

Parashat Lekh-Lekha

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ABRAM'S MISSION Genesis Ch. 12, v. 1-10

- What do we know about Abram before God commands him to leave his home?
- Why did God choose Abram?
- What is Abram's role? What does God expect of him?
- Why does Abram travel to Canaan? What does he do there?
- How is the relationship between Abram and Nimrod described in the text, and how is it described in the *midrash*?

A. Who is Abram?

Parashat Lekh-Lekha opens with God's command to Abram:

(1) And God said to Abram, "Go from your country, your homeland, and your father's house, to a land which I will show you." (Gen. 12:1)

Immediately afterward, before Abram even answers, he is given a blessing and a promise:

(2) "And I shall make you into a great nation, and I shall bless you and magnify your name, and you shall be a blessing. (3) And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and all families on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen. 12:2-3)

Here we have not only a command and its reward;¹ rather, this is a special blessing that hints to Abram's future mission,² which we will discuss below.

**Abram –
Unfamiliar
Name,
Unknown
Deeds**

The Torah does not formally introduce Abram, and many commentators have asked the following questions: Who is Abram? Have we ever heard of him or his deeds? Why does he deserve this special blessing?

Abram is actually mentioned at the end of *Parashat Noah*, where a short and seemingly insignificant story is told about him:

(27) And these are the descendants of Terah: Terah fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot. (28) And Haran died before his father Terah, in his homeland, Ur Kasdim. (29) And Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves; Abram's wife was named Sarai, and Nahor's wife was named

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- 1 Still, this interpretation (the blessing as a reward) is favored by a number of medieval commentators, including Ramban, who states: "The way of the text is to say, 'Go before Me and hear My voice, and I will reward you,' as with David and Solomon, and the sections 'If you follow My laws' (Lev. 26:3) and 'If you surely listen to the voice of the Lord, your God' (Deut. 28:1)."
 - 2 Abram was not only told, "I shall bless you," but also, "You shall be a blessing," and "All... will be blessed through you." This unique language indicates that Abram is not only receiving a blessing from God; in fact, he himself becomes a "blessing." To a certain extent, Abram becomes a source of blessing and can bless others. This is how Rashi interprets verse 2, quoting the *midrash*: "'And you shall be a blessing' – the blessings are in your hands. Until now, they were in Mine; I blessed Adam and Noah. From now on, you shall give blessings as you see fit."

Milcah, daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Yiscah. (30) And Sarai was barren, she had no children. (31) And Terah took his son Abram, and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, Abram's wife, and left Ur Kasdim with them, to travel to Canaan. And they arrived at Charan, and settled there. (Gen. 11:27-31)

The Torah introduces Abram with a seemingly trivial anecdote that does not distinguish him in any way. We might even say that this story diminishes the exceptional nature of Abram's journey to Canaan – after all, he is not even the first to think of going to Canaan. Terah thought of it first and began traveling in that direction. These details reinforce the sense of arbitrariness in God's choice of Abram.

B. Abram vs. Ur Kasdim, the Tower of Babel and Nimrod

THE SURROUNDING CULTURE

**The Midrash
– Filling in
the Gaps**

We know little about Abram – who is he? What is special about him? Why did God reveal Himself specifically to Abram and ask him to travel to Canaan? Why does he merit these exceptional blessings? These elements are vital to understanding the narrative of Abram. Here, the *midrash* steps in to fill the gaps with stories about Abram's beginnings.

The *midrash* (*Bereshit Rabba* 38³) describes Abram convincing people not to worship idols. Abram even destroys these idols, and as a result is brought before the king, Nimrod. He argues with Nimrod and is thrown into a furnace.⁴ This dispute between Nimrod

