avraham to go "to the land that I will show you," he did not give him a road-map spelling out the exact coordinates of this land. Otherwise, the test would not have been that compelling. When there was a famine in the land, Avraham decided to go to Egypt. He was not told to do so by Hashem, as his son Yitzchak would later be told to go to Egypt. He did it on his own. Why? From where did Avraham get the "permission" to leave for Egypt?

Horav Levi Yitzchak, zl, m'Berdichev explains that Hashem did not appear to Avraham to direct him concerning where he should go. Avraham acted on his own for a very good reason. A person who believes with conviction that nothing in this world "just happens," but, rather, everything is directed by Hashem, will view every occurrence, whether great or small, as being representative of the "etzba Elokim," finger of G-d. The Jew should not have the word "coincidence" in his lexicon. Nothing is coincidence - everything emanates from Hashem! It is just that for the average person it is difficult to plumb the depths and determine what it is that Hashem is asking of us, or what message He is conveying. Avraham Avinu's acute perception of Hashem enabled him to understand where it was that Hashem wanted him to go - and he went.

When there was a famine in the land, Avraham saw the "handwriting on the wall"; he was being sent another message. He did not say, "Since Hashem promised me the land, He does not want me to leave." No - he understood the underlying motif of the famine. Hashem wanted him to leave. This is the sign of a great person, setting the standard to which we should all aspire. We must see Hashem's guiding Hand in every incident that occurs and note how it affects us both individually and collectively, so that we can respond accordingly. Regrettably, some of us just do not have a clue. We are privy to events that clearly communicate a compelling message. Do we respond? Or do we continue with business as usual? Surely, every one of us can remember an episode in our lives when we saw the Yad Hashem, Hand of the Almighty, guiding us. Did we follow Him?

*He proceeded on his journeys from the south to Beth-El to the place where his tent had been first.
(13:3)*

Rashi says that these "journeys" were part of an original itinerary, implying that Avraham Avinu stayed in the same places that he had stayed on his way to Egypt. Chazal derive from this seemingly insignificant detail that one should not change his usual lodgings unless he has had a bad experience

there. Otherwise, he discredits himself, implying that he is either hard to please or of an unsavory character. He also gives the impression that his original lodgings were unsatisfactory, thereby harming the host's reputation. While we can understand this approach, should the individual settle for substandard accommodations?

Horav Avraham Pam, zl, explains that Avraham was teaching us more than a lesson in etiquette; rather, he was imparting an understanding of Jewish values. Avraham left as a poor man and returned as a wealthy man laden with gold and silver. He did not act like those nouveau riche who, as a result of their small-minded perception of life and their huge ego due to a low self-esteem, flaunt their wealth and call attention to themselves. No - Avraham did not waste his money; he did not believe in ostentatious display of wealth. He took the newfound wealth and gave it to charity. He went back to the same motel and continued with a lifestyle very similar to the one he had enjoyed before Hashem conferred His blessing upon him. Surely, he did not waste his G-d-given gift on foolishness. To paraphrase Rav Pam, "Avraham Avinu recognized that any money in his possession that was superfluous to his needs was a deposit from Hashem to be guarded and held in safekeeping until the Almighty directed him where to spend it. How could he take for his own personal use that which belonged to the Almighty?"

And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock... so Avram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between me and you...for we are kinsmen. (13:8,9)

It is interesting to note that the pasuk begins with the word riv, quarreling, in lashon zachar, male gender, and ends with the word, merivah, which is lashon nekeivah, female gender. Is there a reason for this change? The Shelah HaKadosh, explains Avraham's dialogue with Lot in the following manner: Avraham said to Lot, "Let us stop this quarrel, this riv right now, before it blows into a full-scale merivah," [in the female gender]." The female symbolizes birth and growth. Let us quell this isolated disagreement before it gives birth and generates many disputes and quarrels. As long as it is in the male gender, then it cannot reproduce and it is controllable. Once it becomes a merivah, there will be no end to it.

Avraham emphasized the fact that he and Lot were "anashim achim," brothers, kinsmen. A fight between brothers has far greater ramification than discord among two unrelated people. It is so much more difficult to resolve the differences.

