

Parashat Lech Lecha

My Journey Back Home

Our Stories of Return Paralleling Avraham's Journey

Lech Lecha is one of my favorite Torah portions as we all have our own *lech lecha* (go to yourself) stories and journeys. That's why I have taught this *parasha* for many years in Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. Not only my students who come from various walks of life can identify with Avraham who was Divinely guided to leave his parent's home, his birthplace and country journeying into an unknown future. I too have my own *lech lecha* story, which began in 1974 and brought me to Israel in 1980. For some its hard to imagine that I used to be a hippie – flower power girl, others can easily visualize it. My journey back home to my roots is similar to that of so many others by the destiny albeit not by its beginning-point. I'm pretty sure you can count the *ba'aeli teshuva* (returnees to Judaism) from Denmark on less than one hand. About 20 years ago, I wrote down my personal *teshuva* story and I thought it appropriate to share it with you at the time when we read about Avraham's journey back home.

My Secret Comforter Since Early Childhood

"What made you return to Judaism?" you ask crowding around me on the sofa. As I look into your eager faces, you remind me of myself, when I first set out to explore the unknown world of my Jewish heritage. The truth is that, although I grew up in an assimilated secular home, I seem to have been born religious. My religiosity was not expressed through any conscious observance of Jewish laws or rituals; yet, as far back as I can recall, I remember praying to G-d every night. Even as a preschooler I folded my hands and spoke the following words to G-d before closing my eyes for the night: "Dear G-d, thank you very much for all the good things you have done for me, and please forgive me for all the bad things I have done. I promise I'll try be better." I never spoke to anyone about my simple prayer. Although I hardly ever heard the word G-d mentioned in my environment, it felt quite natural to address Him every night – my own secret comforter, who was always there for me.

To Live or not to Live as Jews

I was born in Denmark in 1960, and I grew up in a clean green suburb of Copenhagen. My grandfather had been a great Jewish scholar, who later became captivated by the secular "enlightenment." After having traveled the world, he settled in Denmark where he married and raised three children. Soon after their oldest daughter was married and I was born, my grandparents immigrated to Israel with their two younger children. Lacking any significant background in Judaism, my parents sent all their children to the Jewish school, hoping that in this way we would gain enough exposure to Judaism to choose for ourselves whether or not we wanted to live as Jews. However, the Jewish school was not very Jewish. We made fun of the few kids who dared to wear a skullcap to school. The weekly hour of religious instruction was our time to have fun at the teacher's expense.

My Secular Upbringing – a Never-Ending Merry-Go-Round

As I entered seventh grade, I began to question all the values of the society in which I had been raised. The Judaism to which I had been exposed seemed like an empty, hypocritical religion. People who called themselves religious would drive to the synagogue on Shabbat, and park the car a few minutes' walk away to pretend they had walked the entire distance. Of course, no one believed they had actually walked the 25 kilometers from their green suburb to the synagogue located in the heart of Copenhagen. Only the elderly came to synagogue to pray, while the vast majority came to socialize and to show off their newest outfit. My parents never set their foot in the synagogue, except for *Simchat Torah* when the synagogue was packed with 'worshippers' who eagerly came to exchange sweets and candies. I respected my parents for at least being consistent in their non-belief. Yet, it seemed to me that their lives seemed filled with emptiness. Material comforts were the focus of all their endeavors. The son of Russian immigrant shoemakers, my father regarded it a major accomplishment to have worked himself up to become a doctor. He had decided that his children would never lack anything. Little did he know that although we had everything which money could buy, we still felt spiritually deprived. I started wondering about the purpose of life. My parents' lifestyle seemed meaningless to me. They believed that the most important thing was to get a good education, work hard, make a lot of money, get married, have children, give them a good education and so on. This struck me as a never-ending merry-go-round. Everything was for the sake of something else; nothing had a purpose in itself.

The Empty Space in My Soul Yearning for Meaning

I knew that I had been created for something more than getting a good education, so I embarked upon my spiritual journey, searching for meaning in life. I found no shortage of people who were eager to satisfy my thirst. My spiritual starvation must have been written in my clear blue eyes. As I strolled through the busy streets of Copenhagen, people from all sects and religions approached me with their pamphlets and invitations. I recall reading some of those pamphlets in my religious instruction hour at the Jewish school. I had become a real provocation. Perhaps I was secretly hoping that the teacher would notice the literature I had smuggled in and use the opportunity to explain the various concepts in a Jewish light. I felt utterly alone and without direction, susceptible to anyone who approached me. I danced in the streets with the *Children of G-d*, ecstatic at the idea of opening up my heart and being at one with my Creator. Yet, whenever Jesus was mentioned, my heart froze. I had no room in my heart for a human being whom others claimed was the son of G-d. I argued, and asked all kinds of questions which the "born again" Christians were unable to answer. It was as though they had been programmed to mouth their pat replies. They far from filled the empty space in my soul, which was yearning for purpose and meaning.