- 3 The full text of the *midrash* is as follows:
Terah was a worshiper of [and dealer in] idols. Once, when he was away, he put Abraham in charge of his stock of graven images to sell in his absence. In the course of the day, a man came to make a purchase. Abraham asked him, "How old are you?" The man answered, "Between fifty and sixty years." Abraham said, "Woe to he who is sixty years old, and comes to worship [that which has existed for only] a day." The man was ashamed and left. Later, a woman came with a handful of fine flour and asked Abraham to offer it to Terah's idols. He took a stick and broke all of the images except the largest one, in the hand of which he placed the stick. When his father returned, he asked, "Who has done this to them [the idols]?" Abraham replied, "I cannot deny this: a woman came with a handful of flour and asked me to offer it to the idols. When I offered it to them, this one said, 'I shall eat first,' and that one said, 'I shall eat first,' and the biggest one rose up and took the stick in his hand, and destroyed all of them." Terah said, "Are you mocking me? Do they have minds of their own?" Abraham replied, "Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?" Terah took Abraham and turned him over to Nimrod. Nimrod told Abraham, "Worship the fire." Abraham answered, "Should we not worship the water, which can quench the fire?" Nimrod conceded: "Worship the water." Abraham argued, "If so, we should worship the clouds, which absorb the water." Nimrod said, "Let us worship the clouds." Abraham said, "We should worship the wind, which moves the clouds." Nimrod said, "Then worship the wind." Abraham replied, "But then we should worship man, who can withstand the wind." Nimrod replied: "I worship only the fire – and I shall cast you into it, and let the God you worship come and save you from it..."
- 4 Rashi (Gen. 11:18) interprets the name "Ur Kasdim" as a reference to this furnace. He thus ties Abram's individual narrative of leaving Ur Kasdim to the *midrash* describing Abram's deeds that moved God to choose him.

and Abram forces Terah's family to leave Ur Kasdim.

Ur Kasdim,
the Tower
of Babel and
Nimrod

According to the *midrash*, Ur Kasdim belongs to Nimrod's kingdom – the place of rebellion against God. Rashi cites a *midrash* that links Nimrod to the building of the Tower of Babel:

"He (Nimrod) began to be mighty in the land" – to cause the world to rebel against God, with the counsel of the generation of the Tower of Babel. (Rashi on Gen. 10:8)

It is possible that Ur Kasdim might be the same *ur* [fire] with which the inhabitants of Babel made bricks in order to build the tower.⁵

It is interesting to note that the *midrash* relates to the story of Terah and his family leaving Ur Kasdim as hinting to Abram's past. The *midrash* views this story as exposition, clarifying God's choice of Abram. Abram is living in the midst of idol worship,⁶ and despite

- 5 The word *ur* has two meanings in the Bible. The first, "fire," would label Ur Kasdim as the place of a great fire – the fire into which Abram was cast (according to the *midrash*), or the fire used to make the bricks for the tower of Babel. The second meaning is "valley" or "pit." According to this meaning, "Ur Kasdim" is a valley in the land of Kasdim (see Ibn Ezra's commentary).
- 6 Although most sources describing Abram's upbringing amongst idols come from the *midrash*, they seem to be based on a source in Joshua:
And Joshua said to the entire nation, "Thus says the Lord, God of Israel: 'Long ago, your forefathers – including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor – lived across the Jordan and worshiped other gods. And I took your forefather Abraham from across the Jordan, and I led him through the land of Canaan, and I gave him many multiplied his descendants, and

this becomes aware of the Creator independently; he even fights Nimrod to protect his newfound faith. The *midrash* describes Abram as resisting the surrounding culture: he destroys the idols and clashes with Nimrod.⁷ Why did the *midrashim* link Abram and Ur Kasdim (end of Ch. 11) on the one hand and the Tower of Babel (beginning of Ch. 11) and Nimrod (Ch. 10) on the other? Each of these elements is described separately, and the text does not suggest any connection between them.

The Geographical Connection

Ur Kasdim, mentioned in the Torah as Abram's birthplace, is apparently Ur,⁸ an important royal center in Sumer. Ur is located in Shin'ar, near Erekh, Babel and Akkad (see Appendix 1). The story of the Tower of Babel, described in Chapter 11, takes place in the same area:

(1) And it was as they traveled from Kedem, and they found a valley in the land of Shin'ar, and they settled there... Thus the place was called Babel... (Gen. 11:1-9)

I gave him Isaac.”

7 Likewise, according to the *midrashic* description of Nimrod as the architect of the Tower of Babel, Abram would have opposed the tower.

