



Parashah Insights
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Parashat Lech Lecha
Perfection through Milah

Lech Lecha

“And Hashem said to Avram, go for yourself (*lech lecha*) from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you” (*Bereshit* 12:1).

With this commandment, Hashem instructed our Forefather Avraham to distance himself from his native country, his hometown, and his childhood home, all inhabited by wicked, corrupt idolaters. In order for Avraham to perfect himself and complete his mission in this world, he had to detach himself from these overwhelmingly negative influences and settle in the Land of Canaan, which his descendents would inherit as *Eretz Yisrael*. Only in Hashem’s Own Holy Land could he accomplish his mission of coming close to the Al-mighty and achieving ever-higher levels of spirituality.

We know that the Torah is our eternal guide, with a personal message for all Jews, whenever and wherever they live. For Avraham, the message was to move away from everything that was negative in his birthplace and family home, so that he could grow spiritually. We may say that in our times, this verse continues to encourage spiritual growth, but from a positive starting point. We, Avraham’s children, have an accumulated background of four thousand years of total dedication to the Al-mighty and His Torah. With this force behind us, we can take advantage of all that is positive in our lives and use it as an impetus to propel us upward.

With the words *lech lecha*, “go for yourself,” the Torah directs us to the path we should follow in order to successfully fulfill our own life’s mission. The first step on that path is “your land.” *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of our Fathers, the sanctified



homeland given to us by the Al-mighty, is on a higher spiritual plane than any other location on earth. Living there is especially conducive to spiritual growth.

“From your birthplace” is a reference to the concept of community, the magnificent structure of heritage and tradition passed on from generation to generation. “From your father’s house” refers to the education we receive from our parents, as expressed in the verse, “Hear, my child, your father’s rebuke and do not forsake your mother’s Torah” (*Mishle* 1:8). The positive training and values we absorb at home should continue to accompany us as we grow and develop throughout our lives.

By following this path, we will succeed in reaching “the land (*eretz*) which I will show you.” Our Sages use the term *eretz* as an allusion to the World to Come: “All of Israel have a share in the World to Come, as it says (*Yeshayahu* 60:21), “And Your nation, all of them are righteous, they will inherit the land (*eretz*) forever” (*Sanhedrin* 100a).

We should learn to utilize the assets of homeland, community, and family as tools to help us reach the World to Come. In the words of the Ramhal, “Man was created not for his position in this world, but for his position in the World to Come. However, his situation in this world is the cause of his situation in the World to Come, which is the ultimate objective” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, Chapter 1). The path we tread in this world leads directly to our eventual reward in the World to Come.

Perfect Numbers

The words *lech lecha* were used to tell Avraham to separate himself from the evil around him in order to achieve perfection. These same words encourage us to turn our many blessings into steppingstones to perfection. *Lech* and *lecha* each have the numerical equivalent of fifty, together totaling one hundred, a number signifying perfection.¹

We find an allusion to this concept in our Sages’ description of the various stages of man’s life, and his growth in Torah and the service of Hashem. They start with “A five-year-old begins Scripture,” tracing his development over the years, and conclude with “a hundred-year-old is as if he is dead and gone from the world” (*Avot* 5:21). By the age of one hundred, man achieves such a lofty level of spiritual perfection that

¹ In other languages, the alphabet and numbers are separate and unrelated: A,B,C is distinct from 1,2,3. Hebrew is unique in that it has no numbers; the letters also serve as numbers. *Alef*, the first letter, is one, *bet*, the second letter, is two, continuing up to *yud*, ten. Numbers higher than ten are expressed by a *yud* with an *alef* (eleven), *yud-bet* (twelve), etc. In addition to the meaning of any given word expressed by the characters read as letters, it also has a numerical equivalent (*gematriya*) composed of the value of its letters in numbers.



he is on a higher plane, as if he is no longer in the physical world. While it is possible to live longer than one hundred years, our Sages did not go any further, because one hundred indicates perfection.

One hundred is composed of ten times ten. To better appreciate the significance of the number one hundred, let us first understand something about the significance of the number ten.

