

FROM SELF TO SELF¹

G-d said to Abram: "Go you, from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you (Gen 12:1).

A sizable portion of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Abraham, the first Jew. Most curiously, however, we first meet Abraham rather late in his celebrated life. In fact, the first event of Abraham's life described in detail in the Torah occurs when Abraham is seventy-five years old.

All that the Torah has told us about Abraham (or Abram, as he was still called at the time⁽¹⁾) up until this point is that he was one of Terah's three children, and that he was born in Ur Casdim, married Sarah, and relocated to Charan. Nothing about how growing up in a pagan and hedonist society Abraham unilaterally "came to understand that the entire world was in error" and searched for the truth "until he comprehended that there is one G-d who drives the heavenly spheres, who created everything, and that there is no other god in existence other than He." Nothing about his smashing the idols of Ur Casdim, his being thrown into a fiery furnace for his defiance of King Nimrod, and his miraculous salvation.⁽⁴⁾ Nothing about how he embarked on a mission to bring the divine truth to the world, converting many to a monotheistic faith and moral code.⁽⁵⁾ All this is alluded to by the Torah and related in the Midrash and the Talmud; explicitly, however, **the Torah tells us virtually nothing about Abraham's first seventy-five years**—years replete with discovery, sacrifice, and achievement.⁽⁷⁾

There is a profound message in the Torah's silence about Abraham's early life. **The Torah wishes to emphasize that the significance of the event through which we enter into the story of Abraham's life is such that it completely eclipses all that came before it.** This was an event that marked the forging of a new phenomenon, the Jew, on the stage of human history, and which redefined the journey of life.

That event was G-d's call to Abraham: "Go you, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." The opening words of this communication, *lech lecha*, literally mean "go to you" implying that **the journey to which Abraham is being called is both a journey away from himself** ("from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house") **as well as a journey to himself.** G-d is saying to Abraham: Now that you have actualized the full capacity of your known and conscious powers, you must embark on a journey on to your true, inner self. I will now show you a place that is the essence of your soul, a place within yourself that is beyond the "land," "birthplace," and "father's house" that you know.

INSTINCT, ENVIRONMENT, AND REASON

The many factors involved in making us who and what we are can be generalized under three categories: the natural, the impressed, and the acquired.

We begin life already programmed with the drives and inclinations that form an inborn psyche and character. Then, from the moment of birth, begins the influence of our environment, as parents, teachers, and peers impress their manners and attitudes upon us. Finally, a third and overriding influence comes with the attainment of intellectual maturity. The human being, alone in G-d's creation, has been granted an objective intellect with which we can to great extent, control the stimuli to which we are exposed and the manner in which they affect us. With our minds, we are empowered to develop ourselves beyond-and even contrary to our genetic and conditioned self.

This is the deeper significance of the words "your land" "your birthplace" and "your father's house" in G-d's call to Abraham. *Eretz*, the Hebrew word for "land" and "earth," is etymologically related to the word *ratzon*, "will" and "desire"; hence, "your land" also translates as "your natural desires." "Your birthplace"—*molad techa*—is a reference to the influence of home and society. And *beit avicha*, "your father's house," refers to the intellect and its capacity to transcend the natural and conditioned self and forge the person's mind-set, character, and behavior according to its objective reasoning.⁽⁸⁾

By conventional standards, this constitutes the ultimate in human achievement: the development of one's natural instincts, the assimilation of learned and observed truths, and the remaking of self through the objective arbiter of mind. In truth, however, the intellect is still part and parcel of our humanity, remaining ever subject to the deficiencies and limitations of the human state. While it may surmount the confines of the in-born and the impressed, **the intellect is never truly free of the ego and its prejudices.**

But there is a higher self to man, a self that is free of all that defines and confines the human. This is the "spark of G-dliness" that is the core of our soul, the divine essence that G-d breathed into us, the "image of G-d" in which we were created. This is the *eret* that G-d promised to show Abraham.⁽⁹⁾

In his journey of discovery, Abraham must obviously depart the "land, birthplace, and father's house" of his native Mesopotamia; he must obviously reject the pagan culture of Ur Casdim and Charan. But this is not the only departure of which G-d speaks. Indeed, Abraham received this call many years after he had renounced the pagan ways of his family and birthplace, recognized G-d, and had a profound impact on his society. Still he is told: Go! Depart from your nature, depart from your habits, depart

1 Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Genesis*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 124-128.

from your rational self. After rejecting your negative, idolatrous origins, you must now also transcend your positive and gainful past. Reach beyond yourself, however perfected it is.