8 The original name for this region at the time was Ur. Later on, the Kasdim reached the area (as described in the book of Kings, where the army of the Kasdim is mentioned [see II Kings 24:2; 25:5, 10, 13, 26]). In addition, at the end of the book of Kings, the residents of Babel are referred to as “Kasdim.”

Nimrod, described in Chapter 10, ruled in the same area:⁹

(8) And Cush fathered Nimrod, who became mighty in the land. (9) He was a mighty hunter before God; therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before God.” (10) And the first centers of his kingdom were Babel, Erekh, Akkad, and Kalneh in the land of Shin'ar. (11) From this land he came to Assyria, and he built Ninveh, Rehovot Ir and Kalach. (12) And Resen, between Ninveh and Kalach, is the great city. (Gen. 10:8-12)

Our three narratives – Abram, the Tower of Babel and Nimrod – all take place in the same vicinity.

The Chronological Connection

Looking into the chronology of these three narratives, we find that there is some overlap between Abram's lifetime and the generation in Babel. Abram was born during the lifetime of most of the post-Flood generation. If the story in Babel took place at the end of Peleg's life (as is implied in Gen. 10:25), then Abram would have been 48 years old when the tower was built.¹⁰ (See Appendix 2 for a graph of the generations during this era, taken from E. Shulman, *The Sequence of Events in the Old Testament*.)

9 In Chapter 10, the Torah describes the various nations who were scattered over the earth. It does not focus on any individual names or narratives, except for Nimrod; the Torah devotes three verses to his deeds.

10 See *Seder Olam Rabba* 1.

The Fundamental Similarity In addition to the geographical and chronological overlap, there seems to be a common essential element between the narratives. Nimrod possesses three characteristics – might, kingship, and the building of cities – which are directly connected to the Tower of Babel.

The Building of Cities Nimrod establishes cities; the invention of bricks and building the city and tower are central to the Tower of Babel narrative.

Unity Nimrod is described as a king (he was apparently the first great king), and the essence of monarchy is the unification of the people around one central figure. The tower of Babel, too, was an attempt to unite all of humanity around one edifice.

Might The Torah describes Nimrod as “mighty” three times. The term “mighty” indicates special abilities that give one power. Nimrod was a “mighty hunter” – one who managed to overpower animals and nature and manipulate them as he saw fit. The generation of Babel also developed new abilities – the ability to turn simple materials into bricks, a tower, and a city. This ability gave them a sense of power and a sense that they could subdue nature.¹¹

Did Nimrod Initiate the Building of the Tower? Nimrod and the generation of the tower of Babel had the same outlook on the overcoming of nature, the glorification of human power, and unity under a single ruler. Add to that the chronological and

¹¹ See last week’s piece on *Parashat Noah*.

geographical context, as well as the symbolism of the name Nimrod (lit. “we shall rebel”), we can infer that Nimrod was the king who centralized humanity under his rule and initiated the construction of the tower¹² – the same tower which, as our Sages point out, was a main component of the rebellion:

They came with one intention and said, “It is not for Him to choose the upper spheres for Himself! We shall go up to the Heavens and make war on Him.” (*Bereshit Rabba* 38:6)

Nimrod and the Builders – Culturally Identical

However, this parallel can be understood in another way: it is possible that Nimrod and the generation of Babel are not part of the same narrative; rather, they are two separate narratives describing the same mindset. The development of civilizations through advances in technology, the building of cities, the invention of centralized monarchy and a parallel rebellion against God – these were all part of a general spiritual and cultural progression. One expression of this process was the building of the tower of Babel, and another was the reign of Nimrod.

ABRAM VS. THE CULTURE OF BABEL

Was Abram one of the builders? Or was he opposed to them?

Abram is living in Ur in the midst of a culture that, in conjunction with unprecedented technological advancement, is leading a rebellion against God. Abram may have actually witnessed the tower being built.

¹² See the *midrash* in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 24, as well as Rashi’s commentary on Gen. 10:8. Josephus mentions this as well in *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 1, ch. 8.