An anecdote supplements this thought. Once gold asked steel, "Why do you make so much noise when you are hit? I am also struck by a hammer and hardly any sound/noise emanates from me". Steel answered, somewhat dispirited, "You are struck by another metal, thus your pain is not so great. I am struck by steel, my brother, causing deeper pain and humiliation." The hurt caused by a brother penetrates so much deeper and endures so much longer. Are we not all brothers?

And Lot journeyed from the east; thus they parted, one from his brother. (13:11)

In this parsha, we learn about two men who were challenged with the trial of osher - wealth. They each chose a different road. Lot, Avraham's nephew, traveled with him. During this period, he was

his trusted disciple. When they came to the crossroads, Avraham said to Lot, "Separate from me." The Torah writes that Lot took one look at the lush, fertile land of the Jordan, and he chose to move there. It was his chemdas hamamon, desire for riches, his love of money, that drove him to leave his rebbe, the holy Avraham. He traded his opportunity for spiritual advancement for his material yearnings. He abandoned Avraham for the wicked people of Sodom. Chazal teach us that Lot did not merely separate himself from Avraham. He severed his relationship with Hashem. They interpret the word, "mikedem," from the east, as a reference to the "Kadmono Shel Olam," "The ancient One of the World," suggesting, "I want neither Avraham, nor his G-d." The Alter, zl, m'Kelm, questions Chazal. From where do they derive this statement from Lot? What makes them believe that this is the underlying meaning of his separation from Avraham?

He explains that Lot had been prepared to relinquish his relationship with an adam kadosh, holy person, such as Avraham, and move to a country such as Sodom, the standard-bearer of evil, just because of his lust for wealth. This could only have occurred after he had already forsaken Hashem. One whose heart beats with a warmth, an emotion, a connection to the Almighty cannot "throw it all away" for a few extra dollars. It can only be that he had already divorced himself from the Almighty. This is a powerful and penetrating statement, one that perhaps gives us a greater insight into contemporary society and its lack of moral restraint. Contemporary society has long ago traded religion for materialism, obliterating the inherent moral restraints.

Fear not Avram, I am a shield for you, your reward is very great. (15:1)

Avraham Avinu triumphed in his war with the four kings. This was the first "world war." Upon returning victorious from the battlefield, Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, greeted him with bread and wine. The king of Sodom also gave tribute to him. After this war, after the unparalleled victory, Hashem appeared to Avraham and told him, "Do not be afraid, I will be a shield for you." This is enigmatic. Should not Hashem have appeared to Avraham before the war, to encourage him, to give him hope for victory? Avraham was not entering the battle with a large, strong army. He had just 318 soldiers with him. There are even those that contend that Avraham only had his faithful servant, Eliezer, whose Hebrew name is the numerical equivalent of 318. It was as he was going to battle against such formidable odds that Avraham needed the encouragement.

Horav Aryeh Levine, zl, explains that specifically after Avraham had emerged victorious that he needed Hashem's reassurance. After they had suffered defeat, the enemy surely would not accept their humiliation. They had to regroup and attack with greater viciousness to save face, to prove to the world that they were truly superior to Avraham. Indeed, after they were defeated, they became like a wounded animal whose pain is intense and whose emotional state demands one thing - revenge.

We may suggest that the same is true in our daily fight with our archenemy - the yetzer hora, evil inclination. When we succeed in vanquishing him, we might think that the war is now over. Now, especially, we must be on the lookout for his reprisal. It would be a serious mistake to ignore the yetzer hora's hold upon us. It is when we revel in our victory that we lose, falling prey to him.

There was a famine in the land. (12:10)

The Midrash enumerates ten famines throughout history. The first occurred during the days of Adam HaRishon; the second was during Lemech's life; the third struck during the time of Avraham Avinu. The last and most severe famine will precede the advent of Moshiach Tzidkeinu in the "end of the days." This will not be just another famine. It will be, as the Navi describes, "Not (a) hunger for bread; nor (a) hunger for water; but (only) to listen to the word of Hashem." It will be a spiritual famine when people will be spiritually languished, craving for the word of G-d. We must ask ourselves: Is this a curse, or a blessing? Is there a greater blessing than having people thirst for Torah? The Ponevezer Rav, zl, gives a practical response which has profound meaning in contemporary times. During a famine, people begin to settle for less. Overnight, a slice of bread, a piece of vegetable, a drop of soup becomes an entire meal. In order to survive a famine, one conditions his body and mind to expect less. Suddenly, drops and crumbs are sufficient; anything is enough. Even quality control becomes a figment of the past. Regardless of the food's condition, its size and physical state, even if it might pose a health hazard - it is food.

