

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Lech Lecha  
October 31, 2020 \*\*\* 13 Cheshvan, 5781

[Lech Lecha in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3161/jewish/Lech-Lecha-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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G-d speaks to Abram, commanding him, "Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." There, G-d says, he will be made into a great nation. Abram and his wife, Sarai, accompanied by his nephew Lot, journey to the land of Canaan, where Abram builds an altar and continues to spread the message of a one G-d.

A famine forces the first Jew to depart for Egypt, where beautiful Sarai is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram escapes death because they present themselves as brother and sister. A plague prevents the Egyptian king from touching her, and convinces him to return her to Abram and to compensate the brother-revealed-as-husband with gold, silver and cattle.

Back in the land of Canaan, Lot separates from Abram and settles in the evil city of Sodom, where he falls captive when the mighty armies of Chedorlaomer and his three allies conquer the five cities of the Sodom Valley. Abram sets out with a small band to rescue his nephew, defeats the four kings, and is blessed by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem).

G-d seals the Covenant Between the Parts with Abram, in which the exile and persecution (galut) of the people of Israel is foretold, and the Holy Land is bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage.

Still childless ten years after their arrival in the Land, Sarai tells Abram to marry her maidservant Hagar. Hagar conceives, becomes insolent toward her mistress, and then flees when Sarai treats her harshly; an angel convinces her to return, and tells her that her son will father a populous nation. Ishmael is born in Abram's eighty-sixth year. Thirteen years later, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham ("father of multitudes"), and Sarai's to Sarah ("princess"), and promises that a son will be born to them; from this child, whom they should call Isaac ("will laugh"), will stem the great nation with which G-d will establish His special bond. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his descendants as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you." Abraham immediately complies, circumcising himself and all the males of his household.

[Lech Lecha Haftarah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579794/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/579794/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579794/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The haftarah for this week discusses Abraham's journey to the land of Canaan at G-d's behest, and touches upon Abraham's miraculous battle against the four kings, both of which are described in this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Isaiah addresses Israel's complaint: ""My way [of serving G-d] has been ignored by the Lord, and from my G-d, my judgment passes [unrewarded]."" Isaiah reminds Israel of the Creator's greatness. The time will come when "He will give the tired strength, and to him who has no strength, He will increase strength. Youths shall become tired and weary, and young men shall stumble, but those who put their hope in the Lord shall renew [their] vigor, they shall raise wings as eagles; they shall run and not weary, they shall walk and not tire." Nevertheless, "there is no

comprehension of His wisdom," and as such, at times we cannot understand why He chooses to delay the reward of the righteous.

The haftorah then turns its attention to the idolatrous nations of the world. Isaiah reminds them of Abraham's greatness, how after arriving in Canaan he pursued and defeated four mighty kings. "The islands saw and feared; the ends of the earth quaked." Nevertheless, the nations who witnesses these miracles did not abandon their ways. "The [idol] craftsman strengthened the smith, the one who smoothes [the idol] with the hammer strengthened the one who wields the sledge hammer; the one who glues its coating says, "It is good," and he strengthened it with nails that it should not move..."

G-d promises the Jewish nation to reward them for their loyalty to G-d. "Do not fear for I am with you; be not discouraged for I am your G-d. . . Behold all those incensed against you shall be ashamed and confounded; those who quarreled with you shall be as naught and be lost."

[The Courage not to Conform \(Lech Lecha 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://rabbisacks.org/lech-lecha-5781/)  
<https://rabbisacks.org/lech-lecha-5781/>

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they do not follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don't conform for the sake of conforming. They don't do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an inner voice, a call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of God to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)"

Why? Because people do conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live – "your land." At a deeper level, they are influenced by friends and neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents, and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house." I want you, says God to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion that will not worship power and the symbols of power – for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said God, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and into what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man." [1]