Experimenting with Expanded Consciousness

By the time I enrolled in high school, I had become a real hippie, draped in flowing Indian tunics and wearing flowers in my hair. In school, I insisted on sitting on my little rug on the floor. The basement of my parents' villa, that had become my teenage den, was the gathering place for my circle of friends all of whom were experimenting with expansion of consciousness. We read Herman Hesse, Aldous Huxley, and Castaneda and listened to Pink Floyd and the Beatles' Lucy in

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the Sky with Diamonds. We tried to relate to each other by every conceivable means, dancing around wildly, giving one another massages, using nonverbal communication, and breaking into spontaneous drama. There was no social norm, which we didn't try to break. We idolized the American Indians and other exotic peoples, whose cultures seemed so much richer. Western culture was so inhibited! Why did it arbitrarily exclude alternative kinds of behavior or relationships? Reasoning that man-made laws were transient, with no intrinsic value, I questioned everything in the establishment including heterosexuality and the sanctity of marriage.

Experiencing the Entire World on One Side and I on The Other

Although not politically inclined, I was introduced to Marxism on my high school campus. I found myself involved with a group of people who were trying to change the world through demonstrations and street theater. However, the Marxist soon struck me as also being far too materialistic. Furthermore, their idealism seemed to be misplaced. They were avoiding having to develop their own characters by claiming to be working on changing the world. My mother's words must have made an impression upon me after all. She used to say; "If you kids would only learn to get along, perhaps there would be peace in the world." I realized, and deep down, had probably always known that in order to change the world one must first change oneself. I turned to yoga and meditation to get in touch with my inner self. This of course was going to the other extreme. The Yogis were concerned only about their own inner experiences without being involved in the world. Such a frame of mind was too alienating for me, too detached from daily reality. My next involvement was with the Green-peace movement. I went on midnight hikes, and enjoyed listening to the nightingale. When I turned eighteen, I refused to learn how to drive, because driving would be inconsistent with the buttons I was wearing, which proclaimed "Cars out of the City." I fought against pollution and for the preservation of wildlife. Yet, I was still restless. My sensation of a spiritual vacuum seemed to be growing to the point where it threatened to consume me. I became paranoid and depressed. I felt so alone as if the whole world were on one side and I on the other. I was later to learn that this is the meaning of the title **הַיְעָבְדִי**/*Ha'Ivri* – the Hebrew, given to Avraham (*Bereishit* 14:13). because "Avraham distinguished himself from all the people of his environment as if the entire world was on one side and he on the other" (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 42:8).

On My Way to the Promised Land

After graduating high school, I managed to earn enough money to travel the world. Barely nineteen I set out on my own, with a backpack and an outstretched thumb, leaving dear old Denmark behind. Perhaps it was because Denmark was such a flat country that its people were also flat without any spiritual height. My parents' great horror that I was travelling this way on my own, had no power to stop me. I was determined to try everything in my quest for truth. Many questions were still burning within me: "Who created the world? What is the purpose of Creation? And what is my particular function within this world?" I soon realized that hitchhiking alone through Europe is not the safest way for a young girl to travel. Only when other Jews crossed my path did I feel secure. I could always identify a Jewish face. There was something different about the eyes, a depth, which I could only share with other Jews. I began to wonder whether having been born Jewish was supposed to make a difference in my life. Soon, I had

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acquired the habit of seeking refuge in the Jewish communities. There, I was invariably invited in for a meal and treated with respect. Travelling had in fact, started to wear me out. I had run out of money and courage. Despondent, a stranger in a strange land, I phoned home from Paris. Despite all our previous difficulties, this time my parents were enormously helpful. They offered to wire me a ticket to Israel, where I had relatives. There I wouldn't be among strangers. I would be safe and have the option to join a Kibbutz or perhaps, a study program for overseas students. I accepted this offer without the slightest hesitation. The next day I was on my way to the Promised Land.