Regrettably, during a spiritual famine the circumstances are much the same. Everybody wants to learn, but do they care what they learn, from whom they learn, where they learn and how much they learn? Suddenly, a quick vort, a short Torah thought, becomes a shiur, lesson. A tape is a lecture, regardless if one listens to it in the car, while jogging, or in places that are inappropriate. No longer is quality a concern; profundity is a word of the past; the source, however questionable, has no significance. As long as there is Torah, the standards of quality, purity and source are of no consequence. Yes, this is the result of a spiritual famine. Now, let us ask ourselves, "Is this truly a blessing?" It seems as if the Navi might have had a different insight into the effect of a famine.

There was a famine in the land, and Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there for the famine was severe in the land. (12:10)

Anyone who comprehends the virtue of Avraham, his greatness, kedushah, holiness, and devotion to the Almighty would never critique his actions. We would never question his going down to Egypt, or his claim that Sarah was his sister, because we understand who Avraham Avinu was. The Patriarch was the paradigm of devotion to Hashem. Certainly, everything that he did was thoroughly thought-out and carefully weighed. He would never do anything that might be inappropriate. Yet, the Ramban clearly states that Avraham Avinu "chatah chait gadol," inadvertently sinned a great sin, by bringing his wife into a situation of sin. He should have trusted that Hashem would save him. Furthermore, the Ramban critiques Avraham's desertion of the land during a period of famine. Once again, he should have relied solely upon Hashem. As a result of Avraham's actions, Hashem decreed the Egyptian exile upon his descendants.

The Ramban's critique is nothing short of frightening! We are referring to a giant of spiritual giants, Avraham Avinu. At the tender age of three, he recognized that there is an Almighty Supreme Being that created and rules the world. He determined that it was halachically and morally correct to descend to Egypt. Yet, the Ramban not only critiques his actions, but even claims that he performed the transgression for which we were exiled! How are we to understand this?

Horav Yehudah Leib Chasman, zl, comments, that the Ramban's critique notwithstanding, we derive a profound lesson from this incident. Even if logically and halachically a certain approach appears to be correct, one may not paskin, decide, for himself. We must be objective in every decision. While Avraham Avinu ostensibly thought out his decision carefully and meticulously, he was still

rendering a decision for himself. He lacked the degree of total objectivity that is essential in every rendering of Jewish law and perspective.

There is a story told concerning the Shach, one of the most respected and accepted poskim in halachah, who once had a litigation with a distinguished member of the Vilna community. They decided to travel to Novaradok to Rav Avraham Abba, the rav of that community, who was a great saint and brilliant Torah scholar, to adjudicate their dispute. No one outside of Vilna knew the Shach by face, although his reputation certainly preceded him. Before they departed, the Shach went through the various poskim, Shulchan Aruch, and Rambam to determine what was the law in regard to his dispute. He came to the conclusion that the law sided with him.

After they presented their claims before Rav Avraham Abba, he excused himself and went to his study to determine the law. After awhile, he came out and rendered his decision - in favor of the other party. The Shach was shocked, to say the least. He immediately questioned the rav about the reasoning that led to this conclusion. Rav Avraham Abba went to the bookcase and selected a volume on Shulchan Aruch entitled, "Sifsei Kohen," i.e.; Shach, and pointed to a similar decision rendered by the "author." When the Shach saw this, he turned to the rav and said, "I am the author of this volume. I now understand what Chazal mean when they say, "A man cannot see anything to his own disadvantage" (Shabbos 119a). I did not have the necessary objectivity to render this decision when it affected me personally." As a post script, this idea applies to all of us regardless of the area of dispute. One cannot see clearly if he has a personal interest in the decision.