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to the ancient times we have long

outgrown. The way to think of idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and what missiles and bombs are for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must." [2] Judaism is a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I have reached after a lifetime of studying our sacred texts. It is about how a nation can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a world based on justice and compassion, in which "They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and 14 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of influence without power.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the Sages say, he was called ha-ivri, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (be-ever echad) and he was on the other". [3] Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

After the Holocaust, some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that was committing one of the great crimes against humanity. One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it, the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the correct answer for the first few cards, and then to answer incorrectly for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform: it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

More frightening still was the Stanford experiment carried out in the early 1970s by Philip Zimbardo. The participants were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within days the students cast as guards were behaving abusively,

some of them subjecting the “prisoners” to psychological torture. The students cast as prisoners put up with this passively, even siding with the guards against those who resisted. The experiment was called off after six days, by which time even Zimbardo had found himself drawn into the artificial reality he had created. The pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave “his land, his birthplace and his father’s house,” to free himself from the pressure to conform.

Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis, writes: “By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be.”[4]

One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavour, is precisely this willingness to be different. Throughout the centuries, Jews have been the most striking example of a group that refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith.

One other finding of Solomon Asch is worth noting. He noted that when just one other person was willing to support the individual who could see that the others were giving the wrong answer, it gave him the strength to stand up against the consensus. That is why, however small their numbers, Jews created communities. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews, we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.[5]

It is what makes a nation of leaders.

Shabbat Shalom [1] Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), part 1, ch. 13. [2] Thucydides, 5.89. [3] Genesis Rabbah 42:8 [4] Walter Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 49. [5] Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken, Birches, and Other Poems* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1916), 10.

### [A Single Star: Sarah's Journey by Maya Zinkow](#)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online?search=&genre=2046&parashah=&holiday=&theme=&series=&author=>

“I know this is not fun to hear on a Wednesday afternoon, but I would really look into getting fertility tests if I were you.” The harrowing text message from my sister came as I was waiting to hear back from her and my sister-in-law about their most recent cycle of egg retrieval and genetic testing. It was her way of telling me that once again, they received news that their journey to parenthood would not be a simple one. But it

was also her way of reminding me that our expectations about our bodies, so deeply ingrained in us from a young age, often do not come to fruition in the ways we expect them to. My sister's sadness was particular to this moment, yes, but also born in the gap between the expectation that she could easily give life to a healthy child, and the reality that she could not.

In parashat Lekh Lekha, our ancestors grapple with this gulf between expectation and reality, God making an epic promise whose fulfillment is dependent on the bodies of Avraham and Sarah. In chapter 15 of Genesis, Avraham, then Avram, quite shaken by all he's endured since leaving his home, begins to question God's ability to bring about the promise of great nationhood.

Adonai, Hashem, what will you give me, as here I am to go on childless? (Gen. 15:2)

God offers words of assurance in return, inviting Avraham to count the stars above him if he can. So shall his offspring be upon the land that God will give to future generations. There, beneath the blanket of innumerable stars, through a series of odd rituals and a personal revelatory vision, Avraham's faith in God is secured once more. The essential missing voice here is, of course, Sarah our Mother, whose womb is meant to bear the weight of this covenant. Through her, a single star will become millions. Surely if God promises, then it will be so. Surely, if our bodies were created in such a way, commanded to פרו ורבו ("be fruitful and multiply") within our first breaths of being, then they will obey the Divine commandment. Feminist biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, writing of the ancient Near East's cultural transformation from goddess worship to monotheism, emphasizes the power of this faith, whether in the self-propagating plants of all their kinds or in the godlike power of our own bodies to bring forth new human life:

"Human beings do not have to worry about perpetuating and continuing any of the elements that God creates. As master of creation, God has the power to keep creation going. God's mastery over the physical universe, epitomized in the creative word, is so powerful that we can assume that this universe will continue without our active efforts towards this end." (In the Wake of the Goddesses, 93)

If the trees and all the vegetation spread upon the Earth's surface can blossom once more as winter turns to spring, Sarah's body will surely bend to the inevitability of pregnancy.

