

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Lech Lecha  
November 9, 2019 \*\*\* Cheshvan 11, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

TODAY'S PORTIONS

|                                     |       |                    |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
| 1: 12:1-3.....                      | p. 69 | 5: 13:1-4.....     | p. 74 |
| 2: 12:4-9.....                      | p. 71 | 6: 13:5-11.....    | p. 74 |
| 3: 12:10-13.....                    | p. 72 | 7: 13:12-18.....   | p. 76 |
| 4: 12:14-20.....                    | p. 73 | maf: 17:24-27..... | p. 93 |
| Haftarah: Isaiah 40:27 – 41:16..... |       | p. 95              |       |

Lech Lecha in a Nutshell

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

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)

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."

### *FOOD FOR THOUGHT*

#### *A Palace in Flames (Lech Lecha 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*

<http://rabbisacks.org/a-palace-in-flames-lech-lecha-5780/>

Why Abraham? That is the question that haunts us when we read the opening of this week's parsha. Here is the key figure in the story of our faith, the father of our nation, the hero of monotheism, held holy not only by Jews but by Christians and Muslims also. Yet there seems to be nothing in the Torah's description of his early life to give us a hint as to why he was singled out to be the person to whom God said, "I will make you into a great nation ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is surpassingly strange. The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to why God chose Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations; Noah walked with God." It also gives us a clear indication as to why God chose Moses. We see him as a young man, both in Egypt and Midian, intervening whenever he saw injustice, whoever perpetrated it and whoever it was perpetrated against. God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I have appointed you as a Prophet to the nations." These were obviously extraordinary people. There is no such intimation in the case of Abraham. So the Sages, commentators, and philosophers through the ages were forced to speculate, to fill in the glaring gap in the narrative, offering their own suggestions as to what made Abraham different. There are three primary explanations. The first is Abraham the Iconoclast, the breaker of idols. This is based on a speech by Moses' successor, Joshua, towards the end of the book that bears his name. It is a passage given prominence in the Haggadah on Seder night: "Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods" (Josh. 24:2). Abraham's father Terah was an idol worshipper. According to the Midrash, he made and sold idols. One day Abraham smashed all the idols and left, leaving the stick with which he did so in the hand of the biggest idol. When his father returned and queried who had broken his gods, Abraham blamed the biggest idol. "Are you making fun of me?" demanded his father. "Idols cannot do anything." "In that case," asked the young Abraham, "why do you worship them?"

On this view, Abraham was the first person to challenge the idols of the age. There is something profound about this insight. Jews, believers or otherwise, have often been iconoclasts. Some of the most revolutionary thinkers – certainly in the modern age – have been Jews. They had the courage to challenge the received wisdom, think new thoughts and see the world in unprecedented ways, from Einstein in physics to Freud in psychoanalysis to Schoenberg in music, to Marx in economics, and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in behavioural economics. It is as if, deep in our cultural intellectual DNA, we had internalised what the Sages said about Abraham ha-Ivri, "the Hebrew," that it meant he was on one side and all the rest of the world on the other.[1] The second view is set out by Maimonides in the Mishnah Torah: Abraham the Philosopher. In an

age when people had lapsed from humanity's original faith in one God into idolatry, one person stood against the trend, the young Abraham, still a child: "As soon as this mighty man was weaned he began to busy his mind ... He wondered: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no mover? ... He had no teacher, no one to instruct him ... until he attained the way of truth ... and knew that there is One God ... When Abraham was forty years old he recognised his Creator." [2] According to this, Abraham was the first Aristotelian, the first metaphysician, the first person to think his way through to God as the force that moves the sun and all the stars.