He retraced his route from the southland through Beis El as far as the place where his tent had originally been. (13:3)

Rashi says that Avraham returned to the places he had stayed during his original trip to pay the bills he had incurred. Rashi indicates that the Patriarch was in dire financial straits when he left, a situation which is not suggested either by the text, or the commentators. Furthermore, who would give credit to a fugitive? Perhaps, he might have found one or two "decent" innkeepers to help him, but it seems something more had occurred.

Horav Yechezkel Mi'kozmir, zl, takes a different approach towards understanding Rashi's remark. Avraham Avinu devoted his life to Hashem. Wherever he went, with whomever he spoke, "Hashem" was on his lips. He proclaimed the power of the Almighty, His creation of the world, and His constant supervision of its every movement. He reached out to a pagan world, calling its inhabitants to come together to serve Hashem. Many seized the moment and followed Avraham. Others, however, were bothered by the fact that Avraham was a nomad. Why does a merciful G-d let his faithful servants suffer endlessly? Why does He not reward them with happiness, peace and rest? Avraham could not really have explained to the people that his constant wanderings were actually a test to determine his faithfulness. How could he have explained to pagans that Hashem's tests constituted an act of love, tempering his faith in the Almighty? So, Avraham remained "in debt" of his fellows. He owed them an answer. He returned to the land wealthy, powerful, distinguished, world-renowned, as a result of his incident with Pharaoh. He was now able to "compensate" his detractors. He was in a position to demonstrate to them just some of the reward Hashem has in store for his faithful servants.

It is not really much different today. People question why many of Hashem's dedicated ones live in abject poverty; why they suffer; why they lack many material comforts. Can we explain to them this

is Hashem's way; it is His test of faith, His tempering the faith of His devotees? In truth, we are not obligated to provide a response. Indeed, for the scoffer and skeptic, no answer will suffice. We will just have to wait for that glorious day when Hashem will enable us to "pay back our debts."

And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock...So Avram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between me and you...Please separate from me...And Lot journeyed from the east; thus they parted one from his brother. (13:7, 8,11)

Rashi cites the Midrash that interprets the word "kedem" as a reference to the "Ancient One." Chazal comment that by leaving Avraham, Lot was actually distancing himself, "miKadmono Shel Olam," "from Hashem, the Ancient One of the world," saying, "I want neither Avraham nor his G-d!" These are strong words. Let us analyze what this pasuk relates about Lot. Here is a man who was not only related to Avraham, he was also his close disciple. He did not leave Avraham on his own volition; Avraham told him to leave! On the contrary, he had learned so much about chesed, kindness, and interpersonal relationships from Avraham, why would he want to leave him? Moreover, he considered himself to be Avraham's physical and spiritual heir. Even after he left, he continued to observe and maintain Avraham's legacy of chesed. How do we disregard Lot's positive traits and attribute such apostasy to him?

Horav Gershon Liebman, zl, explains that the Torah delves into one's personality and writes the truth. The Torah does not necessarily present what we see, but rather the reality of one's true nature. Lot truly followed Avraham and conformed to Avraham's code of behavior and religious observance. This was, however, only an external display. His true character was not like that of Avraham. When Avraham told him to separate, Lot should have refused! How could he leave his rebbe, the wellspring of his spiritual sustenance? How could he be such an ingrate to Avraham? Everything he possessed was the result of his relationship with Avraham. If he had been a real mentch, he never would have left. When his herdsmen complained to him, he should have immediately silenced them. He did not, because he had no gratitude. He just took and took. Instead of begging Avraham's forgiveness for the inappropriate behavior of his herdsmen, he said he would leave. Does this sound like a mentch?

Chazal tell us that the source of Lot's attitude toward Avraham was his attitude towards Hashem. One does not become an ingrate overnight. Lot had already distanced himself from Hashem. He had no interest in developing his spirituality. We can see this from his choice of places to move - Sodom, a city that exemplified evil incarnate. This is the place to which Lot gravitated. Does this sound like an individual who cared about his spiritual growth? The Torah depicts people as they really are.

Accordingly, Sforno offers a similar explanation in his commentary to the incident with Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, and the angel who confronted her in the desert as she ran from Sarah. The angel asked her, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" She responded, "I am running away from Sarai, my mistress." The angel thereupon told her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination." What dialogue ensued between Hagar and the angel? Did not the angel know from whom she was running? Sforno explains that the angel was actually admonishing her for leaving a home that was so replete with kedushah u'taharah, holiness and purity. "How could you leave such a holy place - to go to Egypt, a country infamous for its immorality and evil?" She responded in the same manner as Lot did: "I did not leave willingly, I am running away." The angel told her to return because, regardless of the conditions, the home she was leaving was well worth the extra hardship she might have to endure.