He may have participated, or fought against it (which would have been,, as we discussed, chronologically and geographically possible). If Nimrod was indeed the king who built the tower, – there would have ensued a major conflict between him and Abram.

However, the Torah does not mention this. It begins the narrative of Abram without giving any background on him at all.

**Abram's Way
- Against the
Tower**

Later on, as we look at the stories told about Abram, it seems that all of his actions – indeed, his very essence – are diametrically opposed to the culture represented by Nimrod and the builders of the tower. Even if Abram did not physically oppose them, **his way of life is the antithesis of theirs.**

The *midrashim* that present Abram's opposition to Nimrod and the tower can be interpreted not only as a factual account (itself a reasonable possibility), but as a conceptual analysis. The culture that had developed in Babel, as expressed by the building of the tower and by Nimrod's reign, was a negative one. Abram was chosen by God to represent a very different approach, which will be introduced in later chapters describing Abram's path.

C. Noah and Abram

We are still troubled by the question: why did the Torah not choose to describe Abram's past, or even to simply tell us that Abram was chosen to fight against the dominant culture of his time?

**Choosing
Noah –
"A guileless
and righteous
man"**

This point is emphasized when we compare Abram to Noah: God's reasons for choosing Noah are well-documented. At Noah's birth, we are already told that "this one will comfort us..." (Gen. 5:29). At the end of *Parashat Bereshit*, Noah "found favor in God's eyes" (Gen. 6:8), in contrast to the rest of humanity, whose "evil was abundant" (6:5). In addition, *Parashat Noah* opens with praise of Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, guileless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (6:9). God's decision to choose Noah is easily understood – why, then, does the Torah omit God's reason for choosing Abram?

**Noah –
the Obvious
Mission**

The comparison with Noah brings to light another difference: in Noah's narrative, his mission is made explicit. God informs Noah of His plan to cause a flood that will destroy all life on earth, due to their evil deeds. God commands him to build an ark so that he will be saved. Noah is given precise instructions – down to the size and shape of the ark – and, as we see later in the story, he follows them to the letter.¹³

¹³ Noah was told when to enter the ark, whom to take with him and when to leave (see Gen. 6:13-7:5). The same verses emphasize many times (see for example 6:22; 7:5) that Noah did exactly as God commanded him.

Abram –
the Hidden
Mission

In contrast, Abram was given a very vague command: “Go from our land...to the land which I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). The main element of the command is to *go* – Abram is not told where; he must decide for himself. Why is he going? What will he do when he gets to this “land”? This point is also left unexplained – even when Abram arrives at the land that He shows him, God does not tell him what to do there.

The Torah does not portray Abram as a remarkable person. **It is unclear why God approaches him, and he is not told what God wants of him.** However, the blessing that is promised to Abram that “I will magnify your name and you shall be a blessing...and all families on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 13:3) seems to indicate some kind of mission. Indeed, Ramban comments on verse 2:

“And you shall be a blessing” – *you* yourself will be a blessing... “And [they] will be blessed through you” – they will be blessed in his merit. Abram is not receiving a blessing, but rather he himself *is* the blessing¹⁴ – a source of blessing to all of humanity. But what is his purpose? How will he fulfill it? The Torah does not say.

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14 However, in his first explanation of the verse, Ramban interprets this in a different way: “They shall be blessed through you; meaning, they will say, ‘May God make you like Abraham.’ Abraham will be a blessing – he is included in the language of the blessing, and is the inspiration for it.”

## D. Walking and Progression

### EMPHASIZING ABRAM’S FUTURE

Facing the  
Future

If the Torah chose not to tell us about Abram’s past, there must be a reason for it. When the Torah describes Noah’s righteousness and his subsequent rescue from the flood, God’s choice of Noah is understandable – it is a reward for his past deeds. In contrast, when we begin to read Abram’s story without knowing anything about him, we expect to hear what will *become* of him, what he will do. In other words, **while Noah’s story focuses on the past, Abram’s narrative concentrates on the future. Disregarding Abram’s past highlights what is to come;**<sup>15</sup> **Abram was chosen for the future.**

Shaping the  
Future

What is this future for which Abram was chosen? Toward what end is he moving? The Torah says nothing about this either. **Abram’s mission is not predetermined, and it is up to him to shape it.** He must set goals, plan how to reach them, and execute this plan himself.