This is strange, given the fact that there is very little philosophy in Tanach, with the exception of wisdom books like Proverbs, Kohelet and Job. Maimonides' Abraham can sometimes look more like Maimonides than Abraham. Yet of all people, Friedrich Nietzsche, who did not like Judaism very much, wrote the following:

Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making people think more logically and for establishing cleaner intellectual habits... Wherever Jews have won influence they have taught men to make finer distinctions, more rigorous inferences, and to write in a more luminous and cleanly fashion; their task was ever to bring a people "to listen to reason." [3]

The explanation he gave is fascinating. He said that only in the arena of reason did Jews face a level playing-field. Everywhere else, they encountered race and class prejudice. "Nothing," he wrote, "is more democratic than logic." So Jews became logicians, and according to Maimonides, it began with Abraham.

However there is a third view, set out in the Midrash on the opening verse of our parsha: "The Lord said to Abram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house . . ." To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. He wondered, "Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."

This is an enigmatic Midrash. It is far from obvious what it means. In my book *A Letter in the Scroll* (published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now*) I argued that Abraham was struck by the contradiction between the order of the universe – the palace – and the disorder of humanity – the flames. How, in a world created by a good God, could there be so much evil? If someone takes the trouble to build a palace, do they leave it to the flames? If someone takes the trouble to create a universe, does He leave it to be disfigured by His own creations? On this reading, what moved Abraham was not philosophical harmony but moral discord. For Abraham, faith began in cognitive dissonance. There is only one way of resolving this dissonance: by protesting evil and fighting it.

That is the poignant meaning of the Midrash when it says that the owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." It is as if God were saying to Abraham: I need you to help Me to put out the flames.

How could that possibly be so? God is all-powerful. Human beings are all too powerless. How could God be saying to Abraham, I need you to help Me put out the flames?

The answer is that evil exists because God gave humans the gift of freedom. Without freedom, we would not disobey God's laws. But at the same time, we would be no more than robots, programmed to do whatever our Creator designed us to do. Freedom and its misuse are the theme of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the generation of the Flood.

Why did God not intervene? Why did He not stop the first humans eating the forbidden fruit, or prevent Cain from killing Abel? Why did the owner of the palace not put out the flames?

Because, by giving us freedom, He bound Himself from intervening in the human situation. If He stopped us every time we were about to do wrong, we would have no freedom. We would never mature, never learn from our errors, never become God's image. We exist as free agents only because of God's *tzimtzum*, His self-limitation. That is why, within the terms with which He created humankind, He cannot put out the flames of human evil.

He needs our help. That is why He chose Abraham. Abraham was the first person in recorded

history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God. Abraham was the man who said: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?” Where Noah accepted, Abraham did not. Abraham is the man of whom God said, “I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” Abraham was the father of a nation, a faith, a civilisation, marked throughout the ages by what Albert Einstein called “an almost fanatical love of justice.” I believe that Abraham is the father of faith, not as acceptance but as protest – protest at the flames that threaten the palace, the evil that threatens God’s gracious world. We fight those flames by acts of justice and compassion that deny evil its victory and bring the world that is a little closer to the world that ought to be.[1] Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna), 42:8. [2] Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, chapter 1. [3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated with commentary by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1974, 291.

[Go Forth: The Grammar of Remembrance by David G. Roskies](http://www.jtsa.edu/go-forth-the-grammar-of-remembrance)  
<http://www.jtsa.edu/go-forth-the-grammar-of-remembrance>

