



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Lech Lecha

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November 12, 2016

Lech Lecha

**Travel Secrets and the  
Stunning Election  
of Donald Trump**



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

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Election of Donald Trump

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## ABSTRACT

Mazal Tov to the 45th president elect of the United States of America, Mr. Donald Trump! May you lead your people with light and liberty, so that they live up to their inalienable image of G-d, with the inalienable rights bestowed upon them by their Creator – the foundations that this country was built upon.

Where does one learn to become president? After all, there is no president school, no presidency apprenticeship, no Ph.D. in presidency at Harvard.

This is especially true regarding Mr. Trump, the first president with no prior governing or military experience. This allows him to learn on the job, more than any president before him.

The president learns to lead not in any school, but on the job.

This week's Torah reading – Parshat *Lech Lecha* – is meant to be a guide for every aspiring leader, Jewish or not. It shows us how our forefather, Abraham, learned how to lead.

How did Abraham learn this?

By traveling.

And what did that teach him?

How to welcome guests and embrace all humankind into his home, which in turn taught him the secret of leadership.

This idea is further explained by a story about Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl, who was famous for redeeming impoverished Jews imprisoned throughout Eastern Europe.

Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl, while sitting in prison, was taught a legendary explanation of the words of *Lech Lecha* – one that sug-

gests that the best way to lead humankind is by being a human being, the best way to welcome a traveler is to travel.

This powerful lesson is one that our new president needs to embrace.

A lesson that originates with Abraham – and is aptly captured by his descendant, poet Emma Lazarus, in “The New Colossus,” a sonnet inscribed on a bronze plaque in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

## TRAVEL SECRETS

### 1. Our New President

How can we not begin with the utterly stunning election of our new president, Mr. Donald J. Trump – surprising and shocking to many of us.

So Mazal Tov to the 45th president elect of the United States of America, Mr. Donald Trump! May you lead your people with light and liberty, so that they live up to their inalienable image of G-d, with the inalienable rights bestowed upon them by their Creator – the foundations that this country was built upon.

This week’s Torah reading – Parshat Lech Lecha – offers us a powerful lesson in leadership from our very first leader – the pioneer Abraham, beginning with his journey, Lech Lecha.

But let me preface this lesson with a joke or two.

### 2. Good News and Bad News (Joke)

A big train was traveling across the country. After a while, the primary engine broke down. The driver continued at half-power, but then the back-up engine failed, and the train came to a standstill.

Speaking over the intercom, the train engineer told the passengers: “I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that both engines have failed and we will be stuck here. The good news is that you decided to take the train instead of an airplane.”

### 3. Weight A Second (Joke)

An airplane was already virtually full and in danger of exceeding its baggage allowance when a last-minute passenger asked to buy the one remaining ticket. The clerk was unsure what to do, so he asked him: “Do you mind me asking how much your weigh?”

“With or without clothes?” asked the passenger.

“Well,” said the clerk, “how do you intend to travel?”

### 4. How to be a President

The United States of America has a new president. Mr. Donald J. Trump. This is the beginning of a new journey for this country.

Our new president can learn much from the first of all leaders – Abraham and his journey.

I would therefore like to talk to you about travel. No, not because you have to run away from the U.S., but because traveling is part of learning to be a true leader. If one does not hit the campaign trail, interact and integrate with the people, one can never truly lead them.

Where does a president learn how to be president? There is no president school. There is no president apprenticeship. There is no degree in presidency. [This is especially true regarding Mr. Trump, the first president with no prior governing or military experience. This allows him to learn on the job, more than any president before him]. So where does he or she learn?

Only by traveling.

That is the only way – other than on the job – to learn to become a leader. And it also applies to how we (on the micro level) learn to lead in our everyday lives.

## 5. Parshat Lech Lecha

The first two portions of the Torah – Parshat *Bereishit*, the story of creation, and Parshat *Noach*, the story of the flood and the rebuilding of global life – discuss the general world and its inhabitants. The third portion, called Parshat *Lech Lecha*, is the first time the Torah discusses Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people and the “father of all nations,”<sup>1</sup> and his story.

Parshat *Lech Lecha*, which we read this week, begins with G-d instructing Abraham to leave his home, hit the road and begin traveling to a destination that G-d promises to show him. Thus the Jewish journey begins with a journey.