### WALKING – THE PURSUIT OF GOD

Abram –  
Defined by  
Walking

The first story we hear about Abram is his walking

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15 Still, God’s choice of Abram was clearly not arbitrary – he is undoubtedly an extraordinary person. The *midrash*, as we have discussed, fills this gap and describes how Abram is uniquely suited for the role for which he was chosen (see also the commentary of R. Bahya on Gen. 11:28). The text, however, disregards Abram’s past in order to emphasize his future.

to Canaan with his father (Gen. 11:31-32). Immediately afterward, Abram's narrative proper opens with God's command to "Go [*lekh*, lit. "walk"]...to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Abram is a man in a state of walking – of progression. **Walking is Abram's very essence.** Therefore, the first thing we hear about Abram is that he is walking. The command given to him is: "Walk to the land that I will show you" – he must walk until he reaches the place that God has designated, without being told beforehand where he is going. Why?

**The
Importance
of the
Process**

Perhaps Abram was not told where to go because **the point is not where he is going, but rather that he is following God: the walking and the progression are what matter** – the spiritual state of following God, searching constantly for "the land that I will show you" and for God's will.

**Following
God and
Taking
Initiative**

This kind of walking, without knowing one's final destination, might be seen as blindly following God's command. On the other hand, specifically here there is room to take initiative. Had God told Abram, "Go to Canaan," he would have known exactly which way to go; *this* would have been following God's command word for word. But when God tells Abram, "Go to a land that I will show you," the way to go is left up to him. Which direction will he take? Where will he choose to look for this country – north, south, east, or west? This walking without a predetermined destination has two aspects: on one hand, following

God and pursuing His will; on the other, taking initiative.

This idea is expressed in a *midrash* which compares Noah and Abram. Regarding Noah, the Torah says, "Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). Abram is told, "Go before me and be guileless" (Gen. 17:1). These two verses define the essential difference between Abram and Noah, and are reminiscent of Rashi's commentary on Gen. 6:9:

"Noah walked with God" – and by Abraham it says "I walked before Him." Noah needed assistance and support, but Abraham became stronger and walked righteously on his own. The source for Rashi's comments comes from the following *midrash*:

Rabbi Nechemiah told a parable about one who loved the king, and was sinking into deep mud. The king saw him, and said: "Before you sink, walk with me." This is what is meant by: "Noah walked with God." And to whom is Abraham compared? To one who loved the king, and saw the king walking in dark corridors. He peeked in and began to light the king's way through the window. The king peeked out and saw him, and said: "Why do you light my way through the window? Come, walk before me and light my way." So God said to Abraham: "Why do you light my way from Mesopotamia and its surroundings? Come, light my way in the land of Israel." This is what is meant by "And he blessed Joseph and said, 'This God, Whom my forefathers

walked before Him...” (*Bereshit Rabba* [Vilna] 30:10, s.v. “With God”)

Abram walks before God – he forges his own path and lights the road for himself. He takes initiative.

E. What is the Mission?

Why does
Abram Go to
Canaan?

Abram takes his family¹⁶ and begins to travel. How is his journey described?

(4) And Abram went as God told him... and they left to go towards the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan. (Gen. 12:4-5)

This description is surprising: at the beginning of the journey, Abram is already heading towards Canaan. But God has not yet told him where to go! Why does he pick Canaan as his destination?

It seems that Abram already knows where he is to go. This is Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the verse:

After He (God) said, “That I will show you,” he told him the secret, as it is written: “And they left to go towards the land of Canaan.” (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 12:1)

¹⁶ This, too, is of Abram’s initiative – God only tells him, “Go.” Abram could have understood this as a command to go alone, since the command was given only to him (and since it was given in the singular Hebrew form “*lekh*”). Despite this, Abram decides to take his wife, Lot, and “the souls they had acquired in Charan” (Gen. 12:5).

