



Our Lives As Service

Parshat Lech-Lecha: *Genesis* 12:1-17:27;
Isaiah 40:27-41:16.

How are we to be a blessing in a world that can feel politically charged and tumultuous? “*Lech lecha mei artzecha ... v’h’yei brachah* — Go forth from your native land ... and be a blessing,” our Torah tells us (*Genesis* 12:1-2). Although God is speaking to Abram in the text, we are invited to hear these words addressing us today.

One midrash suggests that the answer lies in turning inward, teaching that we can best understand Torah as saying, “Go forth — to yourself.” This is because of how the Hebrew works. As a phrase, *lech lecha* might be translated as an emphatic way of saying “betake yourself.” However, parsed into individual words, *lech* is the imperative form of “go,” and *lecha* literally means “to you.” Thus, this teaching suggests that our capacity to be a blessing in this world is best fulfilled when we know ourselves internally and, as a result, cultivate our inner qualities so we can “be a blessing.”

Although this is a compelling teaching, I’ll be reading this phrase differently this year because of the way this year’s election has unfolded. Op-ed columnist David Brooks put my thoughts into words when he stated, “Anxiety is coursing through American society. It has become its own destructive character on the national stage.” (“The Epidemic of Worry” by David Brooks, *New York Times* Opinion Pages, Oct. 25, 2016). Not only have I felt this worry, but so have my friends, family, congregants and acquaintances.

Is turning inward the best way to alleviate our worry and bring about positive change? Not exactly, suggested

Brooks. Citing the author of a book about worry, Brooks counseled direct action, instead. “[A]ction takes us out of ourselves. Worry, like drama, is all about the self. ... If you’re worrying, you’re spiraling into your own narcissistic pool. But concrete plans and actions thrust us into the daily fact of other people’s lives.”



Rabbi Aura Ahuvia

Taking action on behalf of others will help us heal from national election anxiety. Interestingly, there is an alternative interpretation of *lech lecha* that addresses this head-on. The S’fat Emet, an 18th-century Chasidic master named Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, read *lech lecha* as a mandate to “Go forth — from yourself.”

In the world of Torah interpretation, puns are fair game. The S’fat Emet arrived at this creative reading by means of punning on the word *artzecha*, “your land,” which he remarked sounded fairly close to the liturgically redolent phrase *ratzon shelcha*, meaning “Your will.” Were we to apply this phrase to our Torah text, we would get “*lech lecha mi ratzon shelcha*,” meaning “Go [out] from yourself, from your [personal, ego-based] will.” This turns the prior midrashic interpretation on its head; instead of turning inward, the command *lech lecha* now means that we ought to be *seeking outward*.

This year, I choose to read *lech lecha* as the Divine mandate to *go out of ourselves*. Discovering that the world around us doesn’t revolve around us — but yet needs us ... that’s when we can become a blessing. ✱

Aura Ahuvia is rabbi at Congregation Shir Tikvah in Troy.

can't imagine
what my life
would be without
help from
JFS.

Friends of the Family Campaign

Our community is
counting on our help.
Can we count
on you?

Your contribution makes a world of difference in the lives of those we serve. In the past year, we provided critical services to thousands of people:



EMERGENCY
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE:

812



GERIATRIC CARE
MANAGEMENT:

715



RIDES TO CRITICAL
APPOINTMENTS:

29,024



COUNSELING:

901

To make a donation, visit jfsdetroit.org
or contact Jenny Kabert at jkabert@jfsdetroit.org
or 248.592.2339.



Jewish
Family
Service
The heart of a
STRONGER COMMUNITY

