



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 12, 2013

Lech Lecha

You Are A Superstar



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Have you ever looked up to the stars? What transformative message do they contain? What can they teach us?

Now, there are stars and there are stars. What is the difference between a superstar on earth and a superstar in heaven?

What is over 25 trillion miles away from us (one of the few things greater than the US deficit!), was shown to our ancestor nearly four millennia ago and that revelation contains a lesson for us today that is more relevant than ever? In short: You are a superstar.

With all types of superstars out there – from Hollywood to athletes – sometimes, you might wonder: “Am I star? Do I shine bright, illuminating the atmosphere and people around me? I don’t always feel like a star, perhaps I’m just along for the ride, orbiting around someone else’s charisma and energy?”

In this week’s Torah reading – Parshat *Lech Lecha* – we learn that Abraham had similar thoughts. Not necessarily about himself but about the future. He and Sarah had no children and he asked God how exactly he was meant to perpetuate his mission in this world if he had no children?

So God showed him the stars, and said: “So shall be your seed.”

You, me, he, she, we who are Sarah and Abraham’s children, are stars, superstars, heavenly rock stars. So let it shine!

Through a surprising analysis of this week’s parsha, a deeply moving story about a Down Syndrome child, and a powerful old Jewish parable, this sermon explains how a vision shown to Abraham nearly four millennia ago can change our lives today ... how we can learn to be the superstars we truly are.

MEMO FROM GOD: YOU ARE A SUPERSTAR!

Take-away message: You are a star, a heavenly light that illuminates the darkest night.

1. Star Struck (Joke)

The legendary pipe-wielding detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his trusted sidekick, Dr. John Watson, go out to the wilds on a camping trip. After sharing a hearty meal and a bottle of fine Bordeaux, they retire to their tent for the night.

At about 3 AM, Holmes nudges Watson and asks, “Watson, look up to the heavens and tell me what you see?”

Watson said, “I see millions of stars.”

Holmes asks, “And, what does that tell you?”

Watson replies, “Astronomically, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and we are small and insignificant. Horologically, it tells me that it’s about 3 AM. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?”

“It is elementary, my dear Watson,” says Holmes. “It tells me that someone has stolen our tent.”

2. Starry Eyed

Have you ever gone camping, or traveled in a desert? As night falls, you look up to the dark heavens above and a billion twinkling eyes look back at you. You are mystified, misty eyed; it is a truly mystical experience.

Of course, the astronomical star is not the only star out in the universe. There is also another type of star, the human star – the person who shines, glitters and twinkles in this world. There are superstars, rock stars, Hollywood stars, sports stars, rising stars and, also, fading stars.

Besides that, on earth we have *Four Star Restaurants, Five Star Hotels, Starbucks, Star Trek, Star Wars, Dancing With The Stars*, and the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

Stars, by definition, are very far away from us – whether they are up in heaven or up on the stage, or out on the field, or on the big screen. And this is part of their mystique. They are out of reach, untouchable.

No question: Stars, both those in heaven and on earth, have a wondrous power. What is this power and how does it affect us?

And what is the difference between the stars on earth and the stars in heaven? The stark and antithetical difference between them can teach us a tremendous lesson in life. And that lesson begins with this week's Torah reading.

3. A Star Trek: Parshat Lech Lecha

As we learn in Parshat *Lech Lecha*, Abraham – the first Jew and the reason we are all here today – had a big problem. He and his beloved wife, Sarah, had no children. Yet, God had promised him great reward for his righteous deeds. But to what avail was this reward if they had no children?

Abraham and Sarah were totally dedicated to the mission of building a family and a nation that would transform the universe into a home for the Divine. This nation would perpetuate, through kindness and virtue, the belief in One God for all generations to come. But how could this be achieved without children? A nation needs people!

As honest as he was, Abraham – who was called Abram then – opened up his heart to God and, as the Torah relates, shared his grievance:

And Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless ... You have given me no seed..."¹

"There is no future," Abraham told God. "You have not blessed Sarah and me with children so how do You expect us to bring Your Holy Presence into this world? True, I can share the message with everyone I meet, as I do now, but how will I pass it along to the next generation? Who will carry the torch?"

In response, God reassured Abraham, telling him that a child will spring from him and perpetuate the future. To illustrate the point, God took him outside...

And He said, "Please look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall be your seed."²

This is very poetic. Picture it – the Master of the World, the Creator of Existence, took Abraham outside and asked him to please look up to the heavens, count the stars, if he could ... and told him that so will be his descendants.