Jewish destiny begins with “Lekh-lekha,” “Go forth.” It marks the beginning of our journey through covenantal space; the beginning of our obligations under the terms of the covenant; the beginning of our family romance, so fraught with jealousy and betrayal; and the beginning of our ongoing dialogue with God. God speaks to Abram seven times in the parashah, tracking his every move, until, having reached the age of 99, Abram is addressed for the first time by his new covenantal name of “Avraham.” God speaks to him both oracularly, in verse, and in simple prose; both by day and by night: sometimes in a state of wakefulness and sometimes in a vision. How full of promise was the oracular voice of God at the beginning of our journey! The Lord’s extravagant words continued to resonate for millennia: “And all the families of the world shall bless themselves by you” (Gen. 12:3). “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great” (15:1). “I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you” (17:6). Later on, however, when the perils of the journey far outweighed the promises, what was supposed to have been a temporary detour along the way portended a terrible finale: “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (15:13). There came a time when the words “Lekh-lekha” would point in a very different direction. For there is a grammar of remembrance, the ABCs of which are the historical archetypes recorded in Scripture—those one-time events that are understood to recur again and again: The command to Abram to “Go forth” from his native land, the binding of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (the Akedah), the Exodus from Egypt, the 11th-hour rescue of the Jews on Purim, and even the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. These archetypes have enabled Jews throughout the generations to parse, to disassemble, every new experience, both good and bad, according to what came before.

At no time in Jewish history was the grammar of remembrance put to more frequent use than during the Holocaust, and nowhere with such intensity as in the occupied war zone, spanning Europe west and east and pockets of North Africa. Many were the Holocaust’s first witnesses who tried to make sense of the unprecedented events precisely by seeking the most distant analogies. After all, before their eyes both ghettos and yellow stars had been brought back to life, uncanny reminders of the medieval past.

The few survivors, therefore, who banded together in Poland after the war, would easily have deciphered the Hebrew-Yiddish title that appeared on the first publication of the Central Jewish Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Polish Jewry dedicated to Yiddish literature: *Lekh-lekho*.

Similarly, whether they themselves had survived the Łódź ghetto or not, they would surely have recognized the photograph on its cover as an artifact of the mass deportations. For six long and terrible years, whole communities of Jews had been uprooted from their homes at gunpoint and sent off to a destination unknown. Taken by a professional ghetto photographer at the time of the Szpere, the violent lockdown and mass deportations of September 1942, this photograph

depicted a mother whose worldly belongings were strapped to her body while her daughter, all bundled up, walked by her side. It was each family unit by itself and fending for itself. Upon closer inspection, the mother was carrying some food for the road in tin containers, enough to last no more than a day or so. Like their Biblical forebears, the ghetto Jews had set out on foot for the long road ahead. Although large carriage wheels were visible in the background, these wagons apparently, were not intended for them. And they were all of them members of the Chosen People, so identified by a Magen David affixed to their coats.

Finally, there was the matter of the punctuation. The two ancient words were flanked by ellipses. What did this signify? It signified an ancient command that defied all temporal boundaries. It suggested both an echo and a prophecy: Were the mass deportations from the Nazi ghettos the final reenactment of the Lekh-lekha? The cover art was specifically designed to read the documentary and literary evidence from out of the Holocaust against the divine roadmap laid out in the Torah. Who, then, was this latest cartographer named S[imkhe-Bunem] Shayevitsh? Perhaps he was the speaker in the title poem, 448 lines long, a conversation of a father with his beloved only daughter, Blimele (“Little Flower”). How intimate and muted was the father’s voice, and how brutal his message! “And now, Blimele, dear child,” began his opening address,

Restrain your childish joy,  
—that mercurial stream within you—  
Let us be ready for the unknown road.  
Do not gaze in wonder at me  
With your big brown eyes  
and do not ask any questions why  
we have to leave our home.\*

Speaking oracularly, which is to say, in verse, the father used only the simplest diction, so that even a child might understand. His first task was to explain the inexplicable: why, in the dead of winter, a second mass deportation had been decreed, and now it was the turn of this father-mother-and-child to pack up the bare essentials and get ready to leave their ghetto tenement, forever. “Dear lovely child,” he said, “I am / An adult, already grown, / And I don’t know why they’re driving / The bird out of its nest.” How could a father soften the blow of the evil decree for an incredulous child, so full of hope and irrepressible joy? By sharing with her the parents’ profound sense of loss, while trying to instill in her a sense of common destiny. And there was no time to lose; barely enough to give his daughter practical instruction for the present hour, to salvage precious memories from the home they were about to abandon, and to find analogies from the distant and recent past. “Lekh-lekho” was a crash course in Jewish courage and the grammar of remembrance was its core curriculum.

