

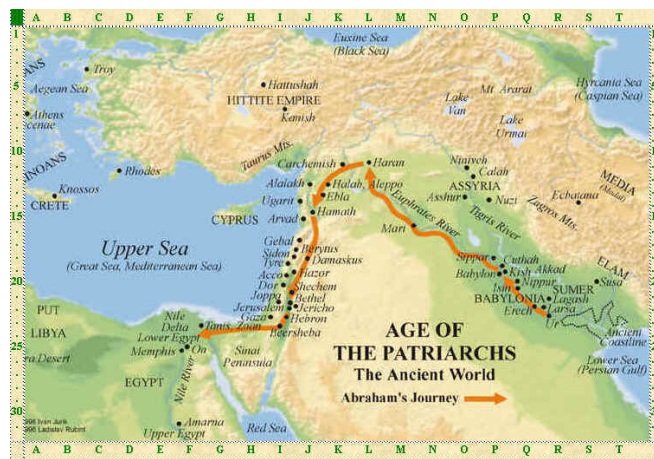


## Around the Shabbat Table

**Lech Lecha 5766  
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Shalom!



### Introduction

This week's parasha, Lech-Lecha, begins with the first of several "trials" that our ancestor Abraham, faces during his life:

The Lord said to Abram [his name at the time] *"Lech-Lecha me'artzecha - Go, get out of your land, from your birthplace, and the house of your fathers, to the land which I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great."* [Genesis 12:1-2]

Abram answers God's call, having moved to the city of Haran from his homeland of Ur Kasdim (in today's Iraq). He now leaves Haran for the land of Canaan, leaving behind his father's dwelling and his past. At the age of seventy-five, along with his wife Sarai, nephew Lot, servants and cattle, he sets out on the journey. In return, God pledges to make Abram a great nation and the Covenant, a special agreement, is developed between God and Abram. Abram's journey from the town of Haran marks the beginning of monotheism, and of our long history.

Shortly after arriving in the land of Canaan, God strikes the land with a devastating famine that forces Abram to relocate to Egypt in search of food. Upon his return to the land of Canaan, Abram and Lot go their separate ways, with Lot moving to the city of Sodom.

Abram's journey continues as he returns to Canaan to battle local tribes, who have taken Lot hostage. Abram, along with his men, withstand another trial, defeating the four kings who had attacked Sodom, and freeing Lot.

God appears to Abram again and renews His pledge to make him of a great nation, and adds that He will give the land of Canaan to his offspring. The parasha continues to tell us of the story of Hagar, Sarai's handmaid, who was given to Abram as a concubine. Hagar gives birth to Abram's son, Ishmael, and runs away from her mistress, but God's angel requests her to go back and promises to increase her offspring. God appears to Abram commanding that "every male among you shall be circumcised...that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Gen: 17:10-13). Abram obeys and circumcises all the males in his household. God changes Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah to symbolize their important role as the parents of a great nation. And to Abraham's amazement, God promises that despite their old ages, Sarah would bear him a son, to be named Isaac, in the following year.

As I am myself a descendant of Babylonian Jewry Lech Lecha carries a special meaning for me. The story of Abraham's exile from his homeland of Iraq, previously known as Babylonia, resembles the story of my family. In 1950, my parents answered a similar call. Along with over 120,000 Iraqi Jews (90 percent of the total Iraqi Jewish population) they fled their homeland of 2600 years bound for an uncertain future in the newly founded State of Israel. Not only did they leave their pasts, property and possessions, many also had to leave family members behind.

Their journey, which followed Abraham's foot-steps, was of historical significance because it marked the end of the most ancient Jewish community in the Diaspora. The remarkable history of the Iraqi (Babylonian) community stretched across 2600 years, beginning with Abraham, through the Diaspora resulting from the destruction of the first Temple, up to the mid-twentieth century. Throughout hundreds of years, despite many tyrant rulers, wars and plagues, Babylonian Jewry became the intellectual and spiritual center for all Jews, in Israel and the Diaspora. Some of their more significant contributions are the development of synagogues and the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud. For my parents and other Iraqi immigrants, their voyage 'back to Israel', marked a new beginning in a new chapter of Jewish history in the Promised Land.

### **Questions for Your Family's Discussion**

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. We are told that Abraham was seventy-five years old when God called upon him to leave his homeland, surrender his past and future. In your opinion, why did God select an older man to be the recipient of his blessing? What life experiences and unique qualities might the older Abraham have had over a younger version of himself?
2. We are told that after Abraham arrived in Canaan, he headed to Egypt to settle for a while since the famine had grown very severe in the land. There is one rabbinic opinion that Abraham sinned by not remaining in the land and trusting God to provide for his needs. Later, Abraham is told by God that "You shall surely know that you seed will be strangers in a land which is not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and tortured for four hundred years." (15:13).
  - a. Do you think that Abraham's actions contributed to God's decision to punish his descendants by making them slaves in Egypt?
  - b. When the children of Israel - Abraham's descendants - went to Egypt as the result of a famine in Canaan, was this an example of the rabbinic teaching that: "Whatever happened to the father is a sign for the children"?
3. In 1848 hundred of thousands of people from throughout the United States and other countries uprooted their families and flocked to California to make their riches in gold, hearkening to the call "Go West!" In your opinion, what makes Abraham's actions unique? What is Abraham's motivation and reward?



## Texts to Wrestle With

### 1. Genesis 12:1

The Lord said to Abraham, “*Lech-Lecha me'artzecha: Go, get out ...*”

Commentators on the text have explained “Lech Lecha,” in various ways, with different emphasis and implication:

- “Go,” “Go forth,” “get thee out,” “Go for your self (for your own benefit),” “Go by your self,” “Go your own way,”
- The Zohar, a thirteenth-century Jewish mystical text, interprets the text as “Go to your self, know yourself, fulfill yourself.” It suggests that Abraham must first understand his self and his soul, prior to his journey.
- Rashi explains that “Lech Lecha,” means “for your own benefit and for your own good.”

Which explanation works for you? Why?

### 2. Genesis 12:1-1: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. “

Gen 12:7: “I will give the land to your offspring”

Gen 13:15, 16: “I will give you all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth”

Gen 15: 18: “To your descendants **I have given this land**, from the Egyptian River to the great river, the Euphrates”

Gen 17: 7-8: “**I will** give you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan as an **everlasting possession.**”

- It seems that God promises the land to Abraham many times; can you explain the development of the promise based on these verses?



## Towards an Action Agenda

1. All Israel are responsible for one another; Learn about Operation Promise, an initiative of UJC and the Jewish Federations of North America devoted to keeping the promise to return Jews to our historic homeland and create a better future for all. The Jewish Federations around the country assist in bringing the remaining Ethiopian Jews to Israel, mainstream the entire Ethiopian-Israeli community, feed the poor, assist elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union and help strengthen Jewish identity among young Jews there.

To learn more about this Operation and ways you can assist, visit their website: [Operation Promise](#)

2. Research your background
  - Learn about your family's origin, heritage, customs and traditions.
  - List the ways they impact your life.
  - Share your conclusions with your classmates and encourage them to do the same.
3. Be an active participant in your Jewish community and synagogue. Promote activities that strengthen Jewish identity and influence Jewish people's future as well as securing the existence of Israel.



## ***Shabbat Shalom***

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York Nassau/Queens Center. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: [www.bjeny.org](http://www.bjeny.org)

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