Our Sages teach that Hashem created the world with ten Utterances, called *Maamarot*. (*Avot* 5:1). The *Mekubalim* explain that these Utterances are ten specific revelations of ways that Hashem relates to His created beings, in accordance with their deeds. The *Sefer Yetzirah* calls them ten *Sefirot*, ten spiritual forces through which Hashem rules the world, each a different level of connection to Him. Every one of the ten *Sefirot*, a perfect entity unto itself, is divided into ten sub-categories.

Hashem is the essence of perfection, and what He creates is perfection. His choice of specifically ten *Sefirot*, each subdivided into ten, as the instrument of Creation and revelation teaches us that ten is perfection, while ten times ten is absolute perfection.

Interestingly, we find the concept of ten as perfection in the decimal system, the universal basis of mathematics. In this system, the highest numeral is nine. Ten completes the cycle, with any number after nine represented by a one with the addition of another digit. For example, one with a zero is ten, one with another one is eleven, and so on. All the numbers link up to ten, which is higher, all-encompassing perfection.

The Torah tells us that man was created in the image of G-d: “And G-d created man in His image, in the image of G-d He created him” (*Bereshit* 1:27). It is one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith that the Al-mighty has no physical image or form at all (Rambam, *Perush Hamishnayot, Sanhedrin, Perek Helek*). Our Sages explain this extremely profound statement on many levels. One explanation is that as we said, perfect revelation of the Al-mighty is through the ten *Sefirot*. Man, created in G-d’s image, so to speak, also contains these same ten spiritual forces, symbolized in his physical form.

The *Mekubalim* teach that man’s body has ten primary parts, corresponding to the ten *Sefirot*. Man’s skull is *Keter* (the Crown). It is the repository of the three compartments of the mind: *Hochmah* in the right brain, *Binah* in the left brain, and *Daat* in the brain at the nape of the neck.² The right arm represents *Hesed*

² *Hochmah*, wisdom, is the capacity to accumulate and store knowledge. *Binah*, intelligence, is the capacity for intellectual depth. *Daat*, reason, is the capacity for practical application of our knowledge.



(Lovingkindness) and the left arm represents *Gevurah* (Might), as we find in our Sages' teaching, "the left hand should always push away (Might) and the right hand [should always] draw close (Lovingkindness)" (*Sotah* 47a). The torso is *Tiferet* (Glory – Truth). The two legs which support the body correspond to *Netzach* (Infinity) and *Hod* (Splendor). The *brit kodesh*, man's organ of procreation, is *Yesod* (Foundation) and the *atarah*, its crown, is *Malchut* (Kingship).³

The hundred-year-old who is no longer of this world has rectified all of these ten levels and the sub-categories they encompass; we may say that he is one hundred percent perfect. The words *lech lecha* – two fifties totaling one hundred – allude to this striving for spiritual perfection, which should be our life's goal.

The Al-mighty commanded Avraham, "Walk before Me and be perfect" (*Bereshit* 17:1). Our Sages teach us that "perfect" refers to the commandment of circumcision (Rashi citing *Bereshit Rabbah* 46:1). Throughout his life, Avraham worked to purify himself from head to foot, rectifying each of the ten levels corresponding to the *Sefirot*. In his first ten years he rectified the ten levels included in the Divine Attribute of *Keter*. In the next ten years he rectified *Hochmah*, then *Binah*, and so on. Finally, aged ninety-nine years, he reached the ninety-ninth level, the last stage before complete perfection. By removing the *orlah* (foreskin) and revealing the *atarah*, he reached the perfection of the hundredth level, in his hundredth year. *Lech lecha*, one hundred, alludes to the spiritual perfection of this highest level, when Avraham was finally ready to become part of the Divine Chariot. Now he could "walk before G-d and be perfect."

There is another lesson we can learn from the division of the perfect hundred into fifty and fifty. Fifty implies half. The years which comprise the first half of a person's life are his primary time for growth and development. The second half are years of decline, as his strength gradually wanes. This is known as "fifty days of ascent and fifty days of descent" (*Rema, Torat HaOlah*, vol. II, Chapter 12) They tell us that "One who learned Torah in his youth should [continue] learning Torah in his old age, and one who taught students in his youth should [continue to] teach students in his old age" (*Yevamot* 62b). Both periods should be utilized to the maximum. We should not waste the growing years, assuming that we will have plenty of time to serve Hashem when we are old. We should also use the later years to the fullest, rather than saying that we are too weak and tired to go any further. At every stage in life, we must serve Hashem to the best of our abilities, working to achieve a perfect one hundred in *avodat Hashem*.