Like the ellipses on the cover, Shayevitsh’s epic poem points us in two directions. It reads the now as if it were a replay of the ancient revealed text, and rereads the Torah, rabbinic law and lore, the liturgy, Hasidism, and the modern Jewish experience in light of the impending deportation. While Blimele is the poem’s named addressee—each of its five parts begins the same way, in medias res, “And now, Blimele, dear child”—“Lekh-Lekho” is really addressed to us, those who will survive to carry on the dialogue. The 34-year-old poet, an esteemed member of the informal Yiddish writers’ group in the Łódź ghetto, was a literate and learned Jew. As such, he could interpret the Torah portion after which his poem is named in ways that it had never been interpreted before: 1. To steel Abram’s resolve, God speaks in the future tense. The covenantal promise will be borne out sometime in the distant future—“shall bless . . . shall be . . . shall come forth”—because God and the First Family do not yet have a shared experience to draw upon. To steel his daughter’s resolve, in marked contrast, the father invokes all available pasthoods. His challenge is to pick and choose those parts of the Jewish past that still have relevance in these nightmare days. “I’ve told you the story / The story of the Cantonists,” he reminds her of a tragic chapter from the recent past, “Poor children kidnapped / Torn away from father and mother. / So why do you wonder, child, / If those times greet the ghetto?” He knows, citing rabbinic case law, that it was considered forbidden for a father to teach Torah to his daughter; nonetheless, she must be taught the weekly Torah portion of “Lekh-lekha,” if only to underscore that there is no comparison. The present

tragedy eclipses anything that has ever come before.

2. The covenantal future is only as strong as its Founding Family, and that strength is tested the moment they set out for the Promised Land. Sometimes, it is Abram who saves the day, but mostly, divine intervention is required to guarantee the line of succession. In the ghetto, it's each family for itself. "And fathers will call to their children / And children demand things from their mothers—/ Families will get lost / And never find themselves." The future is dead-ended, there is none to bring comfort; "no Jeremiah / To lament the Destruction." Blimele and her mother stand in for the guardian angels.

3. At some point in the perilous journey ahead, the weakest and youngest link will be put to the ultimate test. This time around, Isaac-Blimele must be made fully aware and be prepared for the sacrifice. And so, the father's last instruction to his daughter is as follows: "Let us not weep. / Let us not lament, but in spite of all foes / Smile, only smile, so those / Who know the Jews will wonder // And not understand that in our blood / Flows the power of our grandfathers / Who in all generations / Climbed atop so many Moriahs." In Yiddish, zeydes, "grandfathers," rhymes with akeydes, the plural of Akedah.

Shayevitsh's "Lekh-lekho" is both echo and prophecy. The poet could not know what we know—that Blimele and her mother, with a newborn infant son, would be taken away in the Szpere and be murdered in Chelmno. But he did know that his poem would forever change the meaning of God's command to Abram. Never again would it be possible to read "Lekh-lekha" without recalling the millions of Jewish stars, as numerous as the stars in heaven (Gen. 15:5), and those who wore them, fearlessly. \* All references to the poem are from *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (JPS 1989), sec. 91. Translated by Elinor Robinson. (*David G. Roskies is the Sol and Evelyn Henking Chair in Yiddish Literature and Culture and Professor of Jewish Literature at JTS*)

### Lech Lecha by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

<https://mailchi.mp/125ffc149b37/1n6ogmq5px-2553311?e=87d85103d7>

Abraham is told by God to leave his land. He doesn't hesitate, appreciating that just because you don't understand God's reasons doesn't mean he's not right. Upon arrival in the land of Canaan, there is a famine and Abraham leaves for Egypt, again understanding something fundamental: if you go with God, things will ultimately work out - but it will be in God's timescale and way, not necessarily yours.