Of course, it is not so simple. Itzik Manger, one of the great Yiddish poets of the 20th century, writes for us a window into the complicated fertility journey of the house of Avraham in these final chapters of parashat Lekh Lekha. Listen as we are gifted with a midrashic exchange between our Father and Mother:

"Abie, when will we have a child?

We're both already old folks.

Everyone knows a woman as old as I

Is already due for the eighteenth time."  
Abraham Our Father smiles and is mute  
And puffs away, smoking his pipe:  
Have faith my wife, if He on High wills,  
Even a broom can shoot."

The conversation goes on like this: Sarah remains unnamed, expressing her pain plainly to her husband as he continues to respond with the same four lines above. "Every night," she says, "I hear how my body sobs . . . Often I think that the star in the window is really the soul of our child, that wanders around every night among rain and shadows and wind." Have faith, my wife. "I see how Hagar's child plays with the sun in the sand, and I give him a pat on his little head, a strange sadness comes into my hand." Have faith, my wife.

I invite you to be moved by this moment in the lives of our ancestors, when Avraham's faith is set so starkly against Sarah's suffering. While we know that parashat Vayera will bring the sound of Sarah's laughter, the coo of Yitzhak's first cries, for now nothing is yet known by our Mother Sarah. It is a powerful thing to step into Avraham's faith, but what if we are never blessed with a personal revelation, a spectacular moment beneath the whispering stars? What if, when we fall into deep sleep, all we see is that single star, a haunting reminder of the thing we desire most in the world, just beyond our reach?

I pray that I get to be an aunt to my sister's children, however they come into being. With each round of fertility treatments she and her beloved endure, I hope my prayers reach their bodies as much as I hope that they reach the Heavens. But we do not know. We each have a unique journey to take in this world, a particular path, a body all our own. If the still small voice of eternity brings you comfort, listen for the potential promise it may carry as you are brought outside to contemplate God's creation. But when faith wavers, be comforted by Sarah's sadness. Just like us, she did not know where her journey would take her. *(Maya Zinkow is a student at the The Rabbinical School of JTS, class of 2021)*

[Like Terah or Abraham? - Lech Lecha by Rabbi March Rudolph](https://ajr.edu/teachings/divreitorah/)

<https://ajr.edu/teachings/divreitorah/>

Today I am going to do something quite audacious. I am going to disagree with one of the greatest sages who ever lived! I am going to take issue with one of the greatest Jewish minds of the 20th century — The Hafetz Hayyim!

Ever since Ora Prouser introduced us to his collection of weekly Torah Commentary, "Al HaTorah", I have turned to this collection for study and inspiration. For this week's Torah portion he focuses on this verse, "Abraham took his family and his possessions and went forth to go to the Land of Caanan – and he came to the land of Caanan" (Gen. 12:5). He compares this to a verse about Terah, Abraham's father, that we read

last week. There the Torah says, "Terah went forth from Ur Kasdim to go to the Land of Caanan, and he came to the city of Haran, and he settled there" (Gen.11:31).

Comparing these two verses teaches us a valuable lesson, says the Hafetz Hayyim. We should be like Abraham and not like Terah. When we set out to do something, we must not deviate from our goal nor change our plans, like Terah did – we should continue until we accomplish our task, as Abraham shows us. We must persevere until we reach our goal.

Therein lays my disagreement with the Hafetz Hayyim. I am going to argue that sometimes we need to be like Terah, and change our minds, and not be like Abraham, and persevere in our journey. For this we turn to the true story of an Israeli man named Nadav ben Yehudah.

In May, 2012, 24 year old Nadav ben Yehuda, a professional mountaineer, set off to become the youngest Israeli ever to climb to the top of Mt. Everest. On the night before his assault on the summit, he slept at a camp about a half mile below the peak. He woke before sunrise and set off for the top of the world. He was about 900 feet below his goal, and it appeared he would reach the top of Everest before sunrise. He was so close, he could almost taste it!