A Portent for the Sons

³ See second Introduction to *Tikune Zohar*, *Patah Eliyahu*, and my work *Shorshe HaYam, Helek Alef*, for a fuller explanation of this topic.



Our Sages tell us that our Forefather Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah before being commanded, including even rabbinically ordained commandments like *eruve tavshilin* (*Yoma* 28b).⁴ This is because the Forefathers knew through prophetic insight which deeds would bring rectification to their souls and to the world (*Ohr HaHayyim* on *Bamidbar* 12:12; Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Bereshit* 56:10; *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 21). This raises an obvious question. If Avraham fulfilled all the *mitzvot* on his own, why did he not fulfill the important *mitzvah* of circumcision until he was explicitly commanded by Hashem? In addition, why did Hashem wait until Avraham reached the advanced age of ninety-nine, and only then command him to circumcise himself?

We can answer these questions by considering the unique nature of Avraham's service of Hashem.

Our Sages teach us that "the deeds of the fathers are a portent for the sons" (Ramban on *Bereshit* 12:6, citing the Sages). This means that the enormous efforts our Forefathers invested in serving Hashem pay eternal dividends for their descendents. Their initial labor and toil made a permanent impression, so that spiritual accomplishments which they had to struggle to achieve can now be acquired more easily by subsequent generations. Children inherit their parents' spiritual strengths; we are "midgets resting on the shoulders of giants" (*Torat Moshe*, *Bamidbar* 12:3; see *Eduyot* 2:9). This is how "the deeds of the fathers are a portent for the sons."

Avraham was the first Jew to fulfill the commandment of circumcision. He needed ninety-nine years of dedicated *avodat Hashem* to ready himself for the sacred covenant of *milah*. Avraham passed on his hard-won spiritual gains to his children. Thanks to all that he put into this crucial *mitzvah*, his descendents can be circumcised at the age of eight days.

Let us try to understand more about this profound concept. Our Sages tell us that Avraham lacked only a cut on the flesh to complete his circumcision, because his *orlah* had already been crushed by marital relations (cited in Rashi, *Bereshit* 17:25). Clearly, our Sages are not suggesting that Avraham was steeped in desire to the point where he was physically damaged by excess. They are telling us something much more profound about Avraham's spiritual stature.

The *orlah* is symbolic of evil and the Forces of Impurity which have a grip on man. Cutting off the foreskin has the effect of annulling this evil. Avraham was not circumcised until the age of ninety-nine, but by subduing and "crushing" his desires through engaging in marital relations in sanctity and purity, solely for the sake of Heaven, he succeeded in eliminating the impurity of the *orlah* by his own efforts.

⁴ A rabbinical ordinance allowing for preparation of food for Shabbat on a Festival which falls on Friday.



We see here how the deeds of the fathers are a portent for the sons. Avraham had no “forefathers” whose merits and accomplishments would support him; he was strictly on his own. This is why he could not remove the evil forces merely by means of the physical act of circumcision until he had first removed them by his spiritual labors, an enormous accomplishment. After he refined himself to this extremely high level, Hashem told him, “walk before Me and be perfect” – Avraham was finally able to fulfill the commandment of circumcision.

Avraham’s circumcision at ninety-nine was the culmination of a lifetime of hard work, and his exertions imbued his descendents’ circumcisions with the power of his own toil. We, the Jewish people, received *milah* at eight days, without the need for a lifetime of prior purification, as a gift from our saintly Forefather.

Perfection through Circumcision

We can understand the words “walk before Me and be perfect” in another sense as well. Before circumcision, man is connected to the Forces of Impurity that reside (in an esoteric sense) “at the back.” Once circumcised, he is bound to holiness and the Forces of Purity which reside “in front.” Then he can walk before the Al-mighty, perfecting himself through Torah, *mitzvot*, and refined *middot*.

We find this idea in *Birkat HaAretz*, the second blessing in the Grace after Meals. We thank Hashem “for Your covenant (*brit*) that You sealed in our flesh, and for Your Torah that You taught us.” The latter is dependent on the former: only one who is circumcised can understand Torah and achieve perfection in the fulfillment of its commandments.

