

Parshat Lech Lecha: What Can a Seemingly Extra Word Teach Us?

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In this week's parsha, we encounter the origin story of the Jewish people. In a powerful display of faith, Abraham leaves his homeland and sets out for the Land of Israel, in response to the word of God. The story of the Jewish people begins with God's commandment to Abram (later renamed Abraham): "And God said to Abram go for yourself from your homeland and from your birthplace and from the house of your fathers to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). A significant detail in this phrasing catches the attention of Rashi and Ramban. In God's commandment to Abram, after the word *lech*, go, seemingly an extra word appears: *lecha*, for yourself. Through the lens of these commentaries, one small and potentially extra word speaks to the greater destiny of the Jewish people.

Biblical scholar James Kugel has coined the term "omnisignificance" to describe the Rabbinic methodology of ascribing significance to any seemingly extraneous words in the Torah. In the Talmud, some opinions ascribe meaning to every word, such as to the grammatical particle "et" or the second word of parallel phrases. In contrast, Rabbi Yishmael maintains that in some cases, "dibra Torah kilashon b'nei adam," that the Torah speaks in the language of humankind, and that there is no need to ascribe meaning to each extra word. Rashi, following the first approach, explores the meaning of "lecha."

Regarding the phrase "lech lecha," Rashi reads the extra word *lecha* as "for your own benefit, for your own good." Rashi refers to two midrashim that support this reading:

"There I will make of you a great nation while here you will not merit the privilege of having children (Rosh Hashanah 16b). Furthermore, I shall make known your character throughout the world (Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 3)."

From this extra word, Rashi, based on midrashim, learns that by heeding God's commandment, Abraham would be doing so for his own benefit, in that he would become a nation and have a well-established name throughout the world.

In his programmatic statement embedded in his commentary on Genesis 3:8, Rashi explains that he will only quote midrashim that are "meyashevet lamikra," in support of the text. Biblical scholar Sarah Kamin explains this statement to mean that Rashi only includes midrashim that fit with the context and linguistic features of the text. As per this statement, here Rashi maintains that the midrash's interpretation of God's statement fits with the Biblical text.

Ramban points out that, at first glance, the midrashic interpretation of *lecha* might seem unnecessary. Echoing the idea that "the Torah speaks like the language of humankind," Ramban writes, "ki mishpat

halashon ken,” that such are the rules of language. Tanakh in fact includes many examples of extraneous uses of the words “for yourself” or “for themselves,” he writes. For example, a verse in Shir Hashirim (2:11) states, “the rain is over and gone to itself.” Regarding the construction of the Tabernacle (Mishkan), sometimes God’s instructions to Moshe to create items in the Tabernacle include the term “for yourself,” and sometimes they do not. Ramban explains that the midrash needs to explain the extra uses of “yourself” in these verses, “she’ein hamelacha shelo,” because the work was not for Moshe himself.

In a way, here too, the work is not for Abraham. Abraham leaving his homeland for the Land of Israel hypothetically might have been a self-sacrificing act. Settling in Israel would serve to fulfill a divine imperative to create a Jewish nation and would benefit his descendants. However, for Abraham himself, this experience actually could have proven extremely grueling—the difficulty of leaving his homeland, his birthplace, and the land of his ancestors (as the second part of Genesis 12:1 emphasizes) to travel a far distance to a strange land, and to have to start all over in a new land. The Midrash teaches that God reassured Abraham that this act would benefit Abraham personally as well.

Crucially, Abraham’s descendants, the future Jewish people, would benefit from this journey as well. From then on, they would have their own homeland, their own birthplace, the land of their ancestors, a land to call their own, where they could carry out their own religious practices. Thousands of years later, the Land of Israel still has this same meaning to the Jewish people. The word lecha reminds us of the great and difficult sacrifice undertaken by Abraham to provide a future land to the Jewish people.

Rabbi Rina Krautwirth attended Barnard College, where she majored in Biology. She is a graduate of the Maharat Kollel and Drisha Scholar’s Circle. She also holds a Master’s degree in Modern Jewish History from YU and an MLIS from Queens College. She has served on the Young Leadership Board of the Israel Cancer Research Fund and interned at the American Museum of Natural History. She is interested in the intersection between science and Judaism and has written articles and spoken on the topic. Additionally, she has authored an article for Researchers Remember, an anthology of writings by children of Holocaust survivors.