For anything human—including the crowning glory of the human being, the transcendent intellect—is still part of the created reality, ever subject to and defined by its limitations. G-d invites us to experience that which transcends all limit and definition—Himself. But to touch base with the core divine essence of our soul, we must first “go.”

This was G-d's first command to the first Jew: Go away from your finite you, and come to the you that only I can show you—the you that is one with Me.

(1) See Genesis 17:5.

(2) Genesis 11:27-31.

(3) Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Idolatry*, chapter I. Maimonides' description is based on the talmudic and midrashic sources cited in the next footnote. Also see citations from Maimonides' account in the next essay, "The History of Monotheism," pp. 129-135.

(4) See Talmud, *Pesachim* 118a; *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishith* 38:13; *Zohar* 1:86a; *Tana d'Bei Eliyahu Zuta*, 25; *Sefer HaYashar, Noach*; Bechayei's commentary to Genesis 15:7; et al.

(5) *Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Idolatry*, chapter 1.

(6) See Rashi's commentary on Genesis 11:28 and 12:5.

(7) In contrast, when the Torah relates that G-d chose Noah to survive the Flood and regenerate the human race, it first explains how, "G-d saw that the evil of man was great ... But Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d ... Noah was a righteous and perfect man in his generation (Gen 6:5-9). **With Moses, we learn about the leadership qualities he exhibited in his formative years, coming to the aid of his enslaved brethren at the jeopardy of his own life, as well as other acts of compassion and leadership** (see Exo 2:11-17; also see analysis of these verses by Rabbi Simcha Zisel of Kelm in *Chochmah U'Musar*, chapter 3). The same is true regarding King David, King Solomon, and others chosen by G-d to play a special role in history: their choice is described as contingent upon their righteousness and merit (see IKings 2:3-4 and 3:13-14; IChron 28:7-10). **Abraham's election, however, as described in the actual text of the Torah, seems to come out of the blue**, as if G-d simply chose a man named Abram, commanded him to leave everything behind and venture off to "the land that I will show you," and made him the progenitor of His chosen people.

(8) In the terminology of kabbalah and chassidism, the two primary intellectual faculties of the mind—*chochmah* (the facility to conceive ideas) and *binah* (the facility for analysis and understanding)—are considered the "father" and "mother" within the human psyche, as they are the progenitors of, and the authority over, the person's feelings and behavior patterns.

(9) This explains the order in which the terms "land," "birthplace," and "father's house" appear in G-d's communication to Abraham. When a person embarks on a journey, he first leaves his (father's) home, then departs his city ("birthplace"), and only then reaches the boundaries of his land; yet here this order is reversed. According to the deeper meaning of these terms, however, the order is accurate: first a person departs from their base instincts ("land") by means of their education and environmental influences ("birthplace"); these, in turn, are overruled by their faculty for objective reasoning ("father's house"); finally, Abraham was

called on to transcend even his rational self in his journey to the divine essence of his soul.

1. *There is a profound message in the Torah's silence about Abraham's early life. The Torah wishes to emphasize that the significance of the event through which we enter into the story of Abraham's life is such that it completely eclipses all that came before it. This was an event that marked the forging of a new phenomenon, the Jew, on the stage of human history, and which redefined the journey of life.*

a. Matthew 1:1, 18, 2:1, 13-15, 19-23, 3:13

¹This is the genealogy of Yeshua the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham ... ¹⁸This is how the birth of Yeshua the Messiah came about ...

^{2,1}After Yeshua was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to (do him homage [NAB, NJB])" ...

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." ¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. **And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son"** (Hos 11:1) ...

¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." ²¹So he got up ... ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. **So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.**

^{3:13}Then Yeshua came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized (in response to the preaching of) John.