It was then that he recognized a figure sprawled out beside an icy ridge before him, unconscious. It was Aydin Irmak, a Turkish climber who Nadav had met at the base camp. A number of other climbers had already passed the unconscious man on their way to the summit. Nadav ben Yehudah had a choice to make. He could pass by the helpless climber, as others had, and leave him to die from exposure. Or, he could abandon his quest for the top of Mt. Everest and try to rescue the half frozen Irmak. Even if he tried to get him down the mountain, there was no guarantee that he would get him down alive. Perhaps both of them would perish in the rescue attempt. Nadav ben Yehudah did not hesitate. "People passed him by and didn't do a thing. I didn't think for a second about politics – the fact that he was Turkish and I was Israeli. I also didn't think about the glory. All I thought about is that I can save this person – and that's what I did."

So Nadav abandoned his quest for the summit and turned back. Nadav had to carry the injured Turk down the mountain alone, attached to a harness. It took ten hours to get him to the base camp. Both were flown by helicopter to Katmandu and hospitalized. Ayden Irmak survived and regained his health. Nadav suffered severe frostbite of his fingers because during the rescue he had to remove his gloves. "I hope the doctors don't have to amputate them," he said, "because I want to keep climbing". In his book on the Hebrew prophets, Rabbi Rami Shapiro comments on a passage from Isaiah, "God is asking you to live without certainty; knowing only the way (justice, kindness, and compassion) and giving no thought to the destination" (Page 40). Nadav ben Yehudah certainly had a destination – the top of Mt. Everest. But when uncertainty crossed his path, his "way" became not the shortest path to the summit. His way was his justice, his kindness, and his compassion. It was no detour.

He was on that path all along.

Our world, for the most part, looks at things the other way around. It values the destination more than the way we achieve it. Witness the athletes, for whom winning is more important than the way they win. Witness the bankers for whom making a profit is more important than the way they make a profit. And yes, witness the politicians for whom getting elected is far more important than the way they get elected. Witness all the climbers who made their way around an injured fellow in their single minded attempt to reach the top of the world.

Nadav ben Yehudah never reached the heights of Mt. Everest. I think you will agree with me that he reached heights far greater than that. I think the Hafetz Hayyim would have been proud of Nadav ben Yehudah. May he serve as an example and as a reminder to us all. Yes, we should persevere in our goals, like Abraham. But we ought not to be so single minded that we shunt aside our values on the way to reaching our destination. Sometimes, it is better to be like Terah. (*Marc Rudolph (AJR 04) is Senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Shalom in Naperville, Illinois.*)

### [Traveling Down the Road That Helps You To Find Yourself by Rabbi Dan Moskovitz](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/traveling-down-road-helps-you-find-yourself)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/traveling-down-road-helps-you-find-yourself>

In *The Fires of Spring*, the late, prolific American author, James Michener, wrote:

“For this is the journey that humans make: to find themselves. If they fail in this, it doesn’t matter much what else they find. But if a person happens to find oneself — if they know what they can be depended upon to do, the limits of courage, the positions from which they will no longer retreat, the degree to which they can surrender their inner life to someone, the secret reservoirs of their determination, the extent of their dedication, the depth of their feelings for beauty, their honest and un-postured goals — then they have found a mansion which they can inhabit with dignity all the days of their life.” (James Michener, *The Fires of Spring* [NY: Random House, 1949], p. 488)

Michener’s second novel, *The Fires of Spring* was published in 1949, after the close of World War II. We can surmise that he wrote to a generation of soldiers, now back from war, and to those who toiled on the home front in factories and offices at jobs they might never have imagined. He revealed the voice inside each of them, and each of us; the voice we can hear, if we listen, which suggests at seminal moments in our lives, “you can be more than this.”