However, in verse 1, God apparently has not told Abram where to go – and as we discussed above, there is special significance to the fact that Abram is going toward an unknown destination. Why, then, does Abram go towards Canaan?

Abram might have chosen to begin his journey this way **by coincidence** – an arbitrary decision, dictated by Charan’s proximity to Canaan. Or perhaps he was influenced by **his father’s earlier journey** towards Canaan, which he never reached (see Gen. 11:29-32).¹⁷ Alternatively, Abram may have perceived, through his awareness of God, that **this is the land that God intended for him**.¹⁸

Is there a
Progression?

The journey to Canaan is given a very brief description, without any mention of walking or searching. Where is the progression we were expecting? Abram starts off in the right direction, and seems to arrive immediately. How can this be?

¹⁷ If we accept this opinion, we can understand the preceding narrative of Terah’s journey to Canaan as a prologue explaining why Abram chose Canaan as his destination, although God had not told him to go there.

¹⁸ While this is not mentioned in the text, Canaan may have been known (perhaps by the descendants of Shem) as a unique land – possibly in terms of its special connection with God. Abram may have been aware of this, or been handed down this belief from his father (this would also explain Terah’s reason for traveling towards Canaan). Knowing this, Abram might have surmised that Canaan was the unspoken destination of his journey.

**Abram's
Travels in
Canaan**

Abram does reach Canaan immediately, but he does not settle right away. He keeps walking within the land:

(6) And Abram passed through the land until the place of Shechem, until Elon Moreh; the Canaanites were in the land at that time. (Gen. 12:6)

Only then does God reveal that this is His chosen land:

(7) And God appeared to Abram, and He said: "To your descendants I will give this land..." (Gen. 12:7)

What does Abram do after this declaration? We would expect him to remain in this place, build a home, etc., – but this is not his first act:

(7) ...And Abram built there an altar to God, Who had appeared to him. (8) From there he went on toward the hills east of Beit El and pitched his tent, with Beit El to the west and Ai to the east, and there he built an altar to God and called out in the name of God. (Gen. 12:7-8)

Abram **walks** throughout the land, builds altars, and calls out in God's name; he continues his journey. God's command to him was "Go," and he continues "going" once he has reached the land. It seems that Abram is aware of the fact that his purpose is not to sit quietly in the land; rather, fulfilling his mission requires him to be moving. Even after he has already come to Canaan, God does not give him further

instructions. Abram understands for himself what he must do, and he decides on how best to do it.

F. Calling Out in God's Name

Abram builds altars and calls out in God's name, aware of the fact that God's selection of him is not solely as a reward. While Abram was told that "I will magnify your name" (Gen. 12:2), he understands that this is not what is central. Abram adds content to God's designation of him – he understands that **his mission is to call out in God's name.**

"We shall
make
ourselves
a name"
vs. "And he
called out
in God's
name"

Abram, who grew up in the culture of Babel and was fiercely opposed to it, understood that his true path was the antithesis of his upbringing. The builders in Babel wanted to make a name for themselves – to glorify their own abilities and become rulers of the world; the result was the God scattered them over the earth and their names were lost. Abram, by contrast, does not seek to make a name for himself, and is not interested in glory; rather, he occupies himself with calling out in God's name and making a name for God. It is specifically to this person that God promises, "I will magnify your name."

"Lest we be
scattered"
vs. "Go
from your
homeland"

In the Tower of Babel narrative, the people fear dispersion. This motivates them to settle the valley in Shin'ar – they want to build a permanent place to live, in order to prevent being scattered. In the end, God makes sure that they disperse throughout the

world. By contrast, Abram does not settle – he walks. Abram is willing to wander for God and as a reward, he receives land.

From the Culture of Babel to Following God

Abram leaves behind Babel’s culture of glorifying man, increasing his power and rebelling against God. Abandoning this way of life, he answers God’s call to go. He begins to walk, and in doing so, he begins the process of creating a different culture.

The Torah overlooks Abram’s past in order to emphasize that **Abram’s essence is his progression toward a different future.** He leaves Ur Kasdim, and begins a journey... a journey that will last his entire life.