- 1) Like with Abraham, we know very little about the first twenty-nine years of Yeshua's life. And, Matthew only includes these details **in order to** connect events in Yeshua's life to that of the people of Israel. And also, to various prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah.
- 2) *23 Nazareth ... He shall be called a Nazarene* This verse remains a *crux interpretum* ("a difficult or complicated passage in a text") ... (It is) likely the evangelist is playing on the Heb. *netzer*. "a branch," as in Isa. 11.1, *and there shall come forth a shoot out of the stem of Jesse and a branch [netzer] shall grow out of his roots*, with messianic implications.⁽⁴⁾ Cf. also Jer. 23.5, 33.15, where the Davidic Messiah is also described as a branch but by a different

term, *tzemach*.⁽⁵⁾ "R. Joshua b. Levi said: *tzemach* [branch, shoot] is the name of the Messiah."⁽⁶⁾

(4) Cf. also Targ. Isa. 11.1; Zech. 3.8, 6.12.

(5) Zech. loc. cit ("in the place cited")

(6) T.J. Ber. 2, 5a (12), Lam. R. I.16 (p. 66).

a) Isaiah 11:1-3

¹A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots **a Branch (*netzer*) will bear fruit.** ²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD ...

Targum Jonathan, Isaiah 11:1

And a king shall come forth from the sons of Jesse, **and from his children's children the Messiah shall be anointed.**

b) Jeremiah 23:5-6

⁵"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch (*tzemach*), a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous(ness).

b. Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹Every year Yeshua's parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴²When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival ... ⁴³After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Yeshua stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it ... ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son ... Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹"**Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"** ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Yeshua grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

2. *The opening words of this communication, lech lecha, literally mean "go to you" implying that the journey to which Abraham is being called is both a journey away from himself ("from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house") as well as a journey to himself.*

a. Matthew 10:39

³⁹Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

John 12:25

²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

b. Ephesians 2:11-13

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... ¹²remember that at that time you were **separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.**

¹³But now in Messiah Yeshua **you who once were far away have been brought near** by the blood of Messiah.

1) What are Gentiles "excluded from" outside of Messiah? And, what is it that they are they "brought near to ... **in** Messiah"? **Are they now part of a "spiritual Israel"—a Church? No!** They now have "citizenship in Israel," they now share in the "the covenants of the promise" that God made with Israel and they now have "hope" and a relationship with God.

2) Isaiah 56:4-7

⁴For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—⁵to them **I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;** I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. ⁶And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—⁷**these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.** Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

3. *... this constitutes the ultimate in human achievement: the development of one's natural instincts, the assimilation of learned and observed truths, and the remaking of self through the objective arbiter of mind. In truth, however, the intellect is still part and parcel of our humanity, remaining ever subject to the deficiencies and limitations of the human*

state. While it may surmount the confines of the inborn and the impressed, **the intellect is never truly free of the ego and its prejudices.**

- a. Worldview—the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. A collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group.³ Based on ethnic identity, upbringing (*i.e.*, inculcated values), **language**, religious beliefs, etc.

Greek Worldview/Jewish Worldview

Greek is a technical language—Hebrew is a phenomenal language (*i.e.*, Greek describes the way that things *are* in precise terms—Hebrew describes things the way that they *appear* to the beholder.

1) Many gods/One God.

- a) The struggle between good and evil, God and Satan (*i.e.*, Dualism)/God is Sovereign.
- b) Capricious, Arbitrary/Righteous, Just.
- c) Infer the general from the specific/Specific is specific—general is general.
 - 1] *E.g.*, God worked in my life in a particular way, therefore He works in everyone's life that way.

2) Faith

- a) What one believes (*i.e.*, special knowledge)/What one does.

1] James 2:14-19

“What good is it ... if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead ... You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

b) Syncretistic/Distinct (Separate)

- 1] The combination or reconciliation of differing beliefs in religion, philosophy, etc. or an attempt to affect such a compromise.

3) Separate *from* the world/Separate *in* the world.

a) Monastic/Community

1] John 17:15

“My prayer **is not that you take them out of the world** but that you protect them from the evil one.”

b) Vows of Poverty, Celibacy, Silence/Celebration of life.

4) Allegorical/Normally (*i.e.*, literal parts, literally—figurative parts, figuratively)

- a) Allegory—description of one thing under the image of another; a story in which people, things, and happenings have another meaning, as in a fable or parable.
- b) Parable—a short, simple story from which a moral lesson is drawn; an obscure or enigmatic saying, *P'shat*, *Midrash*.

5) Faith is private/Faith is public.

- a) “It’s what in your heart that counts.”