He returns to Canaan and wages war with a few of his servants against 4 powerful armies in order to free his nephew. With God on his side, how could he lose?

Abraham is blessed with a son, Yishmael – father of the Arab nations (by their reckoning as well as ours). He circumcises himself (must have had a steady hand for a 99 year old, especially as he lived in the Bronze rather than Iron Age) and his household and is finally given tidings that another son will be born who will continue his legacy of awakening the world to Ethical Monotheism.

The Rabbis introduce us in this portion to an interesting, if unsavoury, character by the name of Og. He was a 'giant', whatever that might mean. Certainly he was strong, brave and charismatic. However, unfortunately, he was also an evil man, as is illustrated by the following story we are told that transpired in this week's portion.

Lot, Abraham's nephew, is captured by an alliance of four kings. Og gets wind of this and comes to tell Abraham what has happened. Sounds like he's being a good Samaritan? Far from it. The Rabbis explain that Og had taken a fancy to Abraham's wife, Sara. He reasoned that if Abraham went to fight such a powerful group of kings, he would be killed. And Og would, rather fortuitously, be on hand to provide comfort for his poor lonely widow.

As it happens, Abraham goes to fight the battle and actually wins. Thus, Og's dastardly scheme is thwarted in its infancy.

However.....

Four hundred years later, Og was still around. (I did say that he was an interesting character). And he came with an army to attack the Jewish People when they were wandering in the desert. Moses met Og in single combat but was afraid to kill him. Why? Because Og had once done a favour for

his forefather Abraham.

A favour? Moses felt the Jewish People owed Og something for attempting to get Abraham killed?!! With friends like Og, who needs enemies?

This story, however, says a lot to me about gratitude. I see, in essence, the Torah is suggesting that gratitude does not require intent. I should be grateful when an act benefits me – whether or not the person intended that benefit.

Because gratitude is for the expresser, not the recipient. I say thank you, not simply express thanks for what the person did (although that is obviously a component) but also, and more importantly, simply to live in the feeling of gratitude. Someone who expresses gratitude, is more humble, more spiritual, more connected to God and quite simply a greater human being.

It doesn't require that someone intends to benefit you. Even if their intent is essentially self-serving – such as someone who is paid to help you. Because gratitude is an essential part of the human makeup. Without it, we take for granted, we expect, we demand and, as a result, we get disappointed. And a life without gratitude is a life full to the brim with disappointment.

Of course, it's never entirely black and white. In the end, Moses did kill Og – because he posed a clear and present danger to the Jewish People. But Og is the exception from which one can learn the rule. Look for gratitude wherever you can – for minor acts, for unintentional acts, for acts with wrong motivations. It doesn't matter. Because the more grateful you are, the better your own life will be. And who doesn't want a better life???

### Faithful Shepherds by Rabbi Juan Mejia

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hVka1-bfV-C98RT6aNb7HIX8W4dDXswNUw8bM6LZOofU/edit>

In a common trope in the book of Bereshit of brothers going separate ways, our parashah depicts the household and flocks of Avram (Avraham before his name change) and Lot parting company. Lot settles in Kikar Hayarden, the fertile Jordan Valley rift around the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah before their destruction, while Avram chooses the rough hill country of Judah. The trigger for this division of Avram's camp is described as a "quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle." (Bereshit 13:7) The previous verses describe the vastness of the combined flocks of Avram and Lot, so the simple reading of the text hints to the reasons for this quarrel being economic and even environmental. When nomadic herders amass too many animals, they run the risk of depleting an area of its resources, and the smart course of action is to divide the flocks into more manageable and sustainable portions. This explanation is espoused by Ramban and Seforno.

