

Parshat Lech Lecha
The Quiet Inflection Point
Yali Szulanski - Class of 2025

How did we get here? Nowadays, this is a question that plagues everyone's minds as we look back over the last two years - and beyond - to discover the moment where the world changed. We perused articles, consult experts, and search our own memories to find the answer to the question, and the one that follows: What could we have done differently?

The truth is, the moment the world changed - where in some mysterious way a mutated virus crossed paths with us - was quiet. Even if we had the most sophisticated machinery, even if we could bend time and space, and manipulate the universe to reveal this unparalleled truth, we would likely be overwhelmingly unimpressed. We, actually, would likely not even be able to find the moment of inflection. We might think we have - by identifying the first human case, or encouraging past versions of ourselves to test and quarantine earlier - but the actual moment of truth, likely went unnoticed. The first moment came, and went, as a quiet breeze on an early autumn day.

It can be disconcerting to think about this. We, as human beings, like to think that we have some sense of control over the natural world - that we can manipulate land, formulate solutions, and create realities beyond our imaginations. We like to think that whatever the situation is, we will emerge, as a species, victorious. Within this thinking lies the thought that *had we known then, what we know now*, we would have done everything differently. We wouldn't be in this situation. Millions of people would not have lost their lives. The truth, again, is likely more disappointing - the moment in which the world changed, the comma on which the sentence changed inflection - was small, quiet, unnoticed.

If we expand our thinking to include the evolution of great ideas, we also come back to this: massive change starts with quiet moments of inflection. The moment humans discovered fire happened, likely by accident, with nothing more than some sticks and the heat of the sun. The moment the airplane was invented happened in quiet, with some papyrus and a quill. The moment of Bnei Israel's freedom from Egypt, led out in a great exodus by Moshe Rabbeinu was set in motion by a quiet reflection made generations before him by a chosen man named Avram - and a glimmer of hope in the face of great promises.

The promises, made to Avram by Hashem, follow on the heels of a command at the very opening of Parashat Lech Lecha:

Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you (Bereishit 12:1)

לְךָ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ
אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאֶךָ: (בראשית יב:א)

Avram, a spritely young man of 75, listens as Hashem details to him the greatness of his generations to come, and imbued with the excitement of becoming a blessing to all those who follow him, he quietly acquiesces. Avram, who descends from the family whose quiet choices triggered the departure from Gan Eden, whose ancestors built the Ark with Noah to save humanity, carries with him a history of quiet inflection points that shaped the course of history. Looking back at the end of his life, Avram - then Avraham - might have asked himself, "How did I get here?" - and even he may not have been able to recognize the power of that quiet moment in which his heart turned to G-d and said, "I do, I will, I am."

Hashem's promise of abundance ignites the quiet spark within Avram that exists within us all - the desire to do great things, to be somebody, to make change. He picks up his whole life - family, tents, sheep, and makes this journey into the unknown land, having not much more to rely on than Hashem's word, and his followers not much more than their trust in Avram. They could not have known then, as we know now, the struggles they would eventually face, causing their retreat from The Promised land. How could Avram, elated by these great promises and hope, foresee famine, danger to his wife, Sarai, and the eventual fracturing of his family? How could he realistically see thousands of years of struggle following one decision? How can a butterfly flapping its wings know that it may cause a Hurricane on the other side of the world?

How did we get here? We ask ourselves this question several times in our lives - in moments of struggle, in moments of disquiet, and in moments of scarcity. These are the moments that bring us pause, the moments in which we are forced to reflect and reevaluate. In these moments, we seek out quiet and search for the answer within. Rarely will we find people in places of abundance who look back, and wonder what path took them here. Rather, they will spend their energy in the moment, basking in the raucous glory of joy, watching swirls of confetti blowing about them. In truth, these moments are just the summit of a long, often arduous climb. The decision to begin that climb is quiet- an internal rumbling that rises up and emerges as a soft, "I can." We trust that there is a force guiding us on the right paths, away from the rocky cliffs, and jagged edges. As we climb higher, the wind picks up and we are buoyed by the roaring energy of the path we have chosen. When we reach the summit - we celebrate. I offer that perhaps, at the summit we seek again the quiet, in which inflection happens. When we reach the summit of one mountain, we see around us those of the many mountains that remain to be climbed.

In hilchot Teshuvah, Rambam writes on human willpower, and the quiet moment in which it can bend towards good, or towards evil:

Every man was endowed with a free will; if he desires to bend himself toward the good path and to be just it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it, and if he desires to bend himself to a bad path and to be wicked it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it....
(Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah chapter 5)

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו, ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו... (רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה')

Rambam continues on to imply that we don't always know what that will be, but we will be presented with that opportunity again and again - in different forms. Each time, however, the moment of potential inflection will be quiet - it will reside deep within us, and we will choose - echoing ripples into the rest of our lives. That choice may present itself as a new partner, a job, a chance to change the world: sometimes we don't know what the power is behind that moment, we just know that we must change, we must move, we must climb the next mountain, and we must set out towards The Promised Land.

Every year, I have a moment of pause when we read Parshat Lech Lecha. My life, to this day, has been defined by moments of inflection that have launched me into whole new trajectories, spanning the globe. When I was a child, these decisions came from choices that my parents made for our family. What I remember from them are moments of discussion held quietly, in the privacy of rooms whose air was thick with tendrils of anxiety and uncertainty. As I got older, I inherited these choices as my own, and new ones emerged

for me to tackle - often becoming a matter of survival. I, like Avram and Sarai, found myself in situations where I needed to make decisions in times of struggle, pain, and scarcity. These situations, which breed fear and distrust, often necessitate a retreat -and one that can ripple forward into years of healing and recovery. We can become lost in moments of struggle, and remain lost. Once we start to climb, it is disheartening to realize that we must go back down and start again.

The command given to Avram goes beyond the realm of physical relocation, and it is one that many of us receive. It is the leaving behind of ways that haven't served us, and have in fact, harmed us as a people, a species, and a planet.

“Go forth from your native land to the land that I will show you” - Hashem tells Avram of the riches that lie ahead, and yet also quietly reminds him what he must leave behind. Avram who as a child, as the Midrash says, destroyed the idols of his father, now faces the reality of becoming a father himself - of a new nation, the children of Hashem. In this message, Hashem tells Avram to leave the ways that can lead him astray, and trust the road ahead.

When I think back on my own journeys - my own climbs, there were many turns that led me onto precarious ledges, darkened caves, and sometimes straight up cliffs. I wonder, sometimes, if knowing what I know now would have changed my decisions. Would I be here today on this path, had I not fallen down the mountain and gotten lost in my own Egypt along the way? Would we, the Jewish people, The Children of Hashem, be who we are had it not been for the choices of Avram when he felt that spark of quiet inflection and chose to follow the command to go? The truth is - it is impossible to know. Would the hand of the Divine have come through in a different way or would - as Rambam writes - we have eventually made the righteous choices on our own?

Parashat Lech Lecha teaches us that we really don't know what lies ahead for any of us, but that we can get a glimpse of possibility in moments of quiet. The choices we make today have ripples that stretch far ahead in time - even beyond our own time, and so it is important that we listen - that we pay attention to those moments where the energy quivers, and the turn is coming. Avram chose to heed the call, to begin the climb, and it proved to be bumpy. Yet, it was filled with the unique joys of a life lived, a journey taken, and endless opportunities for generations to come.

How did we get here?

The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.¹



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¹ Blowin' in the wind - Bob Dylan