Is it very poetic? Indeed. But is it very practical?

The closest star to earth (not considering the sun) is over 25 trillion miles away! (That's one of the few things greater than the US deficit!). Many are billions of times that distance. Why, then, did God show Abraham such distant objects and not something a little closer to us – something that is a little more at hand, a little more tangible, like say the oceans, the leaves, the grains of sand on the beach? Indeed, earlier we do find God promising Abraham that his offspring will be as multiple as the "dust on the earth."³

So, God could have used the same metaphor again or another example from earth – something closer to home. Stars seem so far away, so intangible, stars only come out at night, and they cannot be touched, felt, or experienced?

¹Genesis 15:3-4.

²Genesis 15:5.

³Genesis 13:16. See also 22:17, 28:14.

Back then, the stars must have seemed even farther. Today, we have the tools to explore the heavens, to understand the power of a star, its chemical makeup and energy output. But back then there were no telescopes, no moon-landings, no missions to Mars, no satellites. Stars appeared unreachable.

So, God might have done better to compare Abraham's descendants to something that would seem more attainable. But God didn't. He must have had a good reason.

And so we ask: Why specifically stars?

4. Star Power

To answer that question, let's first define what makes a star a star.

What makes a star a star is its energy. While this is a hotly debated topic in the sciences, generally speaking, the difference between a star and another celestial body – say a planet or a moon or an asteroid – is that a star emits light produced by a nuclear reaction in its core,⁴ whereas other galactic bodies only shine by reflected light.

(By the way, this is true of human pop-stars as well. What makes them stars is their energy, the light and glitter they generate and give off, not just reflect. Yet, as we shall see, there is very big difference between a man-made star on earth and a divine star in heaven.)

If we were to put on special glasses and look at the closest star to earth – the sun – we would catch a glimpse of a star's astronomical power.

⁴ A star is a mass of gas held together and given its shape by its own gravity. Gravity is constantly squeezing the star, trying to make it collapse. The radiant pressure from the hot gas in the star's interior prevents this collapse. This is called hydrostatic support, or equilibrium. During most of the star's lifetime, the interior heat and radiation is provided by nuclear reactions at the center; this phase of the star's life is called the main sequence. In a main sequence star, the nuclear reaction in its core is created by the fusion of hydrogen nuclei into helium nuclei. The main sequence phase of a star is analogous to the adult life of a human through middle age. What happens after all the hydrogen has been fused into helium and the main sequence phase ends is determined primarily by the mass of the star.

(Interesting to note, in Latin the sun is called *sol*, as in *solar energy*, or *solar system*. “Sol,” is not far from “soul,” the star being the soul and energy of the earth.)

As we know, 99% of the earth’s energy comes from sunlight, which is but a fraction of the energy contained within the sun. Imagine this, if you can: everything on earth – from trees to animals to people to factories to air conditioners to computers to cars – is energized by one single star. (Or, better put, it is energized by God who put that star there as our power-plant, so to speak).

To put a star’s intense energy into further perspective: The closest stars to earth, after the sun – which are known as the “brown dwarves” – are trillions of miles away. This is an unfathomable distance! Yet, the light from these stars is visible to the naked eye of a human being on earth! This is astonishing! Can you imagine how much energy is contained within one of these stars to give off such light? It is humbling.

The vastness, the sheer scope of it, the size and energy, the seemingly infinite possibilities – all this is what makes a star a star. (Indeed, the word astronomical is used in the English language to refer to things of great proportions and vast ability.)

5. Twinkling Stars

There is a beautiful Chassidic teaching⁵ that compares the Jewish people to the stars twinkling in the heavenly skies. By their light, even one who walks in the darkness of night shall not falter. (And perhaps this is what Isaiah meant when he called the Jews “a light unto the nations.”⁶)

Every single Jew, man or woman, possesses the required moral and spiritual ability to inspire and encourage friends and acquaintances to become a beam of light.

⁵ HaYom Yom, 5 Mar-Cheshvan.

⁶ Isaiah 49:6.

This, says the Torah, is God's guarantee to Abraham, and the reason God took Abraham out to show him the stars. God wasn't merely showing Abraham the *quantity* of his offspring, God was also showing Abraham the *quality* of his offspring. "Each of your offspring," said God, "will be a star!"