Tea with Chava – My New Friend from the Yeshiva

Any tourist visiting Israel ends up sooner or later at the Western Wall. I just stood there, in awe of the sense of sanctity that pervaded the place, without a word of prayer crystallizing on my lips. The intense light reflected by the ancient stones penetrated into the empty space in my very heart and soul. As I entered the square in front of the Wall a bearded man approached me. We soon began talking comfortably about everything and nothing. I enjoyed the feeling of being among Jews. Everyone around me seemed like family. A little while after, a girl named Chava a few years older than I, joined our conversation. She asked the man whether he had told me about their school. "The school? What school?" I heard myself ask in wonder. Chava invited me for tea in her room in the Old City. She told me about the Yeshiva where, for the past two years she had been learning what it meant to be a Jew. "Our heritage has so much to offer," she said, that it was a lifetime study. Chava sparkled with intelligence and humor, and I instantly felt very close to her. I asked her all the questions with which I had challenged the members of various religions and sects. Unlike my experience in the past, Chava was able to answer my questions. Her answers not only made sense intellectually, but also touched a chord of recognition within me that resonated emotionally. One of my first questions concerned woman's role within Judaism: "weren't women treated like second-rate citizens?" "A woman is the queen in her home, which she makes into a miniature sanctuary." Chava explained. I had yet to experience this myself in a way that no words can describe. I was prepared to admit that Western culture had brainwashed us into looking at the world through blinders. Title and career should not determine a person's value. It is the deeds that counts, and not whether the person can occupy the spotlight. "But, don't all the laws and regulations limit one's personal freedom?" I persisted; certain that 'freedom' to express oneself fully was the highest value in life. Judaism seemed to be one big doctrine of limitations. Don't mix milk and meat; don't drive on the Sabbath; don't dress immodestly; don't marry a non-Jew and so on. How was it possible to keep all these rules without suffocating? Chava patiently taught me a different way of viewing the concept of freedom. "Real freedom," she explained "is being true to one's inner self." If Jewish law seems to limit our personal freedom, we need to understand the essence of freedom in a deeper way. Someone who does whatever he feels like is not necessarily free. He may be a slave to other people's opinions, his taste dictated by fashion. He might be enslaved to his own instincts and materialistic desires, without even realizing the power they exert over him. He may eat whatever he feels like but be unable to control his impulses and appetite. G-d gave us the commandments to help us actualize our inner potential through their performance, so that we reach the state of self-control that is the highest form of freedom. I left Chava's room elated. I had found a friend, someone who shared my quest for truth. I was no longer all alone.

Awakened to the Truth I had Always Known

Learning to Live Judaism with All its Vibrancy

I received Chava's invitation to return for Sabbath with excited expectation. Perhaps there was more to Judaism than the empty rituals, which I had encountered in Denmark. I was determined to give my own religion a chance. The following days proved extremely difficult for me. Many contradictory thoughts raged through my mind. Could I really take upon myself all of Judaism's laws without feeling horribly constrained? Could I truly relate to this new view of freedom? Would I be able to change my life so profoundly? Yet, whenever I recalled Chava's words, I felt strengthened, and awakened to something that I had somehow always known. Friday afternoon arrived and Chava introduced me to her friends in the dormitory. A French girl who was braiding the long glittering black hair of her Israeli roommate kissed me warmly on both cheeks. The Israeli girl then took out her guitar and started to play. Sara, from Germany, and Lea, from Holland joined us shortly afterward. Like me, they all wore colorful skirts and flowing tunics. All had stories of a spiritual journey similar to my own. We sang together, and danced in a circle. Here, in the heart of Jerusalem, we had reclaimed our roots. Our yearning – theirs and mine – had finally come to fruition. We were fulfilling our spiritual thirst by learning to live Judaism in all its vibrancy.

Coming Home to A Truth to which I Belonged

I was led to a room where two silver candlesticks awaited me. Chava taught me to say the blessing, and I lit the candles. As I gazed at the lights of the Sabbath candles, the world was transformed. The room was aglow with holiness and serenity, as though we had entered a higher realm of existence. It struck me that here was the expanded consciousness for which I had been searching all along. I had never expected to find it within my own tradition. Here, I was no longer a stranger exploring other people and places. I saw truth very clearly for the first time, and it was a truth, to which I belonged. I would keep learning and exploring together with others like myself. I had finally come home.