And the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth for yourself from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed by you.”

And Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him, and Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had acquired, and the souls they had acquired in Haran, and they went to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.<sup>2</sup>

Every nuance of Torah is calculated and weighted with exacting precision. Indeed, the entire Jewish Oral Tradition and its tens of thousands

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:5.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-5.

of volumes are dedicated to understanding how to live a divine life based on and derived from the profound nuances of the Torah's Written Word. With this in mind, why is the Torah's first description of the Jewish narrative one of leaving and traveling? Why not open with, say, the Jewish purpose, or perhaps with some of the blessings and accolades later mentioned, like: "And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" – why open with leaving and traveling, which, as anyone who has ever moved can attest is always stressful?

How does Lech Lecha, which means "Go forth for yourself," embody the Jewish mission, and the human mission as a whole?

## 6. Travel: Literal, Emotional, Experiential

Abraham's journey has multiple meanings.

Literally, G-d's instruction was straightforward: Abraham had to leave his land, birthplace and his parents' home and travel for the conventional reason that most people leave their birthplaces and parents' home – to build a life for himself.

G-d's master plan involved Abraham and his progeny settling in the Promised Land, and the only possible way for that to happen was if Abraham left his home and physically journeyed to the Land of Canaan, which would become the Land of Israel. Without this journey, the journey of Israel could (quite literally) not begin. On a literal level, this is why the story of Israel begins with Lech Lecha, and not a blessing or promise.

But the Torah is multilayered. The Torah also teaches that, in addition to literal travel, Abraham also had to travel emotionally and intellectually and spiritually.

The only way to achieve the divine vision and fulfill one's divine purpose is to leave behind comfort zones and journey to find the Promised Land within. The only way to truly capitalize one's vast potential is to leave behind the forces that shaped us, to leave childhood for adolescence, youth for adulthood, the comforts of home for the unknowns of

independent life. To develop emotionally, to advance intellectually, to mature spiritually, we must go forth in order to discover our possibilities – what could and will be.

These two points – 1) the literal travel of Lecha Lecha and 2) the emotional/intellectual/spiritual travel of Lech Lecha – are essential and fundamental to the beginning of the Jewish people. And this is why the Jewish Torah narrative begins here.

There is also a third dimension to Lech Lecha, a third benefit to going forth for yourself. Let us call this “experiential Lech Lecha.” This third element, the experience of going forth for yourself, is what I would like to focus on for the next few minutes.

For, in addition to the literal benefit of travel (reaching the Promised Land) and the emotional/intellectual/spiritual benefit (reaching a deeper place within yourself), there is also an experiential benefit.

What is the experiential benefit of travel? Learning to lead.

## 7. Learning to Lead

Abraham – the founder of monotheism, the first patriarch of the Nation of Israel, the “father of all nations,” the model of what it is to be a leader – was best known for his hospitality, for *hachnasat orchim*, the great *mitzvah* of welcoming guests.

As we are taught from childhood, Abraham and Sarah’s tent had doors on all sides, so that they could welcome guests from whichever direction they might arrive.

So we are moved to ask: How did Abraham learn to be so hospitable? And: How did Abraham learn how to lead?

Before I answer these questions, let me tell you a story which will put everything into perspective.

## 8. Nachum of Chernobyl (Story)



This story is about Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky, affectionately known as Reb Nachum of Chernobyl, who was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement and of his successor, the Maggid of Mezeritch.

A number of major Chassidic dynasties descended from Reb Nachum of Chernobyl (or Nachum Chernobeler), including Skver, Rachmas-trivka, Trisk, and Talner. The Twersky family is well known to this very day.

In addition to being a great scholar and author of the *Meor Einayim*, Reb Nachum of Chernobyl was famous for his commitment to redeem Jewish prisoners, the profound *mitzvah* known as *pidyon shvuim*.

Back in 18th century Eastern Europe, the local municipalities were ruled by fiefdoms. A poritz, a nobleman landlord (though many were far from noble), would control large swaths of land, rent portions out to the locals, and take a percentage of the product produced on his land. The vast majority of Eastern European Jews were poor and almost no one owned property, so they would work on a poritz's land, pay him rent, and give him a portion of the proceeds from their labor. They were, of course, at his mercy.