Rashi, based on Bereshit Rabba (41:5), has a very different take on the underlying cause for this strife. "AND THERE WAS A QUARREL because Lot's shepherds were wicked men and grazed their cattle in other people's fields. Avram's shepherds rebuked them for this act of robbery, but they replied, 'The land has been given to Avram, and since he has no son as heir, Lot will be his heir: consequently this is not robbery.' Scripture, however, states: 'The Canaanite and the Perizzite abode then in the land,' so that Avram was not yet entitled to possession." According to Rashi the root of the fight between the herders was not economic, but rather religious and ethical. Lot and Avram's farmhands, seasoned underlings who have experienced firsthand Avram's delivery by God from Pharaoh's court, have very different approaches to God's promise to grant the Land of Canaan to their master. Lot's herders, very much like Lot himself later in the parashah, display a firm faith in God's promise, albeit myopic and grounded in selfish motivations: since God has promised the land to Avram, therefore they have DIVINE RIGHT to act upon this promise here and now. Avram's shepherds, on the other hand, exhibit a more pragmatic approach, but also one that takes into account the ethical values and the property of the current inhabitants of the land: despite God's promises, these do not override their present ethical obligations.

In the history of world religions, we find that Lot's herders have had plenty of students and imitators. We cannot count the examples of how, based on divine promises (real or fabricated) or prophecies (often conveniently interpreted), people have found justification for the suspension of their moral obligations, disguising them as faith and obedience. Alas! As with Lot's herders, this



Amid all the drama of the impending Flood and the destruction of almost all of creation, we focus on Noah building the ark, and hear one detailed instruction:

Make a tzohar for the ark and terminate it within a cubit of the top. (Gen. 6:16)

There is a difficulty understanding what “tzohar” means, since the word does not appear anywhere else in Tanach. Everyone agrees that it is referring to a source of illumination. It will give light within the ark itself. But what exactly is it? Rashi quotes a Midrash in which two Rabbis disagree as to its meaning:

Some say this was a window; others say that it was a precious stone that gave light to them.[1]

The precious stone had the miraculous quality of being able to generate light within the darkness. Bartenura suggests that what is at stake between the two interpretations is the etymology of the word tzohar itself. One relates it to the word tzahorayim, meaning “midday.” In that case, the brightness was to come from the sun, the sky, the outside. Therefore tzohar means “a window, a skylight.” The other view is that tzohar is related to zohar, “radiance,” which suggests something that radiates its own light, hence the idea of a miraculous precious stone.

Chizkuni and others suggest Noah had both: a window (from which he later released the raven, Gen. 8:6) and some form of artificial lighting for the prolonged period of the Flood itself when the sun was completely overcast by cloud and the world was shrouded in darkness. It remains fascinating to ask why the Rabbis of the Midrash, and Rashi himself, would spend time on a question that has no practical relevance. There will be – God promised this in this week’s parsha – no further flood. There will be no new Noah. In any future threat to the existence of the planet, an ark floating on the water will not be sufficient to save humankind. So why should it matter what source of illumination Noah had in the ark during those tempestuous days? What is the lesson for the generations?

I would like to offer a midrashic speculation. The answer, I suggest, lies in the history of the Hebrew language. Throughout the biblical era, the word tevah meant an ark – large in the case of Noah and the Flood, small in the case of the papyrus basket coated with tar in which Yocheved placed the baby Moses, setting him afloat on the Nile (Ex. 2:3). More generally, it means “box.” However, by the time of the Midrash, tevah had come also to mean “word.”

It seems to me that the Rabbis of the Midrash were not so much commenting on Noah and the ark as they were reflecting on a fundamental question of Torah. Where and what is the tzohar, the brightness, the source of illumination, for the tevah, the Word? Does it come solely from within, or also from without? Does the Torah come with a window or a precious stone?

There were certainly those who believed that Torah was self-sufficient. If something is difficult in Torah it is because the words of Torah are sparse in one place but rich in another.[2] In other words, the answer to any question in Torah can be found elsewhere in Torah. Turn it over and turn it over for everything is within it.[3] This is probably the majority view, considered historically. There is nothing to be learned outside. The Torah is illuminated by a precious stone that generates its own light. This is even hinted at in the title of the greatest work of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar (see Bartenura above).

