



*Parshat Lech Lecha*  
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**Spiritual Fitness for the Journey That Lies Ahead**  
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This week we marked the two year yahrtzeit for our beloved rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Samuel Chiel. In his honor and memory, I want to start with a joke that Rabbi Chiel used for a sermon he delivered in the early 90s. He tells a story about a Yemenite Jew who at the age of 75 went to a broker to buy life insurance. The broker was incredulous.

You want to buy life insurance? How old are you?

I am 75.

75 is kind of old to be buying life insurance, don't you think?

75 is not too old! You sold my father a life insurance policy just last month.

Your father? Impossible.

Check your records.

The broker checks his records. Indeed, I did sell your father a policy last month. Come back Tuesday for a physical.

I can't come back on Tuesday.

You can't? Why not?

My grandfather is getting married.

Now the broker is really incredulous. Your *grandfather* is getting married next Tuesday? How old is he?

Oh, my grandfather is 120.

120??? Why is a 120 year old getting married? Why is he doing a thing like that at his age?

The Yemenite looks at the broker and says: “*Because his parents keep nudging him!*”

Rabbi Chiel told this joke to frame a sermon on aging. I want to use it for a different purpose.

The Yemenite family in this joke is full of blessing. The 75 year old is fit and healthy. His father is fit and healthy. His grandfather is fit and healthy. Indeed his great grandparents are still helicoptering his 120 year old grandfather. What a happy, full family.

That kind of blessing is alluded to at the beginning of our portion this morning. God connects abundant blessing to going on a journey. God tells Abraham: *Lech lecha*, Go on a journey. Go from the place where you are to the place I will show you. And when you get there, you can expect abundant blessing: “I will bless you. You shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you.” Blessing, blessing, blessing—if and when you go on that journey.

Most of us, at points in our lives, go on a journey, and when we do, we hope and expect we will find blessing when we get there.

We’re 18 and going off to college. Oh I hope it’s going to be amazing!

We’re in our early 20s and we move to a new city after college. Around here that almost always means New York. Life in the Big Apple is going to be so exciting.

We start a new job.

We’re about to get married, an expectant bride or groom.

We’re going to have our first child.

We’re mid-life. The journey continues. I am going to move to a new city, move to a new job, enter into a new relationship. Again, we expect blessing. Why else would we do it.

We retire. The journey continues. Please God blessings for the on golden pond years.

The beginning of the Abraham journey story captures that sense of optimism, of promise, of the excitement of new journeys.

There is only one problem. Abraham no sooner gets to Canaan, we're still in the first *aliyah*, he has not even unpacked yet, and he does not find blessings. He finds problems. Famine. No food to eat. Wandering. He is on the road again, now to Egypt in search of food. Travel is dangerous. Egypt is dangerous. Sarah, a beautiful woman, is vulnerable. I'm vulnerable, Abraham says, as your husband. They'll capture and ravage you. They'll kill me. Sarah, do me a big favor. When they come to take you, tell them you're my sister so at least they will spare me.

So much for high expectations. Abraham and Sarah go on that journey, as we all do, hoping for blessings. But those blessings do not materialize. This happens to us all in different ways. And when it does, what do we do?

I was thinking of Abraham and Sarah this week when I read an autobiography of a journey written by David Gregory, the former NBC newsman.

As he tells his story, he grew up in a home with a lot of pain. His mother was an alcoholic. His parents divorced. The one thing that kept him centered was a dream he had since he was a young boy to one day be a television journalist.

As a young man, through hard work, skill, and good luck, his career takes off. He is the NBC correspondent covering the White House. When Tim Russert dies of a heart attack, David Gregory becomes his successor, the moderator of Meet the Press.

It is late 2008, he is in his early 30s, his journey is filled with amazing blessing. People stop him on the street to thank him for the show. He has access to anybody and everybody. A

few weeks into his role, President Obama is elected, and there is David Gregory, moderating the story of our nation's first black president. Blessings, abundant blessings.

There is only one problem. Our journeys never go quite as we hope. Five years later, his ratings have slipped. Rumors are circulating that he is in trouble. As they say in television land, the blood was in the water. One summer day, on the way to pick up his three children—Max, Ava and Jed—at Camp Merrowvista in rural New Hampshire, he gets a text that he has been quite publicly and unceremoniously fired from his dream job just as he drives into the camp to pick up his kids.

What happens when our journey does not work out? From his failure, David Gregory learns some crucial things.

Losing his dream job made him focus on what he really loved and valued in life, what is truly at his core. Two things mattered to him most: his work and his family, and he now had an even deeper appreciation for his wife and three children. *When we find disappointment on our journey, can we learn from the experience to clarify what we care most about?*

Losing his job also made David Gregory realize something very painful. Most people do not care. Mostly what he hears is silence. Most of his work colleagues move on and are utterly indifferent to his pain. That makes him question what kind of person and colleague he was:

I should have been the kind of colleague whom people wanted to stick their necks out for, to stand up for. But...I don't think I was that guy for many people...When I left NBC, what stung more than the outright negativity was the indifference shown by so many.

Gregory is left asking himself how he can grow as a person and colleague so that he can inspire love and caring which he evidently did not inspire. *When we find a setback on our journey, can we learn from the experience to clarify how we can learn and grow to become a better human being?*

As part of his effort to become a better human being, David Gregory was determined to deepen his spiritual search. When he was the moderator of Meet the Press so much of his self-worth was tied up in ratings, in the buzz that the interview that week generated. He became a buzz junkie. After losing his job, he realized he needed a stronger spiritual dimension. David Gregory is Jewish, his wife Beth is Christian, and they agreed to raise their three children as Jews. But he now came to appreciate he needed to understand his own faith tradition far more deeply in order for him to transmit it to their children. He participated in a Bible study group. He met with rabbis, priests, and ministers. He attended varieties of religious services. He experimented with new rituals like putting on tefilin for daily prayer. In the depths of his anguish, he found comfort from the blessing of his teacher Erica Brown, a prayer from Isaiah, speaking in the name of God: “I have made you, and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.” *When the world knocks us down, can we develop a spiritual dimension, an openness to the invisible other, that will lift us up?*

Which leads to the title of his book. One day, when he was interviewing President George W. Bush in the oval office, the President asked him: Gregory, *how’s your faith?* Thus title of his book: How’s Your Faith? Gregory takes this question to mean that faith is *not* something that you either have or you don’t have. Faith is not static. Rather, faith is something we can work on. Something we can get better at. Like physical fitness. We can be more or less physically fit depending on how much we work at it. Like healthy nutrition. We can eat more or less healthy depending on the choices we make. So too, faith can be a work in progress.

For David Gregory, faith is about clarifying his core values. When he is no longer interviewing kings and presidents, who is he, and what does he live for. Faith is about becoming a better human being. How can he be more caring so that he inspires love rather than

indifference? Faith is about a relationship with God which he develops through study, prayer, family rituals like Shabbat dinner. Faith is a muscle that gets stronger when we use it and weaker when we don't.

What's true for David Gregory is true for us. Our faith is not static. Our faith can also be a work in progress. Our faith is a muscle that gets stronger when we use it. We strengthen our faith when we clarify what really matters to us; when we set out to become better human beings in the ways we need to improve; when we aspire towards a connection with the divine through learning, praying, and doing mitzvot.

We will need that faith for our journey. For as Abraham learned on his journey, as David Gregory learned on his journey, as we learn on ours, often we cannot control what happens *to* us. There *is* an unpredictable quality to life.

But we can make ourselves more strong, more resilient, more spiritually fit, for the journeys and bumpy rides that lie ahead. Shabbat shalom.