



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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## Lech Lecha

WRITTEN BY RABBI SACKS IN 5768 (2007–2008)

### The Heroism of Ordinary Life

The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house – to the land that I will show you.’

Gen. 12:1

These words are among the most consequential in the history of humankind. In that very moment a new faith was born, one that has lasted for two-thirds of the course of civilisation and remains young and vigorous today. Not only did Abraham give rise to what today we call Judaism. He was also the inspiration of two other religions – Christianity and Islam – both of which trace their descent, biological or spiritual, to him, and which now number among their adherents more than half the six billion people on the face of the earth.<sup>1</sup>

There was no one like Abraham, yet the Torah is exceptionally understated in its account of him. As children we learned that he was the first iconoclast, the person who, while still young, broke the idols in his father’s house. But this is a Midrash, a tradition, inferred from hints in the biblical text rather than from explicit statement. In the pure text of the Torah, we are told nothing of his childhood, youth, his early days with Sarah, or any other time before the moment when God spoke these fateful words to him.

From what we do know, Abraham does not fit any conventional image of the religious hero. He is not,

like Noah, the sole survivor of a world hastening to its destruction. He is not, like Moses, a lawgiver and liberator. He is not like the later prophets, people who spent their life confronting kings, wrestling with their contemporaries and “speaking truth to power.”

To be sure, he is a man of exemplary virtue. He welcomes strangers and gives them food. He fights a battle on behalf of the cities of the plain in order to rescue his nephew Lot. He prays for them in one of the greatest dialogues in religious literature. He patiently waits for a child and then, when the command comes, is willing to offer him as a sacrifice, only to discover that the God of truth does not want us to sacrifice our children but to cherish them. But if we were asked to characterise him with adjectives, the words that spring to mind – gentle, kind, gracious – are not those usually associated with the founder of a new faith. They are the kind of attributes to which any of us could aspire. None of us can be an Abraham, but all of us can take him as a role-model. Perhaps that is the deepest lesson of all.

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling made the following comment:

Not all cultures develop the idea of the heroic. I once had occasion to observe in connection with Wordsworth that in the rabbinical

<sup>1</sup> These figures were accurate at the time of writing in August 2008, although today they would need adjusting when quoted, to account for the expanded world population.

literature there is no touch of the heroic idea. The rabbis, in speaking of virtue, never mention the virtue of courage, which Aristotle regarded as basic to the heroic character. The indifference of the rabbis to the idea of courage is the more remarkable in that they knew that many of their number would die for their faith. What is especially to our point is that, as ethical beings, the rabbis never see themselves – it is as if the commandment which forbade the making of images extended to their way of conceiving the personal moral existence as well.

Trilling is not quite accurate. The rabbis did speak of courage, *gevurah*. But he is right to say that Judaism did not have heroes in the way the Greeks and other cultures did. A hero is one convinced of his own importance. He or she is conscious of playing a part on the world stage under the admiring gaze of their contemporaries. The rabbis, said Trilling, “would have been quite ready to understand the definition of the hero as an actor and to say that, as such, he was undeserving of the attention of serious men.” Abraham is the paradigm of an unheroic hero, one who (in Maimonides’ lovely phrase) “does what is right because it is right”<sup>2</sup> and not for the sake of popularity or fame. If we were to define Judaism in Abrahamic terms it would be the heroism of ordinary life, being willing to live by one’s convictions though all the world thinks otherwise, being true to the call of eternity, not the noise of now. Which brings us to the key phrase, the first words of God to the bearer of a new covenant: *Lech Lecha*. Is there, already in these two words, a hint of what was to come?

Rashi, following an ancient exegetical tradition, translates the phrase as “journey for yourself” (Rashi, Gen. 12:1). He suggests that these words really meant, “Travel for your own benefit and good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not have the merit of having children.” Sometimes we have to give up our past in order to acquire a future. God was already teaching Abraham that what seems like a sacrifice is, in the long run, not so. Abraham was about to say goodbye to the things that mean most to us – our land, our birthplace and our parents’ homes, the places where we belong. It was a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a leap into the unknown. To be

able to make that leap involves trust – in Abraham’s case, trust not in visible power but in the voice of the invisible God. At the end of it, however, Abraham would discover that he had achieved something he could not have done otherwise. He would give birth to a new nation whose greatness consisted precisely in the ability to live by that voice and create something new in the history of humankind. *Lech Lecha* therefore means more than “Go”. It means, “Go for yourself.”

