

As we read last week, Abraham is a descendant of Shem's son Eber. Literally translated, Shem was the father "of all who crossed over, from the root עבר – to cross over, giving rise to *ivri* – Hebrew. In the ensuing millennia we Jewish Semites, i.e., descendants of Shem through Isaak, have crossed many physical borders, on land, water, and in the air. Many were truly perilous, and it took immense courage and steady nerves to negotiate them. But today, baruch HaShem, most of us approach borders with nothing more than mild trepidation, which in airports usually gives way to irritation at the cancellations and delays, the long lines, the occasional surly official, and the ever changing rules about what is allowed in our hand luggage. Those of us who have entered East Bloc countries or heavily guarded places such as embassies and military installations have had to show detailed documentation and submit to thorough searches that may include mirrors wheeled under our cars. In short, physical borders are a nuisance at best and they can also be exceedingly stressful and dangerous. But there is another border that is equally fraught. It is not a physical, but rather, an ideological border: the line of demarcation between paganism and monotheism, in essence a paradigm shift. The ancient pagans worshiped tangible objects which they infused with the attributes of the gods they represented, while Abram and his followers began to worship, and to trust, an invisible, inscrutable, ineffable Divine Being. Unlike the porous borders between pagans and their gods, the border between HaShem and humanity is absolute and inviolable. In the beginning of our parashah Abraham, then still only Abram, obeys the call of HaShem to uproot himself and his family and journey to a land HaShem would show him. His father Terach, who may have sensed the presence of HaShem, had already relocated the family from their home in Ur-Kasdim to Kanaan, but entrenched in paganism, he only got as far as Charan, where he became a purveyor of idols. It was Abraham's son Isaak and grandson Jakob who drew part of Terach's family away from Charan and into the fold of monotheism. And it was Abraham's profound sense of identity that gave him the courage to embark on this journey and the resolve to persevere. As we read last week, those who built the tower of Babel were also seeking an identity, but their search ended in disaster because it was based on a false premise. Rather than searching within themselves, they sought identity in conformity, thereby negating, rather than discovering their own true identity. But what gave Abra(ha)m his sense of identity? Whereas our scriptures provide little background information about him, our midrashim tell of a precocious child who at the tender age of three observes nature and begins to wonder how the world with all its diversity, balance, and beauty originated and is maintained. One of the stories has him looking up at the sun and wondering if it were responsible. Then the sun sets and the stars and moon appear, and he wonders if they are the guiding force – until the night ends and the sun rises again. So he continues to wonder, but according to Maimonides, he is too immature at the age of three to do more than that. However, a spark has been kindled. We know the story in Midrash Bereshit Rabbah about him shaming people who came to his father's shop to buy idols, smashing all the idols, and telling his father that they had destroyed themselves fighting over food. When Terach berates him for mocking him, Abram points out the absurdity of selling idols in which he does not believe. Enraged, Terach hands him over to Nimrod, who unsuccessfully tries to force him to worship fire. Once again Abram prevails, but his brother Haran, who only decides to side with Abram after he emerges unscathed from Nimrod's fire, perishes in that same fire. Haran's sense of identity is too weak. Had Nimrod prevailed, he would have followed him. Abra(ha)m is completely convinced that the force governing the world cannot be among the plethora of idols that the people were worshiping. When HaShem's call: *lech lecha* – go for/to/into yourself – comes, he is ready to plumb the depths of his being to discover in his innermost self that which his innate sense of logic has proven to him time and again. Next week he will again hear *lech lecha*, this time to go with Isaak to make an offering his sense of logic utterly refuses to believe literally. HaShem has promised to make a great nation from this son and no one else, therefore a suitable offering will be forthcoming, even at the last possible moment. If not, his very identity is delusion, a possibility he steadfastly continues to reject, even if he occasionally argues with HaShem (as he will next week over Sodom). Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 39 finds Abram reluctant to leave his father: "If I go, the name of Heaven will be desecrated because of me, as people will say: He abandoned his father and left him in his old age. The Holy One of Blessing said: 'I exempt you from honoring your father and mother, but I do not exempt anyone else from honoring their father and mother. Moreover, I will have his death recorded before your departure'" (11:32) Hardly a mere ploy to avoid heeding HaShem's call, Abram's reluctance reveals his profound sense of righteousness. He is indeed worthy of leading the world from idolatry to HaShem. We are still engaged in that struggle. Today people search in the real world and online for identity and the meaning of life and succumb to the idols of power, prestige, possessions, and appearance. Some searches lead to addiction, others persist for decades without resolution. But like Elijah discovers on that mountain, the answer is not in the noisy outside world, but in the quiet murmuring deep within us. *Lech lecha* – go into yourself and listen closely. *Shema, Yisrael!*

Shabbat shalom!