

## Lech Lecha: Abraham's Chesed Journey

*Degel Machaneh Ephraim – R. Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov (1748-1800)*

*Translation and commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

***[Avram] proceeded by stages from the Negev up to Beth El [to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai] (Gen.13:3).***

*O give thanks to the YHVH, for [God] is good; godly lovingkindness (chesed) fills the cosmos... [God] turns the wilderness into a pool of water, and dry ground into springs of water. There [God] settles the hungry; they build a place to settle in. (Psalm 107:1, 35)*

### **Degel Machaneh Ephraim:**

The Torah, in detailing Abraham's travels in this manner, offers us insight in light of the verse, "[God] turns the wilderness into pools of water, parched land into springs of water" (Ps. 107:35). The Shekhinah (as it were) receives God's outpouring of blessing by way of the conduits and pathways that are known to her. When there are righteous people in the world, then they, by means of their good deeds, their study and prayer, draw down love to the Shekhinah by means of these very conduits, so that she continuously receives boundless blessing. But the wicked (heaven forbid), through their deeds, bring about the opposite: "*the river dries up and is parched*" (cf. Job 14:11).

And, so it is, also, with each of us: according to our deeds we either close up the conduits of our souls or we open them and draw down, by means of the conduits and pathways of our souls, blessing for the Shekhinah. Therefore, tzaddikim (righteous ones) are called "love-people (*anshei chesed*)" (Is. 57:1) – for all of their deeds are directed to doing lovingkindness for the Shekhinah and with their souls.

Further, when a wicked person does *teshuvah* he opens up the wellspring of his soul which had the quality of a dry wasteland and desolation that would not produce fruit. Through his complete transformation he also transforms "*the wilderness into pools of water*" that produce fruit and draw down love (which is identified with water) to the Shekhinah. And, that which had previously been "parched land" he transforms into "springs of water."

...Now we can understand what secret is revealed in our verse. "*He proceeded by stages*": the whole purpose of Abraham's travels, and all of his works, was to spread his particular quality, love (*chesed*), "*from the Negev*", which is a "parched land." It had no water, that is: love. But Abraham, by means of his acts, made the land "*Beit El [house of God]*" – that lovingkindness should be revealed in it. And love is called "El," as in "*God's love never ceases (chesed El kol hayom)*" (Ps. 52:3). He drew down lovingkindness for the Shekhinah by means of his good deeds, opening up the lights of the wellsprings of his soul, thereby also opening up the conduits by which blessing pours out on the Shekhinah. Understand.

**Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Slater:**

There is something quite remarkable in this lesson. First we are told about the conduits and pathways by which the Shekhinah receives loving blessing from God. Then, we learn that the tzaddikim are able to bring these blessings to the world, and the Shekhinah, by means of the very same conduits and pathways. But, finally, we also learn that we have the capacity to open up conduits in our own souls, and thereby to bring down love to the Shekhinah. In a subtle manner the *Degel* shifts the location of the cosmic conduits from the supernal level (existing between the Shekhinah and God) to the inner-soul level of every one of us – including the *baal teshuvah*, the repentant sinner. By activating our own souls, by connecting with the light in our own souls, we serve the world and the Shekhinah. Our actions bring water to the parched lands of the Negev, transforming it into a world verdant with God's love all the time.

...What a wonderful lesson to illustrate the Hasidic view of the holistic integration of all existence, that there is “no inside and no outside”. The Shekhinah is the divine quality that connects the spiritual and the material. Thus, she both transmits the flow of blessing from above, but also relays our Torah, prayer and good deeds above... The conduits that water the Shekhinah are both in her and in us, and the experience of the Shekhinah being revived is in us. Our capacity to be “love-people” refreshes the Shekhinah, and sustains the world in wholeness and holiness.

We see this in the *baal teshuvah*: in their personal, inner transformation they transform their own parched land into watered territory, and thereby feed those who are hungry. Their inner change affects those outside of them. When we bring love and compassion to our own inner deserts, we ultimately freshen and revive the world. Whatever we hide from in our souls or psyches drains us of energy. Whatever is unacceptable, frightening, irritating, embarrassing, needy, causes constriction in our hearts. It is difficult to nurture healthy or positive qualities in a heart that is so constrained, so withered. When we direct our attention to the hidden deserts in our hearts and souls with compassion and love we expand the space available in which we can view the whole of our lives. We are able to acknowledge, with compassion and wisdom, what it is that we have done for which we may need to make amends – and so relieve ourselves of the burden of guilt, shame, and inner conflict. This releases the energy that had otherwise gone into these negative emotions, activating and giving power to our intention to indeed make amends, and then to do so. The flow of blessing is opened through love and compassion, extending beyond ourselves into the world.

...Our teacher encourages us to be “love-people” through our righteous deeds, our acts of service and devotion. Everywhere we go, in every interaction, in every time, we have the opportunity to connect with both those we serve and our own inner experience. Our love flowing freely – for ourselves, for others, for the world, for the Shekhinah – refreshes, vivifies and sustains all existence.

- ❏ **At a time when it is easy to feel like the “land is parched,” that Godly love is not flowing particularly freely – what might be our response? How can we bring compassion to ourselves, and to those around us, in a way that might actually help “freshen and revive the world”?**