In this week’s parashah, Lech L’cha, we read a similar imperative to find purpose in life, to listen to and live — as your true self. The command to Abram, lech l’cha, comes from the voice of God — a voice that Abram, like many of us, hears in his conscience. It’s not a voice that can only be experienced on a mountain top or coming from a ray of light descending from the heavens. It’s a voice that echoes in the corners of our minds and is loudest when we stop to listen, but is always there as background music. The voice challenges each one of us to consider: Is this who I am meant to be? Is this

what I am called to do? Is this the purpose for which I was created?

In the parashah, we read:

**"The Eternal One said to Abram, Go, forth [find yourself] from your land, your birthplace, your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing." (Gen. 12:1-2)**

A footnote: Though the Torah gives Abram's age as 75 at the time he leaves his father's house (Gen.12:4), age in the Torah is a literary device. Later, the Torah records that Abraham is 175 years old when he dies. Thus, one can place Abraham's relative age in Lech L'cha as late teens or early 20s — the traditional time of self-discovery. This idea is emphasized by the change in Abram's name to Abraham shortly after he sets out on his journey and makes a covenant with God. Both Abram and his wife Sarai have the letter hei added to their names, becoming Abraham and Sarah, respectively (Gen. 17:1-16). The letter hei is connected to the name of God.

The word (or name) God means something different to each of us. In my experience, the word is like a fingerprint: no two people share the exact same working definition of God. For those of us who struggle with the idea of an omnipotent, intervening, miracle-making being, here's an explanation I learned years ago while working with those in recovery from addiction: G-O-D can be an acronym for the source of "good orderly direction." God is a lodestar, a compass point toward which we, like the biblical Abram, can direct our lives.

The hei is added to Abram and Sarai's names when they accept life direction and purpose from God as they understand that heavenly voice to be. Without a sense of purpose, their names, and therefore their lives, are incomplete.

The 19th-century, orthodox leader, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, observed:

**" ... every individual is directly responsible to God for his/her personal conduct. If it becomes necessary, if the values practiced by the majority are not ones that the individual believes are proper, then the individual must go alone, his own way, with God." (Harvey J. Fields, A Torah Commentary for Our Times: Genesis [NY: UAHC Press, 1990] p. 39-40)**

How could we have survived until this day as a people had we not received from Abram the courage to free ourselves from the self-imposed slavery of self-limiting expectations and harnessed dreams? Abram couldn't be Abraham living in his father's house, among familiar surroundings, conducting the life that had been chosen for him. In finding himself, Abraham found what we are all looking for: a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning that is internally motivated.

In his book, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* Clayton M. Christenson, a professor at the Harvard School of Business, offers a model of how to make that "should I stay or should I go" decision that confronted Abram, Michener, and all of us, by applying business theory to this eternal dilemma. Christenson explains:

**" ... in life, like in business we each have limited resources: time, energy, talent**

and wealth. With every moment of our time, every decision about how we spend our energy, our talent and our money, we are making a statement about what really matters to us.

“You can talk all you want about having a clear purpose in your life, but ultimately this means nothing if you are not investing the resources you have in a way that is consistent with your purpose. If the decisions you make about where to invest your blood, sweat and tears are not consistent with the person you aspire to be, you’ll never become that person.” (Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth, Karen Dillon, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* [NY: Harper Business, 2012], p. 67)

Abraham’s journey and our quest to know ourselves are one and the same. In truth, it’s not a journey we take only in our formative years as teens or young professionals; it’s a journey we take time and time again. We are on that journey right now, all of us. To leave your father’s house, physically and metaphorically, and go to find your purpose in life is truly to live a life of meaning. Sometimes, as for Abraham and Michener, it means we have to jettison all connections to our past and chart a new course. But other times, our journey of self-discovery is a return home to the source of who we are — a place we may have moved away from over time. For either journey, Torah is our guide and our road map to a life of meaning and purpose, our good orderly direction. May it be so in our lives and may it lengthen our days. (*Rabbi Dan Moskovitz is the rabbi of Temple Sholom in Vancouver, BC.*)

### Call and Response: The Hero's Journey by Rabbi Karyn D Kedar

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/traveling-down-road-helps-you-find-yourself>

