

*Lech lecha* (go for/to yourself), the very first commandment given by HaShem to the very first Jew sets a line of demarcation between the pagan world and that which gradually develops into ethical monotheism. Leaving birthplace and familial home for a distant, unknown land is far more than a simple physical move. It marks a profound change of mindset, during which Abram and Sarai acquire a new identity along with their new names, or to put it in computer terms, they get a new operating system. There is little information about Abra(ha)m's background in our scriptures, but our sages have provided a wealth of stories to fill in the gaps. They tell us that from his youth, our first patriarch was different from the others. Although his father Terach initially uproots the family and sets off with them toward Canaan, it is Abram who takes up the cause when Terach, too rooted in paganism, abandons it and settles in Charan. According to Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, a seemingly irrelevant narrative about hostilities between two factions of minor kings in the middle of our parashah is in fact a pivotal episode: Amraphel, king of Shinar, is actually Nimrod, Ham's grandson through Cush. When Abram is still very young, Nimrod, a fire-worshiper, tries to lure him back to the paganism he is beginning to reject. The midrash describes Abram's wily attempts to counteract his father's persistent idol worship. "Rabbi Hiyya said: Terach was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away and left Abram to sell them in his place. A man came wishing to buy one. 'How old are you?' Abram asked. 'Fifty years,' he replied. 'Woe to such a man! You are fifty years old and would worship a day-old object!' At this he became ashamed and departed. On another occasion a woman came with a plate of flour to offer to the idols. ... So, he took a stick, broke the idols, and put the stick in the hand of the largest. When his father demanded to know what had happened, ... he rejoined '... the largest arose, took the stick and broke them.' ... Terach cried out 'Why do you mock me? Have they any knowledge?' Abram answered, 'Should your ears not listen to what your mouth is saying?' Thereupon Terach seized him and delivered him to Nimrod." Fed up with Abram's clever counterattacks pitting the elements fire, water, cloud, and wind against each other and proving them all unworthy of worship, Nimrod throws him into the fire. Abram's brother Haran, undecided whom to follow, waits for the outcome. When Abram emerges unscathed he sides with him, whereupon Nimrod throws him into the fire and he dies. (Parashah Noach: "And Haran died in the presence of his father, in the land of his birth, Ur-Kasdim." 11:28) Citing Midrash Tanchuma, Rashi defines the name Amraphel as *amar* (he said) *pol* (fall) into the fiery furnace. The midrash etymologically interprets the names of the enemy kings: Bera (because he was wicked in the sight of God and man), Birsha (because he had behaved evilly), Shinab (because he detested the Heavenly Father), Shember (because he has said 'I will ascend with a wing above the heights of the clouds). The king of Bela remains unnamed, but Zoar (צֶעַר), the other name of Bela, means small, insignificant, to insult; and in modern Hebrew it means sadness, remorse, or to disappoint. Aptly named, since Zoar, on the boundary between the lands of Abraham and Lot, was originally marked by HaShem for destruction. But it was spared when Lot, fleeing from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and afraid he could not reach the mountains, pleaded with HaShem to take refuge in Zoar (Genesis 19, next week). Both sides in this conflict represent the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. Indeed, Bera is king of Sodom, and Birsha is king of Gomorrah, cities so steeped in evil that HaShem has to destroy them. Earlier, Lot and Abram have amiably parted ways because their herds had grown so large that their herdsmen were quarreling amongst themselves and with the inhabitants of the land. Lot chooses the fertile Jordan plain and settles near Sodom. When he is taken captive after the five kings are defeated, Abram is forced to take sides in a conflict he otherwise would have avoided, fighting Amraphel-Nimrod in the process, even if it means temporarily helping Sodom. Hardly insignificant, these stories are actually the opening salvo in the struggle between paganism and monotheism. One small word (14:13) illustrates: "And the fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew – *ha-ivri* (of Lot's capture). Literally, *ha-ivri* means "the one who crossed over." Abram is the first person to be called *ivri* and this is the first appearance of that word in our scriptures. Abram, the non-conformist, stands firmly against prevailing custom, slowly, patiently leading by example. His kindness and concern for his fellow human beings are the polar opposite of the hedonistic world of Sodom and Gomorrah, and his belief in a single, unseen God shakes the pagan world to its foundations. This is precisely why Lot is captured. The midrash tells us that the kings actually thought they had captured Abram in order to prevent him from further spreading the idea of monotheism. This narrative is also the first mention in the Torah of the concept of war, and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah likens the four kings to the four epic battles of ancient Judaism: Babylon, Greece, Mede, and Rome. And the Amalekites, mentioned only in passing (14:7), will come to represent the struggle between the forces of good and evil, as the midrash suggests when it refers to this battle as the prototype for the battles that will mark the "end of days." We have outlived those ancient kingdoms, but the struggle between those who stand for the affirmation and protection of life and Amalek, i.e., those who consider life expendable, rages on, played out in never-ending, sickening variation all over the world. Entering a conflict between two opposing, but equally evil forces, Abram stands for the battle against tyranny and oppression. We are still a small people whose ideals and achievements often incur the wrath of others. But we will continue to uphold the legacy of our bold patriarch, who dared to be life-affirmingly different. *Am Yisrael chai!*

Shabbat shalom!