Imagine the miracle: Exactly 3756 years ago, God showed a man the stars in heaven and promised him that his children would be like those stars. Now look around the room. Despite all that we have endured – the exiles and persecutions at the hands of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans ... despite the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms, and then the worst of the worst, the Holocaust – here we are, each of us a living/walking star. Just as God promised to Abraham thousands of years ago.

What are the odds that this promise would be fulfilled? That 100-year-old Abraham and his 90-year-old wife would have a child, and that child would have a child, and that child would have offspring, and that we would be here today talking about it?!

But make no mistake – the promise was fulfilled! And the Jewish people are like stars spread across the globe.

Every single Jew contains as much energy as the sun, enough energy to illuminate the darkest situations, even from millions of miles away!

Unlike an earthly star – say a movie star or star politician – the Jew can illuminate the world with a spiritual light so bright it can literally brighten the darkest night and help navigate the seas of life. For is not astronomy the navigation of existence?

6. Old Jewish Parable (Optional)

Here is a translation of an old Jewish parable:

In a great pine forest where the trees grew tall and majestic, there was one lonely apple tree. As winter came, snow would fall on the forest floor and on the branches of the little apple tree.

The big forest was all white and silent. One night the little apple tree looked up at the sky and, between the branches of the other trees, it saw the stars that seemed to be hanging from the boughs of the tall pine trees.

“How lucky those tall pine trees are,” it whispered, “I’d love to have stars hanging from my branches. Then I would feel truly special.”

A voice answered her gently, “Have patience little apple tree.”

Spring came, the snow melted, and tiny white and pink apple blossoms appeared on the branches of the little apple tree. People walking in the big forest would stop and admire the beautiful flowers, and birds would rest on the branches of the little apple tree.

But night after night, the little apple tree would look up at the sky, filled with millions of stars and cry out: “More than anything I want stars hanging from my branches ... just like the big pine trees.”

The voice asked: “Isn’t it enough that you offer soft shade to people, beautifully fragrant blossoms, and branches where the birds can rest and sing their songs?”

The little apple tree sighed and answered: “I’m sorry for sounding ungrateful, but that is just not special enough ... I like how I give others pleasure, but what I would really love is to have stars on my branches, instead of blossoms. Then I would feel truly special.”

“Patience,” answered the voice, “Have patience, little apple tree.”

And so the seasons changed again.

The branches of the little apple tree was covered with beautiful apples. People walking in the big forest, would all stop, reach up, pick an apple and eat it with pleasure. Still, when the night came, the little apple tree would cry out, “More than anything I want stars hanging from my branches. Then I would feel truly special.”

The voice asked: “But apple tree, isn’t it enough that you now have such wonderful apples to offer?” Without a word, the little apple tree would answer by shaking its branches from side to side.

An apple fell to the ground, from the top of the little apple tree, and when it hit the ground, it split open.

“Look,” said the voice. “Look inside yourself. What do you see?”

The little apple tree looked down and saw, that right in the middle of its apple was a star. “A star! I have a star!” cried the apple tree.

And the voice laughed gently and said, “So you do have stars on your branches ... You just didn’t know it.”

If we change how we hold the apple when we cut it – not from the stem down, but across its side, we will find its star. And maybe, if we change how we look at ourselves, we will find the star inside each of us.

7. Three Steps To Becoming A Star

But there is an obvious question you might be asking: “If I am a superstar, how come I don’t feel like a superstar? What can I do to bring out this star quality that God says I have?”

The Torah teaches us exactly how to discover our star:

And He took him outside, and He said, “Please look heavenward and count the stars...”

Why does this verse emphasize that God took Abraham outside (*vayotzei oto hachutzah*) to show him the stars? Because therein lies the secret to discovering your star. You have to go outside yourself and look upward in order to discover the star you are.

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, offers three interpretations of “outside,”⁷ and each of the three provides guidance how we, Abraham’s grandchildren, can see the stars that we truly are.