Our Sages describe Avraham’s circumcision with an interesting parable. A king asked a noblewoman who had been suggested as his bride to walk in front of him so that he could study her appearance. The lady obeyed, but she was unhappy with this request, fearing that the king would find something about her that was not to his liking. The king reassured her, telling her that he saw no flaws at all, other than a tiny toenail that was a bit too long. Once that nail was cut off, he told her, she would be absolutely perfect. The same was true of Avraham: he stood before the Al-mighty and was nearly perfect. Once his *orlah* was physically removed, he would be free of any flaw whatsoever (*Bereshit Rabbah* 46:4).

A teaching of the Arizal helps us understand why the Sages compared the *orlah* to a toenail (*Etz Hayyim, Shaar Lamed-alef*, Chapter 2). He writes that the Forces of Impurity are attached to the place where the toenail protrudes from the flesh. It is from this impure place that they derive their powers. (We also find this comparison in our Sages’ euphemistic expression (*Niddah* 66a), “not all fingers are equal”). The same is true of the *orlah*. It is no more than a scrap of useless extra skin, to which the evil forces attach themselves.



Yitzhak and Yishmael

Our Sages recount a major debate between Avraham's two sons, Yitzhak and Yishmael. "Yitzhak and Yishmael were arguing. The latter said, 'I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at the age of thirteen years.' The former said, 'I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at the age of eight days.' Yishmael said to [Yitzhak], 'I am more beloved than you. Why? Because I was capable of protesting, and I did not protest.' At that moment, Yitzhak said, 'If only the Holy One, blessed be He, would reveal Himself to me and tell me to cut off one of my limbs, and I would not refuse. Immediately afterward, 'And Hashem tested Avraham' [with *Akedat Yitzhak*, where Yitzhak was called upon to give up his very life for Hashem]" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 55:4).⁵

Why did Yitzhak maintain that his circumcision at eight days made him more beloved? Viewed logically, Yishmael's claim does seem to make a great deal of sense. As a mature adolescent in full possession of his faculties, he was perfectly capable of refusing to submit to circumcision, and yet, he agreed. Yitzhak, a helpless newborn, had no input in the decision to be circumcised, and the pain he suffered was certainly much less as well.

And yet, Yitzhak's circumcision – and that of every eight-day-old baby since – bears an element of paramount importance which was lacking in Yishmael's. Circumcision at eight days fulfills the fundamental principle of *naaseh v'nishma* (*Shmot* 24:7). These words, literally translated as "we will do and we will hear," mean "first we will fulfill, and then we will understand what we are fulfilling." They are the foundation of our people's acceptance of the Torah. The non-Jewish nations refused to consider taking on the Torah without first hearing exactly what it would demand of them, and then deciding if they were ready to meet those demands (see *Sifri, V'Zot HaBerachah* 343). In contrast, *naaseh v'nishma* is an impulsive expression of implicit faith and trust in Hashem's Word. It means that we accept and obey His Will entirely, regardless of whether or not we recognize the logic behind it. Circumcision at eight days instills this highest level of obedience to the Al-mighty in our children from infancy. This, Yitzhak said, is most beloved to G-d. Yishmael was prepared to sacrifice a scrap of skin that served no purpose. Yitzhak was not only willing but even eager to give up his entire being out of love and dedication to Hashem.

Milah and the Mitzvot

Man's ultimate purpose is to rectify and perfect himself by fulfilling the six hundred and thirteen commandments. The body's ten main parts consist of two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five sinews, corresponding respectively to the positive and negative commandments, a total of six hundred and thirteen.

⁵ See *Shavuot* Insights for a fuller discussion of this topic.



Fulfillment of all the commandments brings spiritual perfection to every aspect of the human body.

The word *brit* (literally “covenant,” a reference to *brit milah*, the covenant of circumcision) has the numerical equivalent of six hundred and twelve, because *brit milah* is the prerequisite for all the other six hundred and twelve commandments (*Nedarim* 31b). All *mitzvot* and good *middot* have their root in circumcision.

Mitzvot are related to man’s G-dly soul, and *middot* to his base soul (see *Shaare Kedushah, Shaar Alef*). The uncircumcised individual can neither fulfill *mitzvot* properly nor refine his *middot*, because the *orlah* serves as a barrier between him and holiness. Removing it opens the door to spiritual growth. This is why circumcision is the first *mitzvah* in a child’s life, performed just a few days after birth.

