5 Things Lech Lecha Teaches About Spiritual Seeking



Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

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The divine voice pierces through the settled comfort of Haran: “Go from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” Avraham stands at 75, established and secure, yet called to abandon everything familiar for a destination unknown. No GPS coordinates. No five-year plan. Just a promise and a command to walk into uncertainty.

Across the Jewish world, spiritual seekers grapple with their own calls to journey—not necessarily geographic, but deeply personal. The question reverberates: How do we leave our comfort zones while remaining rooted in Jewish commitment? How do we pursue divine calling without losing ourselves in the wilderness?

This week's parsha offers five transformative insights for those hearing their own "*lech lecha*" call—whether it's questioning inherited beliefs, deepening practice, changing communities, or pursuing meaning in unexpected places. These aren't prescriptions but possibilities, drawn from Avraham's archetypal journey and illuminated by diverse Jewish voices navigating similar terrain today.

1. Divine calling often disrupts comfortable certainty

"Now the Lord said to Avram: Get out from your country" (Bereshit 12:1). The Hebrew "*lech lecha*" literally means "go to yourself," suggesting that external journey catalyzes internal discovery.

The Sefat Emet teaches that every person has their own personal '*lech lecha*' moment, when comfortable assumptions must give way to transformative uncertainty. Yet modernity's emphasis on security and predictability makes such disruption feel threatening rather than sacred.

This captures the paradox of aspiration described by philosopher Agnes Callard—we find ourselves trying to value something we don't yet fully understand. Recent neuroscience research from Nature Neuroscience confirms that uncertainty activates the anterior cingulate cortex, creating genuine discomfort that we're evolutionarily programmed to avoid.

Rabbi Shais Taub explores how spiritual growth requires embracing this discomfort, teaching that authentic teshuva involves understanding that we are perpetually in process rather than seeking final arrival. The Zohar teaches that when a person wants to purify themselves, they are helped from Above—but first comes the wanting, the disruption of status quo.

Avraham models not reckless abandonment but conscious departure. He takes his wife, his nephew, his possessions—maintaining continuity within change. For contemporary seekers, this means growth needn't require severing all ties or rejecting everything familiar, but rather conscious evolution within commitment.

2. Spiritual seeking requires leaving without knowing the destination

"To the land that I will show you" (Bereshit 12:1) is written in the future tense, implying the destination is unclear. Avraham walks not toward a known goal but into a relationship with the divine voice calling him forward.

Ibn Ezra notes this tests whether Abraham would follow God's word without knowing where he was going. The Maharal of Prague adds that not knowing the destination increases the merit because it demonstrates pure faith.

Rav Judah Mischel shares his understanding of process over destination, explaining that our common misconception involves believing we need to accomplish or arrive somewhere definitive. His book's title *Baderech*—on the path—captures this perpetual journey quality. Contemporary research from Stanford's Design School validates this approach through "design thinking"—embracing ambiguity as essential to innovation.

The Talmud teaches, "Great is teshuva, for it reaches the Throne of Glory"—not arrives at, but reaches toward, suggesting perpetual movement rather than arrival. Sometimes the calling itself is clearer than the destination, and that's precisely the point.

For further exploration:

- *Listen to our conversation with Miriam Gisser, who emphasizes the importance of patience with oneself throughout life's ongoing journey.*

3. Leaving comfort zones can deepen rather than abandon faith

"Avram passed through the land … and the Canaanites were then in the land" (Bereshit 12:6). Avraham's journey leads not away from challenge but directly into it—surrounded by idolatry, he builds altars and calls in the name of God.

The Kedushat Levi teaches that through the journey itself, new levels of holiness are revealed. Movement creates possibility for growth impossible in stasis.

Kayla Haber-Goldstein exemplifies this journey, explaining how questioning within tradition led to a shift from being "default religious" to "consciously religious." Contemporary psychological research supports the idea that actively choosing one's values rather than simply inheriting them leads to greater life satisfaction and commitment.

Alex Clare describes how leaving his music career for Shabbat observance ultimately enriched both paths, allowing his authentic self to emerge rather than remaining confined by conventional expectations. The Talmud states, "In the place where *baalei teshuva* stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand"—suggesting that conscious choice creates a different quality of commitment.

Parshat Lech Lecha reminds us that leaving comfort zones within Judaism—questioning, exploring, even struggling—can lead to deeper, more authentic faith rather than abandonment of tradition. The journey away can become the journey deeper in.

4. Promises unfold gradually through sustained journey

"I will make you a great nation" (Bereshit 12:2)—yet Avraham remains childless for decades. The promise requires not just initial departure but sustained commitment through uncertainty.

Rashi explains that travel typically causes three diminishments: fertility, reputation, and wealth. God's blessing addresses each, but fulfillment takes generations. The Malbim notes that the blessings came gradually, teaching that spiritual achievement requires patience.

Rav Moshe Weinberger emphasizes the importance of sustainable spiritual community over dramatic individual transformation, asking how we transform peak experiences and spiritual euphoria into lasting change. Longitudinal research from Harvard's Grant Study shows that sustained relationships, not peak experiences, predict life satisfaction.

The promised land isn't reached overnight. Faith journeys unfold across years, even lifetimes, with meaning found in the walking itself.

5. Community accompanies and amplifies personal transformation

"And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions … and the souls they had made in Haran" (Bereshit 12:5). Avraham's personal calling becomes communal journey.

The Midrash explains "souls they had made" refers to those they brought to monotheism. The Netivot Shalom teaches that true spiritual growth cannot happen in isolation.

Rav Judah Mischel describes his evolving Shabbat table as something he looks forward to all week, noting how dramatically it has changed in recent years. Research from the University of Pennsylvania shows that behavior change is 65% more likely to sustain when embedded in community support.

This parsha reminds us that while the call may feel personal, the journey need not be solitary. Building or finding community that supports growth while honoring struggle makes transformation possible and sustainable.

Questions for Reflection:

1. **How do we know when a disruption is divine, and not just restlessness?**
2. **What does faith look like when there are no clear answers?**
3. **What does it mean to live with obligation in an age obsessed with freedom?**