All-too often, for a variety of reasons – either due to a bad season, or the poritz was an anti-Semite, or greedy, or both, and instituted top-heavy terms or taxes to benefit himself and persecute the Jews – the family working on the poritz's land would fall behind on their rent payments. When this would happen, the portiz would not hesitate to throw the father (or another family member) into prison, until the family or community paid up what they owed plus a steep penalty.

This is where the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shvuim*, redeeming prisoners, became so essential. It was literally a life-saving service. People and communities would gather funds to pay off the poritz and redeem the captive Jew and his family.

It was not easy, especially in 18th century Eastern Europe, where the Jewish people were destitute. People didn't have enough money to feed their own families, how could they redeem another's?

Reb Nachum of Chernobyl spent a considerable amount of time traveling from community to community, raising funds and redeeming Jew-



ish prisoners.

It once happened that the gentile peasants of Zhitomer, a Ukrainian city near Kiev, concocted some libelous accusation against him and Reb Nachum was himself thrown into prison.

One of the elders of Zhitomer's Jewish community came to visit him in his cell. The respected elder quoted the verse, "*Lech lecha m'artzecha* - go forth for yourself from your land. And then he explained:

Abraham excelled at *hachnasat orchim*, at welcoming guests into his home. But how did Abraham become an expert at welcoming guests? We all know how hard it is to open our homes to strangers. It is hard enough to welcome our family, our in-laws, even sometimes our parents into our homes, so how does one open his home to complete strangers? And remember, this was in the Middle East - back then, no one opened his home to a stranger from another tribe in the Middle East (and they still don't). So how did Abraham become the consummate host?

*Lech Lecha*, explained the elder, is how. G-d knew that Abraham's role in this world was to spread the message of monotheism, and of our responsibility to live a life of kindness and virtue. Abraham did this by welcoming all people into his home and teaching them about the One G-d, Who have us a moral code.

To prepare and train Abraham for his mission, G-d instructed him to Go forth for yourself... Why? Because when Abraham himself experienced what it's like to be a traveler, to be a homeless sojourner, then and only then was Abraham able to empathize with other travelers, other homeless wanderers and inevitably welcome all journeying strangers into his home.

And then the Zhitomer elder concluded: "So is it with you, Rabbi Nachum... because you have dedicated your entire life to *pidyon shvuyim*, to redeeming prisoners, it was decreed from on high that you yourself should sit in prison for a short while, to experience firsthand what the prisoner experiences, to feel personally what the prisoner feels, so that you may better empathize with the captive and fulfill your purpose and mission of redeeming them to an even higher degree."

## 9. Leadership Lesson

*Lech Lecha* is both a practical instruction – go, so that you may reach a destination, leave where you are so that you may arrive where you need to be – and a character-building one – go so that you may experience what it means to go and understand what it means to be on the move, travel so that you may experience what it means to be a traveler, without a home ... “like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone.”

Leadership, thus, is about empathy. It’s not about the leader, but about the people he is leading. About identifying with others and their issues and needs, and sensitively addressing them.

Abraham’s journey teaches us that the truly valid leader is the one that has traveled out of his comfort zone – the one who has experienced what the community experiences. The only person truly fit to lead the wanderer is one who has wandered. Because the one who has never known captivity can never truly empathize with the captive.

Now that the United States has chosen Mr. Trump as its president, regardless of your opinion of our leader, the “heart of kings and ministers is in the hands of G-d.”<sup>3</sup> We have to pray and hope that our leader will learn the lesson from the first leader Abraham on the characteristics necessary to lead a people.

The challenges facing the United States (and the world) today is that its leaders are seen as self-serving, instead of people serving. True empathy is not seen today as the standard for leadership. How can one empathize with the impoverished if they have never experienced impoverishment? The answer is through *lech lecha*, through going on a spiritual journey of humility and modesty, learning to get beyond yourself and feeling the pain and joy of another.

This is one of many lessons that our new leader – and all leaders – can learn from Abraham and every true Jewish leader: The leader needs to be selfless and be where the people are.

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<sup>3</sup> See Proverbs 21:1.

