

## LEKH LEKHA

### The Promised Land, Then and Now

**P***arashat Lekh Lekha* marks the beginning of the narrative of the Jewish people. Abram, as he is called at the beginning of this *parashah*, takes center stage along with his wife, Sarai, as they form the first family of our people. Their behavior continues to serve as a model of people of faith.

The first verse in the *parashah* begins the story: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1). Abram journeys from his familiar ancestral homeland and follows a God he does not know to the Land of Canaan. We may ask ourselves why Abram's journey is necessary. After all, if Abram was such a great individual and natural leader, could he not have brought monotheism to the world from his ancestral homeland? It should have been possible for him to accept the true God and follow God's dictates in any land.

If one assumes a Zionist mode of interpretation, the response is clear. Abram can only reach his full potential in the Promised Land: "Go forth ... to the land that I will show you." It is only there that Abram can raise his physical, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional status. God tells Abram that his physical presence in the Holy Land will enhance his ability to be a person of faith and a leader of his nation.

Abram was the first *oleh*, the first immigrant to Israel. *Aliyah* should be considered one of the highest *mitzvot* of our generation. For 2,000 years, our people yearned to return to its ancestral homeland, to follow Abram's path. Today, we can live in a free democratic Jewish state that challenges us to build a society based upon Jewish values and democratic ideals. For those of us who live in the free world, this is an *aliyah* of choice whereby we take upon ourselves the special responsibilities and privileges of living in the land that God promised to Abram and Sarai. Within the Conservative movement, we have always been proponents of Zionism. We

need to talk openly of the possibilities of *aliyah* within our congregations, institutions, and organizations and stress our ability to formulate a unique society that can serve as a model to Jews and non-Jews throughout the world. Abram and Sarai were the first to make *aliyah*, and we should at least contemplate following their example.

There are other interpretations to this verse. A Hasidic teaching suggests that this verse be read: "Go to yourself, go back to your roots," examine your past, and let it have an impact upon you in the present. As a people of history, it is essential that we know from whence we have come, for only in that manner can we begin to plan the future.

For those of us who decide to stay in North America, in the Diaspora, opportunities for a significant attachment to the State of Israel and its people should be a *sine qua non* of our ongoing activities. In order to understand our Judaism and the message of the Jewish people, we must have a constant attachment to the land, its history, and its destiny. Today we are accorded that possibility.

It is very easy today to be a participant in either short- or long-term programs in the State of Israel. Our own Conservative movement offers significant programs of which we can avail ourselves. Our Masorti movement in Israel is always ready to receive guests who can become part of Masorti congregations and communities on a short- or long-term basis. Our young people are afforded the opportunity to participate in programs during the summer, as well as semester and year-long programs.

To be actively engaged in Jewish life today means that we must have an ongoing attachment to the State of Israel and its people. If we truly want to understand what it means to be a Jew and to appreciate our ancestral roots, we should try to study in Israel or plan to spend significant time there as often as possible.

The Biblical commentator Rashi offers yet another interpretation of the verse. He suggests that Abram was asked to go to this new land for his "personal good and benefit." Abram's engagement with the Land of Canaan would be of great help to him in the establishment of his leadership and in the maturation of his character. The same can be said

for us as well; attachment to the Land makes us better Jews and can make us better human beings.

If we don't make *aliyah*, or if for some reason we are not able to take advantage of long-term programs in Israel, we can still be actively involved with the State and its people. We should plan trips to Israel, either through our congregations or privately with our families, in order to feel connected to the Land. We can work on behalf of the institutions that serve our movement's needs in the State of Israel. We can be involved with the Zionist movement to promote Zionism as a vision to be actualized in a Jewish, pluralistic, democratic state. We can support Israel financially and politically from this side of the Atlantic and feel part of its ongoing enterprise. No task is too small in order to guarantee the safety and security of our people in the State of Israel and to assert our attachment to the Land.

Abram and Sarai were the first Jews to take a journey to the Promised Land. As the first family of the Jewish people, they serve as our models. May we take their lessons to heart and follow their example.