1] Matthew 5:14-16

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. (When) people light a lamp ... they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. *In the same way, let your light shine before men*, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

2] Matthew 6:1,2

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ ... to be seen by (men) ... *So when you give* to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do ... to be honored by men ...”

6) Man

- a) Body, Soul, Spirit/Inner man and outer “reputation” (*or* “name”)
- b) Component parts/Whole being.
- c) *Nephesh*—“soul; self; life; person; creature; heart; the animating principle of the body, the common property of man and beast.” It is the source of the animation of the body; it is life. It is the personal center of desire, inclination, and appetite, and its normal condition is to be operating in or through a physical organism.
- d) *Ruach*—“breath; air; strength; wind; breeze; spirit; courage; temper; Spirit.” As blood represents animal life, wind represents the spiritual element in life. Wind in the Scripture, represents the mighty penetrating power of the Invisible God. The spirit is the place where our deep feelings are generated and enables us to feel, think, speak, and act according to divine requirements.
- e) God is not set forth in Scripture as a soul, but as a Spirit, that is, an unseen living being capable of deep emotion. God and God alone has the faculty of communicating His Spirit or life to his creatures.
- f) “Body,” “Soul,” and “Spirit” are Greek concepts. Hebrew contrasts the “inner self” and “the outer appearance” or “what

one is to oneself” as opposed to “what one appears to be to ones observers.” The inner person is “*nephesh*,” the outer person, or reputation is “*shem*” (name).

g) So what?

1) Dealing with emotional pain.

a) “Just press on!”

b) “Let’s just go on with the Lord!”

c) “Why do we have to trudge up the past?”

These “solutions” assume that salvation is *just* a spiritual phenomenon. Since my spirit is O.K., the rest of me should be O.K. too!

7) Places

a) The place itself/What happened there.

8) History

a) Fatalism⁴—the view that all events are predetermined by fate and are therefore unalterable.

b) The ancient Greeks thought that just as the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter repeat themselves year after year, so does history repeat itself.

1) Therefore, history was just a repetition of destined events, which could not be affected by human power, so that **history had no meaning or goal**.

c) This view of history is called the “**fatalist view of history**” (or “cyclical view of history.”

d) Representative historians of this view were Herodotus (c. 484-425 BC), who is called the father of history and wrote *History*, and Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC), who wrote *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

e) Herodotus depicted the Persian war in the epic manner, whereas Thucydides depicted the Peloponnesian War **from beginning to end in a manner that was faithful to the historical facts**. What these two men had in common, though, was the idea that **history repeats itself**.

1) “**Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it**”—Winston Churchill

f) The cyclical view of history does not admit that the development of history depends on human effort, because it accepts the development of circumstances as necessary.

g) Also, it cannot offer a future image of the world, because **it sees no goal in history**.

4. *For anything human—including the crowning glory of the human being, the transcendent intellect—is still part of the created reality, **ever subject to and defined by its limitations**. G-d invites us to experience that which transcends all limit and definition—Himself. But to touch base with the core divine essence of our soul, we must first “go.”*

a. **The true essence of God cannot be grasped by anyone but God.**⁵

There is not a single angel in heaven who knows God’s location—and certainly not God’s true essence ...

So all those descriptions that we read in the Torah, of God’s hand, foot, ear, and eye—what do they mean? Know and believe that although those descriptions indicate God’s true being, no creature can know or contemplate ... Though we are made in the divine image and likeness, do not imagine that the divine eye is actually in the form of an eye or the divine hand in the form of a hand. Rather, these are inner—innermost—aspects of the divine reality, from which the fountain flows to all creatures through the divine decree. But the essence of the divine hand is not like the essence of the human hand, nor is their form the same, as it is written: “To whom can I be compared?”

Know and understand that there is no similarity in substance or structure between God and us—except for the intention of the forms of our organs and limbs, which are fashioned as symbols of hidden, (spiritual) realities. The mind cannot know these realities directly; it can only be reminded of them. As when one writes “Reuben son of Jacob.” The form of these letters is not the form, structure, and essence of the real Reuben son of Jacob but simply a mnemonic device (*i.e., something to assist the memory*). “Reuben son of Jacob” is a symbol of the particular entity called by that name.

1) Luke 10:22 (NAS)

²² **All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son** and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

⁴ www.tparents.org/Library/Unification/Books/Euth/Euth08-05.htm.

⁵ Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (Castle Books), p. 81.