

Parshat Lech Lecha: On Second Naiveté

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This week's parsha inaugurates Avraham's spiritual quest and thereby offers a template for our own. From the outset, in the opening words of "lech lecha," we hear the earliest charge to move. Walk and then walk some more, says God to Avram (in one interpretation of the arguably repetitive language). The spiritual quest must be an active resistance to stasis. The Sfat Emet, Reb Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, writes:

"וז"ש לך לך לעולם צריך להיות מהלך אל אשר אראך, תמיד השגה חדשה. לכן נקרא האדם מהלך שכל שעומד בלי התחדשות מיד הטבע שולטת בו." (שפת אמת לך לך תרס"ד)

Roughly translated, he states that the words "lech lecha [mean that] we are forever to be walkers toward that which God shows us, always through renewed perceptions. To be human is to be on the move. Anyone who stands still without renewal will immediately be overruled by nature/routine" (Sfat Emet, Lech Lecha 1903). The first step toward God is to recognize that one must always be stepping toward God.

In this spirit, Avram is further charged this week,

"הַתְּהִלֶּךָ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִים. . ."
". . .Walk before me and become tamim" (Genesis 17:1).

The journey that began with the prompt of lech lecha is now amplified to a lifetime pursuit. Keep walking, indicates God, not only toward a far-off physical land, but also toward an internal state of being, a state of temimut. Translated variously as innocence, perfection, purity, naiveté, wholeheartedness, and simplicity, temimut is a word that contains much richness and much ambiguity. In this context especially, what could it mean to journey toward innocence? How could the end of a quest toward enlightenment be a return to a state of unknowing? Toward what are we, with Avram, to walk?

A closer look at the concept and contexts of temimut might help us better understand. The injunction to Avram to become tamim is directly followed by two significant events: the changing of his name to Avraham and the command to perform brit milah (circumcision). The Talmud in Nedarim 32a and the medieval commentators jump on this juxtaposition to explain the content of temimut. The act of severing the foreskin, of inflicting a blemish, ironically set Avraham on a path toward wholeness. Rashi, on Genesis 17:1, echoes this notion:

"כָּל זְמַן שֶׁהָעֶרְלָה בְּךָ אֵתָהּ בְּעַל מוּם לִפְנֵי"

So long as you are physically whole (i.e. uncircumcised), you are spiritually broken in God's eyes, we are told. You are blemished so long as you are unblemished.

Leaving aside the specificity of (and problematics of) the act of circumcision, conceptually a great mystery remains: the completion that is temimut is to be found in a kind of willed incompleteness. Something must be shattered if there is to be repair. The aspiration of temimut, then, could not be an untested wholeness or a simple perfection, but a fullness ("shleimut" in Rashi's words) born of one's awareness of one's profound imperfection. It is what emerges on the other side of religious rupture.

The parsha bears this out. God's directive to Avraham of "hithalech lefanai" comes many episodes after the initial lech lecha, after so much experience and confusion and disappointment. God bursts into Avraham's life at the beginning of the parsha, promising greatness, but what follows is a tangled mess of personal and familial hardships. Famine strikes, the family moves to Egypt where Sarah is taken captive, the family splits between Avraham and Lot, war erupts, Lot is taken captive, Sarah spars with Hagar, and Ishmael is born. The great journey toward God, alas, was not a bold forward trek, but a meandering series of surprises, challenges, and dead ends. Between age 75, when Avram hears the initial call to walk, and age 99, when he is again charged to walk, Avraham, in the words of the Ramban, "היה תועה כשה אובד." He "wandered aimlessly like a lost sheep" (Ramban on Genesis 12:1).

And so God reappears to him on the other side of so much wandering with a message both old and new. "Hithalech lifanei"--Keep on walking. Keep hearing the call of lech lecha despite all of the time that has elapsed, despite all of the disappointment that might have accumulated, despite the blurring of the mission that might have developed. "Ve'heye tamim"--And find wholeness through the brokenness, serenity through the confusion, peace in spite of the strife. As the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) says,
"לא נקרא תמים אלא על שם מילה"

There is no real temimut, no deep simplicity, without some sacrifice at its core. This is what Avraham learned between his lech lechas. And it was this spiritual journey, one that traverses pain and contends with confusion, that he is called to keep on walking in perpetuity.

To claim temimut as a spiritual aspiration, then, as a goal just over the horizon on the other side of the muck of life, is to embrace not a religious naiveté, but a "second naiveté" as our end. A term borrowed from Catholic theologian Peter Wust by philosophers Paul Ricoeur and later Emmanuel Levinas, Akiva Ernst Simon, a student of Martin Buber's, wrote extensively on "ha'temimut ha'shniya" (second naiveté) and brought it to the attention of modern Jewish thinkers. Second naiveté is faith reconstituted in the aftermath of criticism. It is the willingness to re-embrace religious language and religious modalities after a rupture--intellectual or experiential--has robbed one of innocence. In the words of Ricoeur, "Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again" (The Symbolism of Evil, p. 249). And the call that we just might hear is lech lecha. Walk on.

If we can reconstitute faith after we fall away from it; if we can find a way back toward sweet surrender after we have been challenged by it; if we can trust again in God's promises even after life offers such compromises, then, suggests the Torah, we will be blessed to walk, like Avraham, "el ha'aretz asher arecha," to the unknown places that God has in store for us.



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