

**Our Own Journeys**  
Textual Sermon for Beth-El, on *Lech L'chah*  
October 30, 2009

The story of the first Jew, Abram, soon to be renamed Abraham, “father of multitudes,” begins with the command to make a journey: *lech l'chah mei'artzechah*, go forth from your land, the place where you have grown up and are comfortable. You cannot achieve your destiny unless you have the courage to move into unknown territory. The grammatical form, lost in the English, *Lech L'chah*, is an emphatic construction, not just “Go to a land that I will show you,” but “Get moving, now, to a land that I will show you.”

From Abraham some 4000 years ago to today, we Jews have moved off into *terra incognita* time and again. Every one of you (born Jews and Jews-by-choice alike) has ancestors who did that—or how would they have gotten from the Middle East (or wherever your most remote ancestors began) to (most of them) Europe, and now to America? For Abraham, and for many of our ancestors and of us, the journey was not simply geographical, but spiritual. The standard commentary on Abraham’s journey was that, living in one of the so-called “cradles of civilization,” Mesopotamia, the powerful and established cultural environment would have been too powerful for his mission to succeed had he stayed at home and proclaimed that he and his family would only serve one God. He had to go off into the boondocks to create a new world-view.

Sometimes voluntarily, and some times as refugees, Jews have moved on to more congenial places many times. The round of Torah readings—with their stress on leaving first

Mesopotamia, and later Egypt, emphasize that aspect of Jewish history. And the round of holidays, especially Pesach and to some extent Sukkot, strive to drive that message home as we symbolically reenact the Exodus time and again. We are instructed to feel this as our journey, not only our ancestors' journey. Then, perhaps, we will—for our own personal life journeys—have the vision and courage, when needed, geographically or spiritually, to move on when God calls.

Six years ago Dr. Norman Cohen, a Midrash Professor at the Hebrew Union College in New York, published a book called *Hineini in our Lives*, a midrashic commentary on 14 biblical texts, about hearing and responding to the call of other people, as well as God, when we are addressed in significant ways. That is Part I of the book. Most interesting, as I read it, is Part II, which attempts to bring the idea alive not only through Cohen's biblical interpretation, but through a section of personal testimony, 11 brief spiritual memoirs—rabbis and scholars talking about this dynamic—rising to God's challenge—in their personal experience.

I want to share, in context with this week's parashah, *Lech L'chah*, a bit of what my friend Neil Gillman, rabbi and philosophy professor, wrote. He grew up, he says, in Quebec City, Canada. He never knew his maternal grandfather, and has but the faintest memories of his paternal grandparents, who died when he was young. But his maternal grandmother, Dvora Gardner, who emigrated from Rumania to Canada in 1887, the matriarch of the family, lived to be 98, when Gillman was a 23 year-old rabbinic student. He spent as much time in her home as in his own when growing up. The family regularly gathered 'round her table for shabbat and holiday meals, and he loved to hear:

stories of the “old country,” about her early years raising a family of nine children (and burying three of them) in this outpost of primitive, anti-Semitic, French-speaking Catholicism, about the history of the Quebec Jewish community (18 families when we arrived, over 135 families during my years there, and now dying away), supporting her husband as he built up his business—folk wisdom, all delivered in her delightful mix of English, French, and Yiddish. I was the crown of her old age, the beloved grandchild, named after her late husband, upon whom she showered unqualified affection. I was her pride and joy.

Then Gillman adds the following:

What I could never understand was why and how she left Rumania in 1887, traveled by train across half of Europe, a young single woman, accompanied by an infant niece she was charged to bring with her to the New World.

For this young woman to abandon everything that was familiar to her—her birthplace, her home, her family, her native culture—and travel to some unknown foreign land seemed then and still seems to me to be beyond belief. From where did she draw the courage, the initiative, the sheer determination to take this step and to carry it out?...

(p. 130)

By contrast, my friend says, he always thought his own experience was rather pedestrian. He grew up, went off to College in Toronto, became interested in Judaism and so went on to graduate school in New York, and has been teaching ever since.

But he had an aunt who had “escaped (her word)” small town Canada years before to marry and move to New York. About 10 years before writing this little memoir Gillman had gone out to Flatbush to see this now-elderly aunt. He writes:

She began to talk of her childhood in Quebec and asked what it was like for me to grow up there. “Quite different than growing up in Flatbush,” she laughed.

Then came the following: “I’ve never said this to you but I have always marveled at the fact that coming out of a small backward town as you did, without much of a Jewish education, you came to New York, studied at one of the great institutions of Jewish learning where you are now a ‘renowned’ (again her word) professor of Jewish studies. That my kids, growing up in Flatbush, a great Jewish community, studying in the best *yeshivot*, achieved similar positions is no surprise. But that you accomplished all of this is astonishing. Do you appreciate that? Where in the world did you get the courage to take such steps?” (p. 131)

“She left me speechless,” says Gillman. “No, I didn’t appreciate that at all,” he writes. “Where was my fear of the unknown? Did God play a role? I would never have claimed that

then.” He just took one step after another, doing what seemed natural, seeking an education, figuring he’d handle whatever came up along the way.

The point, of course, is that he did not think of this life journey as evidence of God operating in his life. He did not see himself as courageous. Neither did his grandmother see her journey as courageous. They just did what they thought best, one step at a time. But he sensed God operating in the world as he thought about his grandmother, and his aunt felt God operating in the world as she thought about him. And, I would add, and Dr. Gillman would surely agree, we—the Jewish people—sense God operating in life as we ponder Abraham moving on from Charan, Moses and the Israelites moving out of Egypt, and on and on as we have gone to so many other places over the ages!

*Lech l’chah* (and song-writer Debbie Friedman brilliantly added, in the feminine, for Sarah went with him, *L’chi Lach*), “Get moving!” was not only the commandment to our ancestors, but also to each person down through the ages. Do you think of your life as under the guidance of some “higher power”? Most of us have boldly moved from one place to another, or one career to another, or one marriage to another, or one religion to another; we have coped with new beginnings medically, some of us. People around us, whether they said it aloud or not, may well have wondered where we found the strength or courage? To which we—certainly I—would say, at most—“I get by with a little help from my friends”—and in fact would, most of the time, simply say, “I took what seemed the next logical step in my life.” Only when someone with some “distance,” perspective, sees the pattern is the hand of God apparent. For each of us, even

if, in life's maze, there was a blind alley or two, here we are, doing quite well, thank you. (Make that, thank You with a capital Y!)

There are moments in life when we know that we have to set forth—as often spiritually as geographically—into the unknown. It is time to be parents, or to be retrained for another job, or to find a different way of relating to others, or even to God. *Lech L'chah* says the Torah to us. You can do it. “Get moving!” God is not only in other people's lives. God will continue to be with you.

Amen