Lot did not go back - because he did not want to go back. He looked for excuses to justify going to Sodom. Hagar did not have the complete proper attitude, the humility necessary to absorb the

kedushah and spiritual refinement that permeated Avraham Avinu's home. While she did return to Avraham's home, she had no qualms about sending Yishmael to Egypt to seek a wife. In order to become inspired, in order for the educational process to work, the student must have the correct attitude, a willingness to acquiesce to his spiritual mentor. Lot did not have this attitude. Hagar's positive attitude was superficial. Need we say more?

And Sarai afflicted her, so she fled from her. (16:6)

The Ramban comments that Sarai's seeming ill-treatment of Hagar was held against her, to the point that Hagar was rewarded with having a son, Yishmael, to compensate for her suffering. When Hagar heard that she would have a son who would be a wild, uncontrolled person, she was willing to return, even to suffer under Sarai's domination, just to have her own son. We glean from here an incredible and frightening thought. Hagar went back b'mesiras nefesh, with self-sacrifice, just to have a son that will persecute Jews. Is it any wonder that until this very day we suffer so much from the ruthless Arabs. Their grandmother's gratitude bequeathed them a legacy of mesiras nefesh. This mesiras nefesh, however, was based upon sheker, perfidious intentions.

It can, therefore, never succeed against one who battles them with the power of emes, truth. In contrast, we have been bequeathed a legacy of mesiras nefesh - one founded in emes, nurtured and sustained in emes. Yishmael cannot triumph against emes. Regrettably, emes is not always the primary focus in this constant battle.

Go for yourself from your land. (12:1)

Hashem is telling Avraham to leave for his own benefit. As long as he remained in Charan, he would not merit the privilege of begetting children or the opportunity of successfully reaching out to a pagan society. Interestingly, Chazal consider Avraham Avinu's move to be one of the asarah nisyonos, ten trials, to which he was subjected. This seems questionable. Imagine that someone who is r"l childless is told that, by traveling out of the country, he will meet a famous doctor who has successfully treated people who previously had not been blessed with children. Would anyone consider this a trial and resist departing? Moreover, if he is told that his and the doctor's expenses will be paid for, he would immediately run to see that doctor. In this case, Hashem is telling Avraham to go from here to Eretz Yisrael where he will be blessed with children, honor and prosperity. Yet, Chazal consider it to be a trial! Why is this?

Horav Ovadiah Yosef, Shlita, explains that Avraham was concerned about the inroads he had made in this community and the spiritual loss that would ensue if he were to prematurely leave. It was well-known that he was miraculously saved from the fiery furnace which Nimrod, the evil king, had prepared for him. Indeed, Chazal tell us that Hashem personally saved Avraham. No doubt, such an example of Kiddush Hashem would leave an indelible impression on even the most ardent pagan. Certainly, this miracle provided Avraham Avinu with access to everyone. He succeeded in bringing many people into the fold. Suddenly, the "star" of the show was leaving, going to a new place where nobody had heard of him or of the miracle that he had experienced. What should he do?

Hashem explained to Avraham that one who believes in Him as a result of logical deduction will maintain his conviction - in contrast to the individual who is attracted by miracles. He was to go to Eretz Yisrael in order to teach the people about monotheism. No miracles, no wonders. Just teaching, learning and caring, and he would succeed. We have only to look at contemporary society to see how true this still is today. Those who have "returned" as a result of artificial inspiration or exposure to miracles do not necessarily remain for the duration of the "trip." Those whose belief is founded in sagacious rationalization of the facts, coupled with emunah, true belief, maintain their conviction, regardless of the challenges they might encounter.