Another midrashic interpretation takes the phrase to mean “Go with yourself” – meaning, by traveling from place to place you will extend your influence not over one land but many:

When the Holy One said to Abraham, “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house . . .” what did Abraham resemble? A jar of scent with a tight-fitting lid put away in a corner so that its fragrance could not go forth. As soon as it was moved from that place and opened, its fragrance began to spread. So the Holy One said to Abraham, “Abraham, many good deeds are in you. Travel about from place to place, so that the greatness of your name will go forth in My world.”

*Bereishit Rabbah* 39:2.

Abraham was commanded to leave his place in order to testify to the existence of a God not bounded by place – Creator and Sovereign of the entire universe. Abraham and Sarah were to be like perfume, leaving a trace of their presence wherever they went. Implicit in this Midrash is the idea that the fate of the first Jews already prefigured that of their descendants. They were scattered throughout the world in order to spread knowledge of God throughout the world. Unusually, exile is seen here not as punishment but as a necessary corollary of a faith that sees God everywhere. ‘*Lech lecha*’ means “Go with yourself” – your beliefs, your way of life, your faith.

A third interpretation, this time more mystical, takes the phrase to mean, “Go to yourself.” The Jewish journey, said R. David of Lelov, is a journey to the root of the soul. Only in the holy land, said R. Ephraim Landschutz, can a Jew find the source of his or her being. R. Zushya of Hanipol said, “When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, Zushya, why

were you not Moses? They will ask me, Zushya, why were you not Zushya?" Abraham was being asked to leave behind all the things that make us someone else – for it is only by taking a long and lonely journey that we discover who we truly are. "Go to yourself."

There is, however, a fourth interpretation: "Go by yourself." Only a person willing to stand alone, singular and unique can worship the God who is alone, singular and unique. Only one able to leave behind the natural sources of identity can encounter God who stands above and beyond nature. A journey into the unknown is one of the greatest possible expressions of freedom. God wanted Abraham and his children to be a living example of what it is to serve the God of freedom, in freedom, for the sake of freedom. What does this mean?

Alasdair MacIntyre once pointed out that there are two kinds of atheist: one who does not believe in God, and one for whom atheism itself is a kind of religion. Of the latter, some of the greatest examples were (lapsed, converted, or non-believing) Jews – most famously, Spinoza, Marx, and Freud. Instead of merely denying the truths of Judaism, they set out to provide systematic alternatives.

Fundamental to the Torah are two freedoms: the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings. God is not, in Judaism, an impersonal force. He acts (in creation, revelation, and redemption) on the basis not of necessity but of choice. In choosing to make humanity in His own image He endowed us, too, with choice. There is no such thing as fate or predestination. "I call heaven and earth to witness," said Moses, "that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life."

It was this that Spinoza, Marx, and Freud set out to challenge. Each sought to show that we are not free. Man is a predictable animal. Our nature and character are subject to quasi-scientific laws. There is a science of human behaviour as there is a science of atoms. History, personal or collective, is a form of inevitability. We are what we are because we could not be otherwise. Against this, Judaism is a living protest. Abraham and his children were summoned to a life of radical freedom – and it is this that is at the heart of God's threefold call.

Marx said that man is a product of social forces, themselves shaped by the interests of the ruling class, the owners of property of which the most significant is land. Therefore God said to Abraham, Leave your land.

Spinoza said that humans are made by innate instincts and biological drives (nowadays this is called genetic determinism) given by birth. Therefore God said to Abraham: Leave the circumstances of your birth.

Freud said that we are the way we are because of the traumas of childhood, the influence of our early years, our relationships and rivalries with our parents, especially our father. Therefore, God said to Abraham: Leave your father's house.

*Lech Lecha* means: Leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable, unfree, able to blame others and evade responsibility. Abraham's children were summoned to be the people that defied the laws of nature because they refused to define themselves as the products of nature (Nietzsche understood this aspect of Judaism particularly well). That is not to say that economic or biological or psychological forces have no part to play in human behaviour. They do. But with sufficient imagination, determination, discipline and courage we can rise above them. Abraham did. So, at most times, did his children.

