

Go forth!
Shabbat Lech Lecha 5776

On this Shabbat, we engage the foundation story of the Jewish people with the words, *Vayomer Adonai El Avram: Lech Lecha Mei-Artz'cha, U-Mimoladatcha, U-Mibeit Avicha El Ha-aretz Asher Areka – Adonai said to Avram: go forth from your native land, and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.*

That is to say, the Jewish story begins with a call to embark on a journey away from the familiar, the known, and the comfortable toward a destination to be determined, not yet envisioned or imagined and toward a future marked by both promise and uncertainty. Thus, Avram at the age of 75, seemingly without hesitation, responds to the call and sets forth. As the members of Congregation Beth Israel approach the end of a month designated as a period of *Hitlamdut*, regarding Torah as though it speaks directly to us and, at the same time, regarding our lives as sacred texts of Torah, we do well then to consider the call to Avram through this lens.

And not incidentally, let us take appreciative note that we consider the call of Lech Lecha this Shabbat in the presence of our esteemed guest Hazzan, Cantor Yakerson, whose life so vividly exemplifies a series of dramatic calls to leave the familiar and the comfortable and his brave and affirmative response to these calls.

If you would indulge me, I offer a first person reflection in the manner of an exercise in *Hitlamdut* as applied to Lech Lecha. I do so with the implied invitation that you do the same.

And God told Avram, “Go forth! Leave the known, the familiar and the comfortable!” Years later, God told Dan, “Go forth! Leave the known, the familiar and the comfortable!” God has said it often. To the teenaged Dan, God said, “Go forth to your father and persuade him to permit you to skip Rosh Hashanah” Dan went forth to his father. His father said, “No!” God said, “Go forth and write a persuasive letter!” Dan did and his father sadly said, “Okay.”

God said to the youthful Dan, “Go forth. Seek truth and meaning by studying science and philosophy! Prepare yourself to inquire into the human brain, there to discern the soul or, if not the soul, the mind or, if not the mind, at least some neural and chemical pathways.” Dan did for a time, but grew to dislike the

washing of glassware and became disconsolate over the inconclusiveness of much experimentation.

God said, “Go forth. Study in India or Tibet in order to learn wisdom from the east!” Dan said, “Hmm, I think not.” God said, “Then go forth: study in Israel.” Dan said, “Maybe later. There’s someone I want to get know better right here.”

God said, “Marry her!” Dan said, “If she’s willing, you bet!”

God said “Go forth!” many times to Dan: “Go forth: follow your wife to California!” “Go forth: leave the world of science and medicine and apply to rabbinic school!” “Go forth: remain in Rabbinic School even when doubt rises as you contemplate a career as a rabbi, even when Rabbinic School fails as a place of spiritual deepening.”

“Go forth and direct a Hillel Foundation in a place called Charlottesville, Virginia.” “Go forth and have a child ... and another!”

“Go forth and seek balance in your life, balancing the roles of husband, father, rabbi, son, brother, friend, and seeker after a corner of light in a dark and often confusing world.” “Go forth as a mourner for your sister and for your mother: Learn to live with the reality of loss. Go forth: meet the transitions in your life with equanimity.”

Long ago God called Avram. Ever since, God calls each of us and says, “Go forth!” Thus are we beckoned to go forth and discern the nature of the call that arrives at each moment of each stage of each life.

Shabbat Shalom.