Mitzvot are divided into three categories, which correspond to the three stages of the process of halachic circumcision. We have the negative commandments, explicit prohibitions which we must avoid at all costs, such as idol worship and the consumption of non-kosher food. We also have the positive commandments, our obligations as Jews, such as *tefillin* and *shofar*. Then we have the gray area of discretionary activities (*reshut*), a domain which is not clearly defined, but is nonetheless a critical testing ground of our commitment to Hashem and His Torah.

The Torah tells us, *kedoshim tihyu: you will be holy* (*Vayikra* 19:2). The Ramban explains that this commandment refers to *reshut*, the vast range of permissible activities which are not *mitzvot*, but which nevertheless make up a considerable part of our lives. For example, the Torah allows us to marry, engage in business, consume meat and wine, and the like. And yet, if we spend our days indulging in the pleasures of marriage, money, and mealtimes, we are what the Ramban calls “a degenerate within the permitted bounds of the Torah,” or in other words, a monster with a *hechsher*. Are we doing anything which is outright forbidden? If we are careful about the details, then no, not really. But G-d did not put us in this world solely for coffee, cake, and the stock market. If we relate to the mundane aspects of our lives as part of our service of Hashem, we make them – and ourselves – holy. If we plunge in headfirst for the permissible pleasures they bring, we will be anything but.

The *mitzvah* of *milah* consists of three stages, corresponding to these three categories.

The first stage is cutting off the foreskin. As we explained, evil and the Forces of Impurity attach themselves to the *orlah*. By removing it, we separate the Forces of Evil from the newborn. The *orlah* is called the “portion of the snake,” symbolic of evil. This is why we cover it with dust after it is cut off, burying it completely. We find an allusion to this concept in the verse “And the snake, its bread is dust” (*Yeshayahu* 65:25).



Cutting off the *orlah* corresponds to the three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments; we must sever all contact with everything the Torah forbids, in the same way that we cut off the *orlah* altogether.

The second part is *periah*, uncovering the *atarah* at circumcision by splitting the fine inner layer of skin and pushing it inward toward the body, symbolically directing it to holiness.⁶ *Periah* corresponds to the Torah's commandment to be holy, or the gray area of *reshut*.

Life abounds with discretionary activities. They are not forbidden, and they can go either way, to good or to bad; it all depends on how we relate to them. The same is true of the inner skin which we peel away in *periah*. It can be pushed inward as required by *halachah*, revealing the *atarah*, symbolic of sanctity, or it can be allowed to fall back and cover the *atarah*. This is how we should deal with activities which are *reshut*. Confined to their proper place, they can become part of our service of Hashem. Allowed to grow unchecked, they obscure the element of sanctity.

The *mitzvah* of *periah* is also symbolic of the need to control and refine our *middot*. Carefully directed, any character trait can become an asset in serving Hashem. Left unchecked, our *middot* will ultimately run wild and destroy our spirituality.

The third stage of *milah* is revelation of the *atarah*, which is the symbol of sanctity. This stage of *milah* corresponds to the fulfillment of the positive commandments.

Now we can understand Yitzhak's words, "I am more beloved than you, because I was circumcised at eight days." True, Yishmael's circumcision had the element of willing choice. However, circumcision at eight days is of greater importance, because it separates man from evil from his very earliest days, opening him up to sanctity almost from birth. *Milah* at its proper time – the tender age of eight days – is the first step on the path of Torah. It is a declaration of *naaseh v'nishma*.

For thousands of years, our people have circumcised their sons at the age of eight days, with all that this cherished *mitzvah* implies. There can be nothing greater and more beloved than this continual renewal of our eternal bond to the Al-mighty.

"And Your nation, all of them are *tzaddikim*, they will inherit the land forever" (*Yeshayahu* 60:21). Our Sages teach that a *tzaddik* is one who upholds the sanctity of *brit milah* (*Zohar, Parashat Lech Lecha*, p. 94a, et al). In the merit of our devotion to the *mitzvah* of *milah* we will "inherit the land forever," earning life in this world and in the World to Come.

⁶ The Arizal teaches that *periah* must be done as a separate step following the cutting of the *orlah*, rather than cutting off both layers of skin together (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Lech Lecha* 9a, cited in my work *Ateret Shalom, Ot Chaf*).