



GEULAS YISRAEL

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Lech Lecha: Why is Aliyah so Difficult?

My Rebbe, Harav Yehuda Amital, would often remark "I don't understand anything about Bereishit and Noach. I don't know the difference between a 'big bang' and a 'small bang.' I begin reading the Torah from Lech Lecha. Hashem instructed Avraham to journey to Israel- that I understand." Avraham's epic journey launched Jewish history and has captivated the Jewish imagination for centuries. Sadly, though every Jew dreams of Yerushalayim and prays in her direction, not all of Avraham's descendants have successfully retraced his steps. Why is this simple journey so difficult for so many?

The gemara remarks that ארץ ישראל - the Land can only be accessed through struggle and hardship. Israel isn't a normal country and doesn't operate under the normal principles which govern other lands. Life under the eye of Hashem is supernatural, and the conditions of residence in Israel are outsized, stretching beyond human proportion. Settling Israel

and living in Israel will always be demanding and will always require extraordinary effort and commitment.

Departure

To voyage to the Land of Hashem, Avraham must first delete his background. Purging his past pagan influences is a necessary precondition for his future life of faith and monotheism. Abandoning his past, his Lech-lecha journey poses numerous personal challenges. The Torah delineates the various elements of this personal trial: תּוֹרַחְךָ מִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ . Evidently, leaving your past behind is easier said than done. It is difficult to walk away from the "familiar"- the social norms you are accustomed to and the financial systems you were raised upon. Walking into a foreign culture and speaking a new language demands emotional flexibility and personal courage. And, of course leaving family behind, and raising your own family "alone", is a steep price to pay for moving to the Land of Hashem. The road to Israel is paved with the surrender and sacrifice necessary to enter the house of Hashem.

Religious Challenges

Ironically, life in Israel, with its additional mitzvot often "complexifies" religion. Astonishingly, Rabbi Chaim Cohen, a 12th century French/German Tosafist counseled against Aliyah, due to the fear of violating unfamiliar mitzvot which are unique to life in Israel- such as Teruma. Though this

position was roundly rejected, it does signal that religious life in Israel will always be more intricate and more "involved" than it is in exile. Throughout history political and economic conditions in Israel were often-times more demanding and less suitable for tranquil Torah study than they were in exile. The 2nd century Babylonian amora Rebbe Yehuda bar Yechezkeil, forbade his student Rav Ze'ira from moving to Israel, fearing in part that his disciple's Torah study would regress upon abandoning the epicenter of Torah which Babylonia had become.

Life in the modern state of Israel challenges religious experience in a very different fashion. Generally, religious observance in exile reduces to a single variable: how can communities and individuals construct "protected" spaces of religious commitment. By contrast, religious life in Israel is generally a two-dimensional equation: in addition to preserving personal religious conduct, we also must ensure that our state is infused with a religious nature. How can we expand religion to every Israeli citizen – even those who don't adhere to halacha in the classic forms, while still valuing their Judaism and their heritage. Extending religion nationally sometimes "clashes" with personal piety and the maintenance of personal religious experience. Kashrut observance is a perfect example of a more complicated national dynamic in Israel. Outside of Israel, kashrut standards are established exclusively for "interested" and willful kashrut consumers who are generally interested in strict standards. By contrast "national kashrut" in Israel is geared for the broader public and cannot always be established with the

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strict standards which many religiously oriented people may prefer. Ironically, one of the challenges of life in Israel is a more complex religious experience. Living in the Land of Hashem, especially while it is still under historical construction isn't always straightforward. The complexity is built-in. This is a different Land with very different norms and dynamics.

Turning Dreams Into "Reality"

What happens when our dreams become a reality? In general, reality leaves a lot to the imagination. Avraham discovered this truth when he first arrived in Israel: He was promised a Land of prosperity and divine supervision. Anticipating a magical Land, he discovers that food is sparse and that the Land of prosperity is parched by famine. Subsequently, his own family begins to disband. His nephew Lot— part of a younger generation which may not fully identify with Avraham's pioneering spirit— abandons Avraham and his "inspired lifestyle". Immigrants are always separated by a culture gap which tries their ability to raise a younger generation.

Furthermore, Avraham discovers that even in this Land of divine machinery, wars are waged, hostages are taken, negotiations are conducted and politics reigns. The gap between the Land he was promised and the actual country he arrived in was enormous.

Our own expectations for life in Israel tend to swell well beyond realistic possibilities. Life in the real country of Israel often feels pedestrian or humdrum, challenging us to reconcile our resplendent dreams with an ordinary and sometimes dreary reality. A few years after making aliyah, I

invited a Rebbe of mine from the United States to visit me in Israel. He remarked that it would be sacrilegious for him to visit Israel for a mere few weeks as a tourist and return home afterwards. Travel to Israel demanded the gravitas and solemnity due this holy Land. While I was impressed with his reverence for Israel, it was also obvious that his veneration carried a heavy price: he remained distant from our Land for decades. In our holy Land we also pay taxes, take out the garbage and deal with the common and petty tedium of life. Living in Israel comes with great anticipation but reality doesn't always match our grandest expectations.

On his fateful journey, Avraham faced numerous trials: he surrenders his past and discovers a Land of wars and politics and not just of dreams and divine promises. All of his children who have followed in his footsteps have faced similar challenges. Short-term ideals, though, must not obscure the long-term grandeur of making Aliyah. For those seeking a life of convenience, the adversity of aliyah can feel daunting. For those seeking a life of prophecy, they are minute or even meaningless. Moving to Israel and joining the ranks of Jewish history is a decision which stretches beyond our personal lives and individual conditions. It is a decision for our people and for our future and a decision which will be applauded by that future specifically because it carried personal sacrifice.

The honor and privilege of contributing to the final chapters of Jewish history far surpasses hardships and heartache. Avraham set the mold for this journey and we are fortunate to march down his path. ■