And Hashem said to Avram, "Go for yourself." (12:1)

The words "Lech Lecha," "Go for yourself" have a profound meaning according to the Sifrei Kaballah. Hashem instructed Avraham to go to the source of his neshamah, soul, to introspect, to look deeper into himself. Horav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, zl, explains that man is not expected to achieve a level higher than his potential. He is expected to maximize his competencies to attain a level of success and accomplishment commensurate with his G-d-given faculties. He cites the tzaddik, Rav Zushia of Annipole, who said, "When I arrive at the Olam Ha'Emes, the World of Truth, if they ask me, 'Zushia, why did you not attain the spiritual level of the Baal Shem Tov,' I will not be frightened, for I am not in the same "league" as the Baal Shem. And if they say to me, 'Zushia, why were you not like the Mezritcher Maggid?' I will also not be concerned. For, how could anyone expect someone like me to become as great as the Mezritcher? What frightens me is when they will ask me, 'Zushia, why weren't you Zushia?' Why did you not become what you could have been? Why did you not maximize your potential and become the gadol that you were destined to be? "

This story should carry a deep meaning for all of us. Regrettably, many of us live two lives: ours and someone else's. We push ourselves to be someone we are not, all the while neglecting to strive to be who we are destined to be. Unfortunately, parents sometimes turn their children into neurotics in an attempt to transform them into someone other than themselves. If they would only focus upon their child's actual potential, instead of always looking "next door," they and their children would be much happier people. As the Rebbe Reb Zushia said, "We will be called to task for not maximizing our talents, not those of someone else." Unfortunately, those for whom this message is meant are too concerned with being someone else, with the superficial image which they cast.

They left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan. (12:5)

The primary rule in spiritual growth is never to lose focus of one's goals. Horav Leib Chasman, zl, emphasizes the importance of setting an objective and not losing sight of it - even momentarily. A short lapse can cause one to fall short of his goal or, even worse, fall behind his starting point. Often, we accept upon ourselves the obligation to perform good deeds, we undertake lofty endeavors, all very worthwhile and within our grasp - if we abide by our agenda. We begin our quest, steadily moving forward, heading towards our goal. After awhile, however, something briefly distracts us. Before we realize it, we are no longer on track. Our enthusiasm has waned, our desire has dissipated. How did this happen? People think that as long as they are on track, everything will be fine. This is not so. One must maintain the same drive and enthusiasm he displayed when he started. The slightest deviation from that

early elation can bring us down, where we fall into the grips of the yetzer hara, evil inclination. In our twice-daily recitation of the Shema, we say, "And these matters that I command you today shall be on your heart." Chazal teach us that we should view the Torah as if it is being given to us today - fresh and exciting, not stale and archaic. The Torah should constantly stimulate us. It should challenge us intellectually and emotionally. By taking this perspective, we are ensured that we will not tire of it.

This is the underlying meaning of our pasuk, "They left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan." With every step that Avraham took on his way, he revitalized Hashem's imperative. He never waned from following the command to go to Canaan. Every movement represented a mitzvah, performed with excitement and joy. Even when he was at the last step prior to entering the land, Avraham maintained his original focus. His initial enthusiasm continued as if he had just now been commanded.

And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock; and the Canaanite and the Peruzi were dwelling in the land. (13:7)

This seemingly innocuous pasuk is the source of much homiletic exposition by the commentators. Why does the Torah begin by saying that there was a "riv," "quarrel", between Avraham and Lot's herdsmen? In this instance, the Torah uses the word "riv," which is the masculine gender of the word. On the other hand, when Avraham speaks with Lot, he says, "Let there not be a merivah between us," using the female gender. The Shlah HaKadosh explains that Avraham sought to emphasize to Lot the gravity of machlokes, controversy, and its tragic consequences. He said a simple "riv," which is the masculine gender, can quickly swell in proportion and transform into a merivah, in the feminine gender, implying the ability to give birth to more and more strife. Avraham told Lot to stop the quarrel now, while it could still be contained, before it veered out of control. How true this is! How often does a simple argument within a community blow up into an all-out machlokes, with everybody taking sides? It takes a wise man to know when to quell an argument. It takes an even wiser man not to argue at all.

