



RABBI JUDAH

MISCHEL

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Dedicated L'Iluy Nishmas HaChaver
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Travelers

The Friediker Rebbe, Reb Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, zy'a, shared the following story:

Once, the Baal Shem Tov asked a visiting *chasid* to stop by the village of Mezeritch on his way home, in order to send regards to one of his closest and most beloved *talmidim*, the Maggid, Reb Dov Ber. When the Jew arrived in Mezeritch, no one seemed to know of a “great Reb Dov Ber”; the only resident with that name was a seemingly simple *melamed*, a teacher, who lived on the edge of town.

The Baal Shem Tov's messenger was directed to a dilapidated shack where R' Dov Ber, the *melamed*, lived. Inside the hovel with a dirt floor, he found a makeshift *cheder*, and R' Dov Ber was sitting on a rickety chair in front of a small group of children. Each *talmid* sat on a wood board supported by a rock. Introducing himself as a messenger from the Baal Shem Tov, he was greeted with great warmth and respect. R' Dov Ber requested that his visitor please return later in the evening,

after the day's Torah classes were done, and invited him for dinner.

When he came back later that night, R' Dov Ber was still sitting on the simple chair, but the “classroom furniture” was transformed, repurposed as beds for R' Dov Ber's children. Taken aback at the dirt floor, empty walls and poor excuse for beds, the guest couldn't contain himself, and expressed shock at the extreme poverty and lack of basic furnishings in the house. Where was the table, proper chairs, beds?

R' Dov Ber looked his guest in the eyes and asked with earnestness: “My dear brother, where is *your* furniture? I don't see that you have a desk, chairs and household furnishings with you tonight?”

Confused, the visitor exclaimed, “What do you mean? Do you think that I *shlep* my furniture and belongings around with me wherever I go? When I'm on the road, it is for a specific purpose... I am just a guest, and I make do with whatever is available. What difference does it make what furnishings I surround myself with if I'm only visiting temporarily, just passing through?”

Rebbe Dov Ber flashed a radiant smile, “Ah, aren't we all travelers in this world, just passing through?”

Lech lecha m'artzecha... “Go from your land....” (Bereishis, 12:1). The Rebbe Reb Meilech, R' Elimelech of Lizhensk, zy'a, would interpret the word *me'artzecha* as ‘from your *artzius*’, from your earthly, physical nature, from your materialism.

Now, Avraham was himself very well established on the ‘earth’. Indeed, our *sedra* mentions Avraham being the wealthiest of men, *kaveid me'od*, “very heavy with livestock, silver and gold” (Bereishis, 13:2). Torah tells us that our forefather was a real estate magnate, who excelled at commerce, import and export. He had dealings with Malkitzedek, Avimelech, Efron and the shepherds of Lot. Nonetheless, he had already been transformed by and internalized the command *Lech lecha*, and had ‘gone out’ of any previous attachment to materialism.

Earlier, Avraham had encountered a world seemingly in chaos. Even after the *Mabul*, the Great Flood, people everywhere were drawn after idolatry and lowly, base desires. Chazal depicted this as a palace aflame, and yet Avraham perceived that there is nonetheless a *Ba'al haBira*, a Master of the House. The *Lech Lecha* of Avram and Sarai is instructive, and initiates a new existential recognition: the world we inhabit is not a free-for-all; there is a *Ba'al haBira*.

Theologian and spiritual guide Rabbi Shalom Sabag points out the significance of the Torah immediately addressing the inherent tension between body and soul, materialism and holy sufficiency. This starting point of the Jewish story, he says,

provides us with the first step toward a life of *d'veykus*.

Lech lecha empowers us in navigating the unknown, living in-process, in the middle, on the way. We must traverse the gulf between materialism and a Divinely guided life by letting go of self-definitions, releasing our being bound by ‘place’, and not becoming too attached to the temporal. This world is transient, and our time here is limited.

‘Liminal’ means relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process, occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold. To be an ‘alive’ person means to be in a liminal state of change, growth and development. This recognition compels us to be considerably aware of our finite existence in *olam hazeh*, this world, and to focus on drawing from the Source of eternal life.

When we are born, our souls have journeyed from our ‘home’, our Divine Source. Our descent into this world and the directive of *Lech Lecha* allow us to uncover something deeper about ourselves and the purpose of our lives.

The revolutionary accomplishments, faith and sacrifice of our great-grandparents that begin in our *sedra* take place *baderech*, ‘on the road’, as part of a lifelong journey toward self-actualization. Perhaps that is a reminder for us to prioritize the spiritual in our lives, that which is most essential and eternal.

In the end, we are all travelers here, on a journey, passing through... May we go well! ■