Those who live within the laws of history are subject to the laws of history. Whatever is natural, said Maimonides, is subject to disintegration and decay. That is what has happened to virtually every civilisation that has appeared on the world's stage. Abraham, however, was to become the father of an *am olam*, an eternal people that would neither disintegrate nor decay. Therefore, it had to be a people willing to stand outside the laws of nature. What for other nations are natural – land, home, family – in Judaism are subjects of religious command. They must be striven for. They involve a journey. They are not given at the outset, nor can they be taken for granted. Abraham was to leave behind the things that make most people and peoples what they are, and lay the foundations for a land, a Jewish home, and a family structure responsive not to economic forces, biological drives, and psychological conflicts but to the word and will of God. *Lech Lecha* in this sense means being prepared to take an often-lonely journey: "Go by yourself."

To be Jewish, to be a child of Abraham, is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age. In an era of polytheism, that meant seeing the universe as the product of a single creative will – and therefore not meaningless but coherent, meaningful.

In an era of slavery, it meant refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, instead challenging it in the name of God. When power was worshipped, it meant constructing a society that cared for the powerless: the widow, orphan, and stranger. During centuries in which the mass of humankind was sunk in ignorance, it meant honouring education as the key to human dignity and creating schools to provide universal literacy. When war was the test of humanity, it meant striving for peace. In ages of radical individualism like today, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what

we share; not what we buy but what we give; that there is something higher than appetite and desire – namely the call that comes to us, as it came to Abraham, from outside ourselves, summoning us to make a contribution to the world.

The (non-Jewish) journalist Andrew Marr once wrote that Jews “really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it.”<sup>3</sup> It is that courage to travel alone if necessary, to be different, to swim against the tide, to speak in an age of relativism of the absolutes of human dignity under the sovereignty of God, that was born in the words *Lech Lecha*. To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Abraham’s journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope. First we hear of how he began his journey. Then we step forward to find our own destiny.

### Around the Shabbat Table



- What does it mean to be a Jewish hero - without seeking recognition - and how do we find the courage to stand apart?
- While we are all influenced (and enriched) by our upbringing, circumstances, and the guidance of others and expectations of others, how can we balance this with the call to shape our own destinies?

› Find more from Rabbi Sacks at [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)



3 Andrew Marr, *The Observer*, 14 May 2000.



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## FAMILY EDITION

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

### Lech Lecha: The Constant Journey

DEVELOPED BY SHOSH HILL



parsha  
recap

Lech Lecha begins with God speaking to Avram, telling him that he should go from his land, his birthplace, and his father's house to the land that God will show him. God continues by assuring Avram that he will become the father of a great nation, and that all who bless Avram will be blessed, and all who curse him will be cursed. Avram then ups and leaves, together with Sarai his wife, and Lot his nephew.

- Why do you think God told Avram to leave 'his land, his birthplace, and his father's house,' instead of simply telling him to leave?
- Do you think Avram would be scared to leave behind everything he knew?



a closer  
look

אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה.

"To the land that I will show you."

(BEREISHIT 12:1)

#### RABBI SACKS TEACHES US:

“Each year we tell the story of Avraham's call from God to leave his home and travel to “the land that I will show you”. I call that the journey into insecurity. Life has been insecure for Jews for four thousand years. We are still on that journey. A lot of people are struck by the history of Jewish suffering. I am always struck by the history of Jewish recovery from suffering. What gives people the strength to keep going? It is that feeling that you can face the future without fear if you know you are not alone.’

Source: Lech Lecha 15:1 - Commentary on the Koren Sacks Chumash.



moral  
matters

#### LET'S DISCUSS!

- Rabbi Sacks says **the Jewish journey of insecurity is still continuing**. What do you think this means, and why do you think Jewish people sometimes still face unfair treatment?
- If you hear someone saying something antisemitic, what could you do?
- What might happen **if you choose to speak up**, and conversely, what might happen if you choose to stay silent?
- Rabbi Sacks talks about the history of Jewish recovery from suffering. How does knowing that God is with us help us to **hold onto resilience in tough times**?

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