Abraham traveled. Abraham left his comfort zone. Abraham was homeless. Abraham could therefore welcome every traveler, could embrace every road-weary homeless guest and welcome him in his home.

Moses, the penultimate leader, was exiled from his own people for sixty years. Moses experienced exile. Moses could therefore lead the exiles out of slavery into freedom.

King David was a shepherd, the consummate underdog to Goliath's giant. Thus, David could rule a people of underdogs, thus David could compose a Book of Psalms that would comfort the despairing to this very day.

Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl sat in prison. He knew what it was like to be a captive; this empowered him even more and compelled him to raise the funds for other captives.

We must go forth out of our comfort zones so that we may be able to relate to those who are uncomfortable. We must journey in our lives so that we may learn to lead and help others to lead as well.

## **10. Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses**

G-d instructed Abraham to travel to reach the Promised Land. But G-d also instructed Abraham to travel to learn what it means to be a traveler, to know how to welcome and embrace the weary sojourner, to educate the patriarch in the meaning of being a stranger, an alien, a foreigner.

This powerful lesson is one that our new president needs to embrace. A lesson that originates with Abraham - and is aptly captured by his descendant, poet Emma Lazarus, in "The New Colossus," a sonnet inscribed on a bronze plaque in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand*

*A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Perhaps the source of Emma Lazarus's inspiration was from her great grandfather Abraham, the first wayward journeyer, the first immigrant,<sup>4</sup> who arrived as a stranger in the land of Canaan.

It certainly reflects the soul of this country, the United States – a safe haven for all.

And it serves as a compelling lesson for our new president on the enduring nature of true leadership.

## 11. Speed Limit (Joke)

A state trooper pulls over a carload of rabbis traveling to a conference.

Trooper: "Rabbi, this is a 55 m.p.h. highway – why are you going at half that speed?"

Rabbi: "Sir, I saw a lot of signs that said 22, not 55."

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<sup>4</sup> See Genesis 23:4.

Trooper: "Oh rabbi, that's not the speed limit, that's the number of the highway you're on!"

Rabbi: "Oh! Silly me! Thanks for letting me know."

At this point the trooper looks in the backseat where the other rabbis are shaking and trembling.

Trooper: "Excuse me, Rabbi, what's wrong with your friends back there? They're shaking something terrible."

Rabbi: "Oh, we just got off Highway 119."

## 12. Get Going (Practical Advice)

In addition to being a means to an end, travel is an end in itself. The experience of travel is why you should travel, therefore it matters little how fast you are going. As a matter of fact, perhaps the slower you go, the more you learn. Because when you rush, things rush past you before you've had the chance to register their importance.

Sometimes you travel to reach a destination. And sometimes you travel to learn what it means to travel, to be able to empathize with the traveler.

G-d instructed Abraham to travel to reach a destination, the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan, which would become the Land of Israel. But G-d also instructed Abraham to travel to learn what it means to be a traveler, to know how to welcome and embrace the weary sojourner, to educate Abraham and provide him with experience, so that the patriarch would know what it is to be a stranger, an alien, a foreigner.

They say that you shall not judge another man until you walk a mile in his shoes. *Lech Lecha* was G-d telling Abraham to go walk the proverbial mile in the traveler's shoes.

It is true that we are often homeless because we are homeward bound. But we are also homeless because we need to learn to feel what it means to be homeless.

This is a lesson not only for presidents and heads of state but for all of us.

How do we achieve this level of empathy?

Here is an exercise:

Identify one aspect of life that you are unfamiliar with and with which you wish to become more intimate. Then implement *Lech Lecha*, go forth into that field and experience it.

For example, say you've had little exposure to special needs individuals. Implement *Lech Lecha* – go forth into the realm of special needs by volunteering with, reading about, or talking with people in that field.

Another example: say you've had little exposure to Torah. Implement *Lech Lecha* – go forth into the realm of Torah and experience it, in a class, or online, or by reading books.

Apply practical *Lech Lecha* to your life and you will surely go places.

May our new president take these lessons to heart, and may each of us do the same in our own lives. Together let us build a world as envisioned by G-d, and pioneered by Abraham our forefather, blazing a path for all of us in how to create an empathetic and compassionate world.

Shabbat Shalom!