

Lech Lecha

Lisette van Lieshout, Nov 5th, 2022

Today we read Lech lecha. But before I will say some words about the content, I want to share with you an impression of my last week. It has been a happy week, but also rather intense week. With 4 days of travelling. This is in order to reach Lamberene, where I spent only 3 days.

Lamberene is a middle-size town in the middle of the jungle of Gabon, a country on the west coast of Central Africa. Near this town, the Nobel prize winner Dr Albert Schweitzer opened in 1913 a hospital with his name on it and he lived and worked there for many years. He is also buried there, after his death in 1965. On the same campus as the hospital, German universities have now built an international research centre for tropical diseases - with around 100 staff members and many temporary researchers at work. During my stay I was shown around the well-equipped laboratories, had several meetings about the progress of the research projects, in particular the specific project I am involved in.

In these few days I met several scientists, mostly African, but also European, some Asian. Some of these scientists are in Lambarene for a project of only a couple of months, sometime for several years. Some with a more permanent position. But almost all were not born and raised in the region of Lambarene. Including the African researchers. They came from different places, from different countries. So they live and work in a rather isolated place, away from their own community, away from the place they were born and raised. Certainly during the two Covid years, with limited travel opportunities, that has not been easy for them.

Why do they do this? This fascinates me. Why, in general, do people move to totally different places from where they grew up. This fascination is probably because of the life story of my grandfather. He came from a rather poor family in Amsterdam. But he was bright and got a scholarship in the early 1930's to go to the Technical University in Delft. After finishing he went with my grandmother to Indonesia in 1937, as he found a job there as an engineer. He and my grandmother had never left the Netherlands before.

Back to Lambarene. Some of the scientists I met seem to be driven by economic perspectives. In particular for young and mid-career researchers it can be beneficial to have international work experiences. They see their displacement as temporary suffering for the benefit of their future career success.

But with others I noticed an intrinsic motivation. The drive to become an excellent scientist or clinicians. A felt an open mind towards new experiences and the willingness to learn from mistakes. And mistakes are easily made, in particular when people with different cultural background, with a different language, interact. But you can see how some of them grow, both professionally and mentally because of being exposed to a totally different environment.

I thought about Abraham and Lech lecha, while being there. And about the topic of my droshe. As with all parashiot of Bereshit, a range of topics which could be discussed. I could talk about:

- The intriguing conversation between God and Abram, where God promises him a great nation and prosperity, if he moves to Canaan.
- The fact that Abram is not honest to Pharaoh in Egypt about the fact that Sarai is his wife and not just his sister. And the interesting reaction of Pharaoh when he finds out.
- The division of the land between Abram and his nephew Lot and the confrontation with the four enemy kings when he rescues Lot
- Sarai, who stimulates Abram to marry her servant Hagar, as Sarai does not get pregnant. The jealousy and pestering that follows if Hagar does conceive. Hagar flees, but is convinced by an angel to return and she gives birth to Ishmael.
- The change of names, into Abraham and Sarah and the promise that at their old age they together will get a son who will be the source of a great nation
- The brit-milah. Abraham not only circumcises himself and Ishmael, but all men in his household.

I decided, inspired of what I saw this week, I would like to focus on chapter 12, in particular the very first sentence. Lech lecha – go for you –
And God said the Abram go for you - away from your land, from your birthplace and from the home of your father, to the land which I will show you.

This sounds mysterious – *the land I will show you*. Does Abram at this point not know the identity of the promised land? Also confusing, because we know from the previous chapter, that Abram already has left his birth place – which is Ur.

Last week at the end of Chapter 11 we read about Terah, the father of Abram. Terah, took his family from Ur to the land of Canaan. Simple as that. He took his family and went, without any conversation with God. And he stopped in Charan. No explanation is given why he stopped. And it is no secret that his original goal was the land of Canaan.

So what do we learn from these words???: *go for you - away from your land, from your birthplace and from the home of your father, to the land which I will show you.*

Moving to another place is not unique. Abram is one of so many human beings who at a certain age leave the place they grew up. Mostly these are young adults. Abram was 75 years old when he departed Charan. But his father died at the age of 205, so there is some suggestion of a different way of counting the years.

What is this urge of so many young adults to leave in a rather drastic way the house of their parents, the community they grew up, the region or country of which they speak the language and now the customs. To Abram, God made a promise. *I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing*. And as God promised, Abram became very successful.

Aviva Zornberg writes: *“For the first time a journey is undertaken not as an act of exile (Adam, Cain) or a quest for domination (the generation of Babel), but a response to a divine imperative”*

A journey undertaken as an act of exile is still happening. Still, so many people are forced to leave the place they were born. Forced, due to war, social and political instability, famine, diseases and drought. Because of life threatening discrimination due to their religion, identity, culture, sexual preferences.

According to the UNHCR, the UN refugee Agency, there are currently 103 million people displaced. Here in the UK and in the Netherlands we see only a small fraction of them. 53 million are internally displaced people. Low- and middle-income countries host 74 per cent of the world's refugees and other people in need of international protection. Displaced people, but it has not been their personal choice to leave, they have been forced by the situation. Mostly, these are whole communities, families, mothers, children. 41% of the currently displaced people around the world are below the age of 18 years.

Maybe Terah and his family moved away from Ur because he was forced by the local situation. His other son Haran, the father of Lot, died there. The reason is not explained. Was there political instability? Famine? Diseases? Flooding? Maybe he assumed to find a solution for his situation in the land of Canaan, but already noticed that Charan was good enough, compared to Ur.

So should we then interpret the story of Abram leaving his father's house as the biblical version of "the American dream" – new migrants who enter an unknown country with hardly any possessions and because they have a vision and a drive they become very successful. Highly economically motivated. When travelling in Africa I met so often poor young Africans, mostly males, with hopes and dreams that once they could live in EU or USA, they would be rich. How humiliating and painful is often the truth.

Abram is not driven by economic wealth. He has an intrinsic drive, you call it a divine. He is seen as the first person to realize that the world is ruled by **one** God; a God who demands righteous behaviour of humanity. A position different from his surroundings, different from the viewpoint of his father. And it takes enormous courage to break with the tradition you grew up with.

And Abram becomes successful, with progeny, riches and fame. But he also makes mistakes, specifically in his relationship with others. As we read in the portion of today. Time after time he argues, there is tension and miscommunication..... with Pharaoh, with Lot, with Sarah with Hagar. But in Torah we do not read anything about a quarrel with Terach.

This we read in the midrash. *Terach was a manufacturer of idols. One night Abram smashed all his father's idols. The next morning his father, incensed, demanded to know who had destroyed his property . "They attacked each*

other” Abram told him. “That is impossible cried Terah.”They are made of stone. There is no soul or spirit in them.” “Then why do you worship them?”Abram challenged him.

Lech lecha – go for **you** –. Rashi gives insight. He gives the explanation that this implies – Go for your own satisfaction and benefit, for there I will make you a great nation. Abram not only had to do as he was challenged, he had to do it for the right objective: *he had to do this for his own self.*

As a midrash explains *“go to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be”*

And this inner drive to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be, this bit of divine, that is what I notice in some of the displaced young scientists I met this week.

May Abram be a personal source of inspiration to all of us.

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