In this week’s parashah, Lech L’cha, I have always been more mystified by the call and response rather than the journey itself. God says to Abram, in the imperative, “you go” (Gen. 12:1). And what do Abram and Sarai reply to such a dramatic and life altering command? Nothing. Nothing is said. They simply go and embark upon the journey. What follows is defining — it is the hero’s journey to discover the meaning of personal and national identity. With all its complexity, and yet with ultimate simplicity, this journey turns Abram and Sarai from anonymous tribal leaders into our ancestors of origin: from this moment we will, eventually, become the Jewish people.

Call and response. This narrative teaches us three powerful lessons: we are called to a greater purpose, we can discern that purpose, and when we answer the call, we live a life of meaning and consequence. This is the spiritual principle of discernment. From depths of our being we can discern a tug, pulling and pushing us to become who we are always meant to be. It is no less than a calling to manifest the beauty and power with which we were born. And when we are brave and faithful, we respond to that calling. What unfolds is a purposeful and meaningful life. All who are in our orb are affected and urged to do the same.

This is not a simple task. Abram and Sarai make it seem simple by their clarity and

actions. But we, their descendants, don't find this to be so easy. Inside us, there is a choir of voices telling us not to be brave and faithful. We are riddled with doubt and fear. And in fact, we aren't really sure that we've been called to greatness. A calling? We don't know what that means. This is why a spiritually grounded life is a life of practice. It takes commitment and practice to discern, to decide to listen to that discernment, and to choose, every day, the actions and attitudes that will propel us on our path.

Discernment is clarity. It is fine-tuning. It is guidance. It is trusting intuition over fear, listening to the gentle fluttering of longing and to the whispers of the soul. It is self-reliance. It is the utter denial of negativity and the commitment to positive thinking. And yet, discernment is not dogmatic. There are a myriad of possibilities to self-actualize, to discover purpose, to have a meaningful life, and to impact our world, making it safer and more compassionate.

We go back and forth between choice and discernment, reaffirming our decisions, reexamining everything. The spiritual path is a zigzag, a switchback up a mountain. It is exhausting, riddled with doubt and setbacks. There are so many ways to get us where we need to go.

Discernment is the practice of sorting out the words and assumptions, tendencies and habits, people and surroundings. It is a primary principle of our spiritual life. That which is life-draining must fall away. And all that is life-affirming becomes the foundation of a life well lived.

Sometimes, we are called to a life of real and true suffering. This week, we remember Kristallnacht, the night when the decimation of the Jewish communities in Germany and Austria was so profound that we remember the pogrom by the sound it made: "The Night of Broken Glass." The psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, bears witness to the destructive forces of the Holocaust and still commands us not to give in to cynicism and despair:

**"We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a person's tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement." (Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, newly revised, third addition, p. 118)**

It is true that life can be filled with suffering; as human beings we have the capacity for evil and destruction; and, our own particular circumstance can be riddled with tragic and difficult events. Paradoxically, it is also true that life at its core is precious, and filled with sparks of light and beauty and blessing. And it is true that we are being called to a greater purpose than our own circumstance. We are called to live a life of grace and kindness and compassion, even within unimaginable suffering. And when we heed that call, we follow the example of Abram and Sarai, we come closer to living a hero's journey. Note: Excerpts were adapted for this essay from *Omer: A Counting* by Rabbi

Karyn D. Kedar; Reference Materials: Lech L'cha, Genesis 12:1 – 17:27; The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 91–117; Revised Edition, pp. 88–117; The Torah: A Women's Commentary, pp. 59–84; Haftarah, Isaiah 40:27–41:16; The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 330 – 333; Revised Edition, pp. 118 – 120. (*Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar is the senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Deerfield, IL.*)

#### YAHRTZEITS

Lisa Small remembers her father Joseph Small (Yosef ben Yehudah v' Gittel) on Sunday November 1<sup>st</sup> (Cheshvan 14)