There were, however, other views. Most famously, Maimonides believed that a knowledge of science and philosophy – a window to the outside world – was essential to understanding God’s word. He made the radical suggestion, in the Mishnah Torah (Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:2), that it was precisely these forms of study that were the way to the love and fear of God. Through science – the knowledge of “He who spoke and called the universe into existence” – we gain a sense of the majesty and beauty, the almost infinite scope and intricate detail of creation and thus of the Creator. That is the source of love. Then, realising how small we are and how brief our lives in the total scheme of things: that is the source of fear.

The case Maimonides made in the 12th century, long before the rise of science, has been compounded a thousand times with our accelerated knowledge of the nature of the universe. Every new discovery of the vastness of the cosmos and the wonders of the micro-cosmos, fills the mind

with awe. “Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?” (Is. 40:26). Maimonides did not think that science and philosophy were secular disciplines. He believed that they were ancient forms of Jewish wisdom, that the Greeks had acquired from the Jews and sustained at a time when the Jewish people, through exile and dispersion, had forgotten them. So they were not foreign borrowings. Maimonides was re-claiming a tradition that had been born in Israel itself. Nor were they source of independent illumination. They were simply a window through which the light of God’s created universe could help us decode the Torah itself. Understanding God’s world helps us understand God’s word.

This made a significant difference to the way Maimonides was able to convey the truth of Torah. So for example, his knowledge of ancient religious practices – albeit based on sources that were not always reliable – afforded him the deep insight (in *The Guide for the Perplexed*) that many of the Chukim, the statutes, the laws that seem to have no reason, were in fact directed against specific idolatrous practices.

His knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy enabled him to formulate an idea that exists throughout both Tanach and the rabbinic literature, but that had not been articulated so clearly before, namely that Judaism has a virtue ethic. It is interested not just in what we do but in what we are, in the kind of people we become. That is the basis of his pathbreaking *Hilchot De’ot*, “Laws of ethical character.”

The more we understand the way the world is, the more we understand why the Torah is as it is. It is our roadmap through reality. It is as if secular and scientific knowledge were the map, and Torah the route.

This view, articulated by Maimonides, was developed in the modern age in a variety of forms. Devotees of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch called it *Torah im derech erez*, “Torah with general culture.” In Yeshiva University it came to be known as *Torah u-Madda*, “Torah and science.” Together with the late Rav Aaron Lichtenstein zt”l, I prefer the phrase *Torah ve-Chochmah*, “Torah and wisdom,” because wisdom is a biblical category.

Recently, the science writer David Epstein published a fascinating book called *Range*, subtitled, *How Generalists Triumph in a Specialised World*.<sup>[4]</sup> He makes the point that over-concentration on a single specialised topic is good for efficiency but bad for creativity. The real creatives, (people like the Nobel prize winners), are often those who had outside interests, who knew other disciplines, or had passions and hobbies outside their subject. Even in a field like sport, for every Tiger Woods, who had a feel for golf even before he could speak, there is a Roger Federer, who exercised his skills in many sports before, quite late in youth, choosing to focus on tennis. Lehavdil, it was precisely Maimonides’ breadth of knowledge of science, medicine, psychology, astronomy, philosophy, logic, and many other fields that allowed him to be so creative in everything he wrote, from his letters, to his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, to the *Mishnah Torah* itself, structured differently from any other code of Jewish law, all the way to *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides said things that many may have sensed before, but no one had expressed so cogently and powerfully. He showed that it is possible to be utterly devoted to Jewish faith and law and yet be creative, showing people spiritual and intellectual depths they had not seen before. That was his way making a *tzohar*, a window for the *tevah*, the Divine word. On the other hand, the *Zohar* conceives of Torah as a precious stone that gives light of itself and needs none from the outside. Its world is a closed system, a very deep, passionate, moving, sustained search for intimacy with the Divine that dwells within the universe and within the human soul.

