

**Beth Chayim Chadashim,
Los Angeles Oct. 26, 2001**

Lech Lecha 5762

Rabbinic Intern Sharon Gladstone

Shabbat Shalom - I feel so good seeing you, recognizing so many faces, knowing so many names. This bimah feels like a home! It is so perfect that I should be standing here, at the very start of my journey, while we read about Abraham starting his journey. Abraham went much farther in his life that I expect to go in my life, but I know that my experiences with you will in fact help me to make a difference in this world just as Abraham changed his. I wonder if Abraham felt as supported and befriended by the people who accompanied him on his journey as I do by you? I hope so.

Avram's journey began with those two short and enigmatic words, "lech- lecha." The second word, lecha, is unnecessary, and has given us considerable trouble. You see Lech, go, would have done the trick. Abram would have understood God's direction without that confusing Lecha. (USE VISUAL AIDE HERE) My favorite understanding of that second word is that it means "to yourself." Lech, go, Lecha, to yourself. Abram's journey is not merely one of outward consequence, but also one of great personal significance. As he confronts his world, he must also confront himself. He must learn who he is so that he can be good father to a nation.

This parasha is filled of "lech-lecha" adventures and promises, rituals and dreams. Avram must look deep into himself in order to make it through this 24-year introductory period (Avram is 75 when God first called). And what awaited him once he made it through, was a holy covenant. Avram had survived his initial "lech-lecha" tests, and now God deemed him ready to go out to the world as God's covenanted friend. And how did God instruct Abraham to create this covenant? God said, "Such shall be the covenant between Me and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you."

Now to me, the act of circumcision seems like a very lech-lecha gesture. It has great personal significance, but not so much public weight. I remember a skit from Saturday Night Live. The setting was a nudist colony, and as people passed one another, they would comment on the *[whisper]* penises of the men. It was a very funny skit, but hardly a model for everyday life. We do not enter the public eye each day in the buff. We have no way of knowing who is an who is not

circumcised! So how can we recognize the children of the covenant? There are other issues with the idea of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. I, for one, am not circumcised. And many of my non-Jewish friends, are. Jews from all walks of life would and do include me and all other Jewish women in the covenant, and they would and generally do exclude circumcised but non-Jewish men. Sometimes those men are included as spouses of Jews, but those who are just not Jewish are just not Jewish! And some people, who are neither technically Jewish (for men or women) or circumcised are very much a part of the covenant! This is a complex issue that boils down to this question: How do we show the world that we are part of a covenanted people without showing or even bearing the biblical sign of the covenant?

Is the answer that we wear a Kipah on our heads all the time? Do we wear a small talit beneath our clothes and allow the tassles, or tzitzit, to hang out at our waist? Do we wear a Star of David, a Chai, a mezuzah on a chain around our necks? For some of us, yes, that is an answer, but for many of us, no. Many of us, myself included, make no outward physical displays of our Jewishness on a daily basis. Unless people see me standing beneath the mezuzah that adorns my doorpost, or see me praying in a shul, they would never know that I am Jewish. According to many people "I don't look Jewish!" Nu... So... What do we do?

What is covenant, how do we wear it, and how do we live it? The covenant is our unique and special relationship with God. We as a people, and we as individuals, have this covenant with God: we agree to serve and worship God, and God in turn gives us inspiration and, we hope, protection. It is a lifelong relationship that we can pass on to our children, our lovers and even our friends.

We can all wear the covenant, for it resides not only on our flesh, but in our hearts. In Deuteronomy 10:16, God Tells the people Israel to: "Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, Umaltem et orlat levavchem." This too can be a form of covenantal circumcision. We can all make an indelible mark on our hearts that we can show to the entire world as a sign of our Jewishness. Of course, we don't literally see each other's circumcised hearts any more than we see each other's circumcisions on any other parts of our bodies. But wouldn't you agree that a circumcised heart is often quite easy to spot? Let me explain what I mean by a circumcised heart, for that will explain how we can live our covenant with God.

There are many ways to make the mark on our hearts. It begins by removing the covering that makes it difficult for us to engage in relationship with God. Let's open ourselves to our covenant. Then, we can study Torah, we can pray as a community, we can participate in Jewish rituals such as the celebration of Shabbat, immersion in the mikveh or bar and bat mitzvah. We can find God in each of these experiences. And these activities give us a Jewish awareness and perspective. If Fran were here, she would call this a Yiddisher kopf- a Jewish

head. The more Judaism we know, the more Jewish we can be. We can wear our covenant on our hearts. And once that covenant is intact in our hearts, we become what God promised Avram - a light to the nations, or lagoyim. You see, part of living a covenanted life is showing the world that we do so.

We are all faced with ample opportunities to show the world that we are covenanted people. Each day, we make decisions on how to behave in our professional and our personal lives. Ethical decisions are Jewish decisions. We consider politics from a Jewish position. We use words and phrases - oy vey comes to mind first, that remind us and those around us, of our Jewishness. In some cases, we, like Abraham, are told exactly what to do to show that we are a people worthy of a covenant with God. Other times, we are not guided at all. Those are the times that bring me back to the first words of the parahsa: lech-lecha. If we hope to show the world that we are each covenanted, we have to do a considerable amount of personal seeking. We must go to ourselves, see who we are and what we believe. We all have different ways of engaging in relationship with God, and so we might each have different ways of showing the world who, and what, we are.

Next week, we will read about some of the ways that Abraham engaged in his relationship with God. He was not directed in these episodes, so we can assume that he found his path through deeds of lech-lecha. He welcomes visitors and allows them to visit him while he is ill (he's actually recovering from his circumcision). If you'd like to hear more, come hear my drash next week!

I'll conclude this drash with a holy challenge for each of us. Lech- lecha, let's each go to ourselves, that we may find our Jewish place in this world, and that we, like our father Abraham, may be a blessing.