

Harry and Alice,

Yasher koach. For those teachings and for chanting so beautifully this morning. For taking your place as teachers of Torah in this community. This week's parsha marks the beginning of the Jewish story, when Avram hears the call that will set him on a course to found the Jewish people. Some thousands of years later, your teachings today remind us that the Jewish story is alive and well, through you, and through all of us learning from you.

As you become adults, no doubt you will each need to take risks like Avram and Sarai in this parsha.

And Harry, in your d'var Torah, you encouraged us to consider how we might find the courage to do exactly that. How do we know when a risk is worth it? When it's the right time? How do we proceed with any faith that things are going to turn out OK when we can anticipate so many twists and turns ahead? When answering these questions becomes impossible, we have to proceed, as Avram does...with faith that a blessing is on the other side of our risks. And as you pointed out, sometimes when we take risks, we don't succeed. But if we fail, you taught us, then at least we'll learn something new about ourselves and about the world.

And Alice, you also emphasized the courage that's necessary when we embark on a journey into the unknown. And from there, you wondered: is courage really enough? We might need to be brave when we take a risk, but doesn't it also matter how we treat people along the way? What good is all that strength and moxy if it blinds us to the people who are cast aside as we blaze forward in pursuit of personal blessings? I love your inclination, Alice, to transform the Hagar saga into something positive. And you used this painful episode in Genesis to remind us that part of hearing the lech lecha call to "go forth," is to "go to yourself." And to find ourselves as people of good judgment...often requires seeing the people who are impacted as we proceed toward the blessings we seek.

Both of these lessons drive at the heart of Jewish living. On the one hand we must be bold and take risks if we are to live lives of purpose. Because,

if I'm not for myself, who will be for me? But on the other hand, if I'm only for myself, as Hillel said, what am I?

Another way of translating lech lecha is "get up and go!" "Try something!" "Move on!" And "keep moving!" It's less literal. But totally to the point. And since the first call of lech lecha, we're still telling the same story our ancestors did...because the Jewish People keeps moving on. Always with a tether to the past, while taking into account the many people who are also part of our story. I think the secret to our longevity as a people is the fact that we keep moving on. No matter what.

That's not to say it's easy. The text doesn't tell us much in the way of Avram's interior experience. Maybe he heeded the call to move on because he really wanted to. Maybe he simply had to. Maybe the experience of hearing a disembodied voice freaked him out so much that he just said "get me outta here." Or maybe his reality at home was more frightening than the prospect of leaving what he knew. We won't know.

But as all of us get older, we know that "moving on" is a part of living. And ironically, as we get older, moving on gets harder and harder to do. Because the older we get, the more attached we become. To the things we love. To our memories. To endlessly more reasons to stay exactly where we are.

If the call of "lech lecha" weren't hard enough in the first place, consider that Avram is actually 75 years old in this parsha. He's already lived an entire life! And yet God insists that Avram has not completed his process of becoming who he is supposed to be. We are never too old to change or to course correct. And if Avram can do it, why can't we?

But Alice, you reminded us that there is another kind of moving on. Sometimes we are so intent on getting where we're going that we fail to notice others. Sometimes we proceed so forcefully toward our own aims that we become indifferent to the burdens that other people are carrying. And sometimes, moving on becomes an excuse for indifference.

So what, then, are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to make sense of this tension? The need to move on, to grow up, to live lives of blessing...and also the need to see others, to remain in relationship with the people we love, and to create a world of blessing in which we actually want to live?

There is a famous midrash on this parsha that sits in precisely this tension.

In Bereishit Rabbah we read:

‘Rabbi Yitzhak said, [the call to lech lecha] may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace on fire, a birah doleket. He said, “is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?” [And at precisely this moment] the owner of the building looked out and said, “I am the owner of this palace.”’

Traditionally this midrash is used as a metaphor for Abraham coming into awareness about monotheism. But the burning palace opens another possibility: Abraham’s spiritual journey begins because he refuses to ignore what he sees. Before Abraham can become the man who is willing to leave everything behind, the rabbis imagine him as the man who is unwilling to look away. He sees a world on fire and he asks: who is responsible for this? Who is taking care of things? How can we possibly go about our business when the palace is burning?

In this moment, Abraham is not yet a person who knows exactly what to do. But he is a person who understands that something is wrong. And that things can, and should, be better.

This is, for Avram, the beginning of moral living. Not having all the answers. Not having a certainty that things will turn out OK. But the clarity that things should be different. And the willingness to take on a risk in order to try and solve it.

Avraham Avinu is our first patriarch. He is, according to tradition, the first Jew, and the first monotheist. But what can we say about his character? Does his greatness lie in the fact that he knew when to get up and go? To

move on? Or does his greatness lie in the fact that he cannot turn away from reality?

Perhaps, as you can imagine I might say, Abraham's greatness lies in both of those things. There are moments when God calls us to move on. To stop clinging to the comforts of what was. But there are other moments when the voice of conscience calls us to do precisely the opposite. To remain. To bear witness. To insist that the suffering of the world is not only someone else's problem.

Growing up, however old we are, requires learning to distinguish between the two.

Harry and Alice, as you begin this new chapter of your adult Jewish lives, may you carry both of these lessons with you. I hope you will have the courage to move on. To take risks, and to venture beyond your comfort zone to discover blessings you cannot yet imagine. But I hope you will also have the courage not to move on. Not when you see that someone is being wronged. Not when you see injustice. May you not look away from something you know you ought to see.

Because to be a Jew, to be a spiritual descendent of Abraham, means to see in our forebear a person who was willing to leave everything behind but also a person who was unwilling to ignore a burning world. May you, and may all of us, have the wisdom to know the difference.

Shabbat Shalom.