Even when Abram reaches Canaan, he does not settle. He continues walking: from Shechem to Beit El, and then southward (Gen. 12:6-9); he travels to Egypt and back (12:10-20); he goes from the south to Beit El (13:1-3); he separates from Lot and continues to Elonei Mamre in Hebron (13:17-18); from there he joins the war of the five kings against the four (Ch. 14), and then returns to Hebron. He travels again to the south and settles in Gerar (Be’er Sheva) (Gen. 20:1); he goes to the Binding of Isaac and then returns to Be’er Sheva (Ch. 22); later, he goes to Hebron to bury Sarah (Ch. 23). Abram does not stay in any one place in the country, but rather “travels the length and breadth of it” (Gen. 13:17). **This walking is not only a physical act. It is Abram’s way of life, which is fundamentally a process.**

G. Initiative and Command

Serving God through Self-Awareness

Another characteristic of Abram’s travels, as is already evident at the beginning of *Lekh-Lekha*, is the fact that God does not explicitly tell him what to do. This lack of direct command continues throughout Abram’s life.

Why does God not direct him? God’s command to Abram is vague because, apparently, God is not interested in giving Abram exact instructions. God would like there to be a person¹⁹ in the world who is able to realize himself that he must call out in God’s name. Calling out in God’s name, in this case, becomes much more authentic and meaningful.

Abram must decide for himself what his mission is, and how to achieve it. He must determine how to deal with various scenarios: Abram elects to go down to Egypt or Gerar during famine; he makes the decision to separate from Lot; he goes to war with the four kings on his own initiative; he buys the Cave of Machpela without God having commanded him to do so; he even argues *against* God regarding the destruction of Sodom.

God does not direct Abram’s every move,²⁰ and certainly does not command him to build altars or

¹⁹ At this point, only one person is calling out in God’s name. Later, however, there will be a nation to call out in His name – and at the end of days, all nations will recognize God’s sovereignty. This is Abram’s final mission.

²⁰ As opposed to Noah, who is given explicit instructions every step of the way, and follows them exactly.

call out in His name. Abram initiates all of these things himself.

The Four Commands to Abram

Although Abram's life is characterized by independent action, he is commanded by God regarding four things:

First is the command which opens Abram's narrative: "Go...to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). The second is, "Get up and walk in the land, travel the length and breadth of it" (Gen. 13:17). The third is circumcision - and here, too, walking is mentioned: the command begins with the words "Walk before Me and be guileless" (Gen. 17:1).²¹ The last command is: "Take your son...and go to the land of Moria, and bring him up there as an offering..." (Gen. 22:2).

 21 There is an interesting *midrash* on the verse "Go before Me and be guileless" (Gen. 17:1):

Rabbi Yehuda said that Rav said: "When God told Abraham to 'go before Me and be guileless,' he (Abraham) trembled, thinking, 'Perhaps there is some flaw in me?' When God said, 'And I will make My covenant between us,' Abraham was relieved." (Nedarim 32.)

Abram fears that "perhaps there is some flaw in me." During a journey, the right path is not always obvious. While God reassures Abram, the *midrash* describes the fear that accompanies the journey, the process. Another expression of this fear can be found in the *midrash* on "Do not fear, Abram" (Gen. 15:1), which illustrates Abram's fear following his war with the four kings, that he may have made a mistake and thus lost some of his merit during this war. Here, too, Abram does not reach a final destination - the Torah never says of Abram that he "was righteous and guileless," as it does of Noah. Rather, Abram is constantly moving and progressing.

Walking into the Unknown

Each of these four commands is connected to "walking," the action that typifies Abram. The first and last commands begin with the same word: "Go," and in each command **the destination is unknown**: in going to Canaan, God says, "To the land that I will show you." At the Binding of Isaac, God states, "On one of the mountains that I will tell you" (Gen. 22:2).

These commands illustrate the essence of Abram's life: the pursuit of an undefined mission.

Calling out in God's Name through Self- Awareness

Throughout his life, **Abraham** is on a quest in pursuit of God's will. He does not receive any specific instructions of where to go or what to do. He must walk before God - initiate, illuminate, make his own way, and call out in God's name through a true awareness of self.