- *The literal simple interpretation is that God took Abraham outside, out of his tent to look up to heaven to see the stars.* To see the star that you are, you must go outside of your tent, your comfort zone. To see heaven and the stars therein, to see yourself as a shining star, you must go out and look upward and forward to the possibilities. As long as you remain trapped on the inside, tucked away safely within your little cozy, secure environment, you will not be able to see the stars – the potential you can reach.
- *According to homiletic take on things, God took Abraham out of his mindset.* Abraham was no slouch, he knew exactly what his destiny was. Abraham saw in the stars that he and Sarah would be childless. And this mindset, this informed calculation, caused Abraham to question the future. So God took him outside of his mindset and said, look up to the stars – the possibilities are endless! So, too, for us to see and recognize the stars we are, we have to get outside of our mindsets, outside of our human calculations that keep us limited.
- *Another homiletic interpretation is that God took Abraham out of the “hallow atmosphere of the universe.”* To show Abraham the stars, God took Abraham outside of this world, to have an out of body experience! So, too, we have to transcend our spheres and atmospheres, go beyond it all, go outside of this world, and look down at it from an elevated place, and then we can see that we are truly stars.

⁷ Here is a translation of Rashi’s commentary: And He took him outside: According to its simple meaning: He took him out of his tent, outdoors, to see the stars. But according to its Midrashic interpretation, He said to him, “Go out of your astrology,” for you have seen in the signs of the Zodiac that you are not destined to have a son. Indeed, Abram will have no son, but Abraham will have a son. Similarly, Sarai will not give birth, but Sarah will give birth. I will give you another name, and your destiny will change (Nedarim 32a, Genesis Rabbah 44:10). Another explanation: He took him out of the terrestrial sphere and lifted him above the stars. This explains the expression of looking down from above (Genesis Rabbah 44:12).

A rock star, pop star or movie star on earth lacks all these three elements. So their apparent star power is nothing more than a facade that quickly fades. Stars in heaven are eternal – “strong as the day they were created”⁸ because they are beyond earth, because they are transcendent.

For us to be stars – the stars shown to Abraham – we need to go out of ourselves, our comfort zones, our mindsets, our earth-bound perspectives. And then we can truly shine!

8. Looking Up to Heaven (Inspirational Story)

I heard this story from a friend who has a child with Downs Syndrome:

Once, after coming home from play group, his little girl was crying. “What’s the matter, my angel,” her father asked.

“Some of the kids today made fun of me. They said I looked strange.” And then she continued, “Every day, the teacher rewards one of the children with the ‘star of the day award.’ Everyone says that I will never get this award. It makes me so sad.”

“Don’t mind them,” her father replied, “you are the sweetest soul I know. You are my star. The most beautiful shining star of them all.”

Several months later, when the family went on vacation, the little girl asked to go outside out of the country home for a walk after dinner. Her older brother eagerly offered to go with her. All she did was stare up into the dark sky. The same thing happened the next night. And the night after that. Finally, her brother asked his little sister, “Why are you gazing into the heavens night after night?”

In her endearing innocence the little girl replied: “Daddy told me that I am a beautiful star. I am looking to find which star I am...”

⁸Yerushalmi Berochos 1:1.

Out of the mouths of babes: the deepest – and most moving truths – are often expressed by our children.

Yes, my friends, each one of us is a bright star, a unique source of light and energy.

And we must go out of ourselves – out of our comfort zones, mindsets and earthly perspectives – and gaze humbly into the heavens to find our star.

9. In Conclusion

Have you ever wondered why, when you are in a populated city, with a lot happening on the ground, it is so hard to see what is going on up above. You can hardly see any stars at all! Yet, when you venture out into the wild, a wood, a desert, an uninhabited land, you look up and see millions upon millions of sparkling stars looking back at you? What's the difference?

The difference is, and may we all take it to heart, that when there are earthly distractions, light pollution and dark holes, it is difficult to make out the stars above, though, of course, they are there all the same. Whereas when all the outside noise is removed and all the distractions are no more, then all the stars can be perceived in their full glory.

So is it in life. God tells Abraham: “To see the blessings that I am giving you, you have got to go outside of the distracting elements and just see the stars.”

So, next time you and a friend go camping, and your friend wakes you up at 3AM and says “Look up, what do you see?” And you reply: “I see millions of stars.” And your friend says: “And what does that tell you?”

Then, I propose that you answer him like this:

“It tells me that God’s promise to Abraham is being fulfilled. It tells me that I and you, and the Jewish people are divine rock stars. It tells me that we each contain enough energy to electrify the entire earth ten-times over. It tells me that no matter how dark the night, no matter how discombobulating and confusing the journey may seem, I am a superstar, shining bright and illuminating the universe. It tells me to appreciate myself and everyone around me. This is what it tells me.”

And then your friend might look back at you and say: “Well, all I can say is, thank God someone stole our tent!”

Shabbat Shalom!