So we are not forced to choose either the one or the other. Recall that Chizkuni said that Noah had a precious stone for the dark days and a window for when the sun shone again. Something like that happened when it came to Torah also. During the dark days of persecution, Jewish mysticism flourished, and Torah was illuminated from within. During the benign days when the world was more open to Jews, they had a window to the outside, and so emerged figures like Maimonides in the Middle Ages, and Samson Raphael Hirsch in the 19th century.

I believe that the challenge for our time is to open a series of windows so that the world can illuminate our understanding of Torah, and so that the Torah may guide us as we seek to make our

way through the world. [1] *Genesis Rabbah 31:11*. [2] *Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 3:5*. [3] *Mishnah Avot 5:22*. [4] *David Epstein, Range, Macmillan, 2019*.

### Deluge, Ancient and Modern: Noah By Rabbi Len Levin

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and all their host. God saw everything that God made, that it was good. All the beings and creatures followed the innate laws of their being, as implanted in them by their creator. Everything was perfectly orderly and predictable. Then God created human beings and granted them free will. All hell broke loose, and all bets were off.

Corruption spread from humans to all God's creation. The world was reverting to chaos faster than God could catch the divine breath that was hovering over the waters. God resolved to wipe out the entirety of earthly creation, except for a few specimens from each species that God's chosen human representative Noah would salvage in order to start over.

After the deluge, God considered what changes to institute to give things a better chance the next time around. God decided to institute a dual covenant, establishing eternal laws in the celestial and terrestrial realms. These laws would reinforce each other and make for a stable future. In the terrestrial realm, God instituted the Noahide laws, enjoining humankind against murder, theft, unchastity, idolatry, blasphemy, and cruelty to animals, and commanding them to establish courts of justice. In the celestial realm, God placed the rainbow as a sign after every storm, to indicate that seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night should never cease. These laws were tested within a year of the new regime. Noah, the designated righteous person for his generation, planted a vineyard, drank of the wine it yielded, and got drunk, losing all self-control. God stood back and let Noah and his family figure it out. The grapes were doing what grapes do. Humans may not know on the first time around, when they mess with natural substances, what effects they will produce. But God gave humans reason, to learn from trial and error, and to use the volatile substances of nature with moderation. An occasional error here and there was no threat to the natural order, and people would recover from their mistakes.

And so events proceeded for centuries and millennia. Good kings alternated with bad, and good commonwealths with evil empires. God sat back and let people work out their destinies, confident in the stability of the natural processes to sustain them.

But this equilibrium was strained when human technological capabilities increased, when humans cut down whole forests for farmland and burned coal to sustain their machines of production, changing the layout of the land and adding so much pollution to the atmosphere that it formed a partition, trapping the sun's heat and warming the earth and the seas. Then the equilibrium was disturbed. Glaciers and icecaps started to melt, causing the sea to rise and threatening to submerge low lying islands and coastlands. The sea became warmer and more acidic, causing coral reefs to languish. Fishes, birds, and animals were driven from their customary habitats. Hurricanes and firestorms raged with unwonted intensity.

God stood back and observed, with growing concern. "I will not intervene as I did in biblical times. I will not intervene and upset the course of nature as I did then. But My human creatures are upsetting the natural course by their own actions. At first, they had the excuse that they knew not what they did. Like the properties of the grape, the properties of advanced technology must be learned through trial and error. But now they have sufficient knowledge of the good and evil that technology produces. I call on the divine image in my creatures, that they may diagnose the disease and prescribe the remedy while there is still time."

How will this story end? Will we hear God's call, and use our God-given reason to repair the damage and restore the equilibrium of the natural cycles? May it be so! Then the earth will be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas. (*Rabbi Len Levin teaches Jewish philosophy and pluralism at AJR.*)