The Avnei Azel renders this pasuk homiletically, applying it to the strife that revolves around Torah chinuch, education. In the Talmud Shabbos 119A, Chazal state that Yerusholayim was destroyed because that prevented the young children from studying Torah. This means that Torah education, the yeshivah day-school movement, was not one of their priorities. When our children's education takes second place to everything else, the future of Klal Yisrael appears very bleak. For what do we need Yerusholayim, if there will be no Jews to inhabit it? This idea is underscored in Sefer Eichah 1:5,6, "Her young have gone into captivity before the enemy. Gone from Tzion is all her splendor." When the young have been taken captive, Tzion no longer manifests her splendor. The children are the hope, the future, the beauty of a community. If we destroy our spiritual heritage, we will be left with nothing but destruction.

The shepherds in this pasuk symbolize those who shepherd children. This alludes to controversy regarding the best manner in which to teach Jewish children. There is one Torah -- and one approach to teaching it - b'ruach Yisrael sabah," in accordance with the traditional approach. Torah cannot be watered down or subjected to secular supplementation. The controversy often arises as to whether to follow the shepherds of Avraham, the path of Torah chinuch as forged by Avraham, or whether to follow the materialistic secular approach of Lavan. When this occurs, the Canaanite and Perizi take control of the land; the children assimilate, because they have nothing with which to fortify themselves against the onslaught of the street/society.

Rashi questions the relationship between the second half of the pasuk, which tells of the

Canaani and Perizi dwelling in the land, to the quarrel between the herdsmen. Horav Zeev Weinberger, Shlita, quotes from "Seforim" that claims that the notion of these two pagan nations dwelling "peacefully" in the land is a critique against Avraham. The pagans "seem" to be able to get along, while Avraham's shepherds are embroiled in controversy! What happens among Jews is relative to the rest of the world. If everyone is at peace while we unfortunately are at strife, our discord becomes magnified.

Horav Weinberger takes a practical approach to understand the juxtaposition. There are those among us whose liberal perspective takes a dim view of those who criticize other Jews as long as we are in exile. They feel we should not wash our "dirty laundry" in public. We should ignore the spiritual shortcomings of some of our brethren in light of "public opinion." This is categorically wrong. Avraham was surrounded by pagans from all sides. Yet, when Lot's shepherds were acting inappropriately, he had no qualms about rebuking them. We must do what is right, regardless of who is watching. When other Jews are profaning the Torah, our primary concern should be to protest vigorously, with dignity - but never to ignore the disgrace because we are concerned about what the world community will say? We have to act with a demeanor becoming the Jewish People, but we must act.

We see this idea expressed in Moshe Rabbeinu's actions towards Dasan and Aviram, his two nemesis', who were fighting with one another. The Torah records two times that Moshe "went outside." On the first day, he encountered an Egyptian striking a Jew. On the second day, he came upon Dasan and Aviram clashing. What is the connection between these two encounters? Horav Weinberger suggests that although the Jews were subject to Egyptian captivity and their every activity was scrutinized, Moshe had no compunction about admonishing two Jews who were not acting "Jewish." While we should be cognizant of what the world around us thinks, this awareness should not constitute a primary factor in our behavior or policy formation.

And He (Hashem) said: "Gaze, now, towards the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!" And He said to him, "So shall your offspring be!" (15:5)

In order to understand the foregoing simile, we must assume that the reference is to Avraham's descendants throughout the millennia. Otherwise, how are we to understand the inability to count the Jewish People? Are we that great in number that we cannot be counted? On the other hand, we find in the beginning of Sefer Devarim (1:10) that the Torah states: "Behold, you are like the stars of heaven in abundance." Rashi attributes this comparison to the eternal nature of the heavenly bodies. As they last forever, so, too, will the Jewish People be blessed with permanence.

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, suggests a novel exposition of this pasuk. The reason we cannot count the stars is that they cannot be seen. If we look up at the sky we can tally the number of stars that we observe. There are thousands of stars in the sky, however, that are so distant from us that we cannot see them. Consequently, they cannot be counted.

Klal Yisrael has its own unique infiniteness. We are all connected to an eternal source of life, encompassing every Jew who ever lived and is yet to be born. This is the concept of "V'chayei olam nota b'socheinu," "And (He has) implanted eternal life within us." Indeed, if one were to count the Jewish People and announce the total, he would not only be wrong, it would be a denial of the eternity of Klal Yisrael. Klal Yisrael is one eternal continuum in which every Jew is included. As the stars cannot be counted, so, too, is the number of Jews not within the parameters of human perception.

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