VOTING WITH YOUR FEET
Parashat Lech Lecha
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The existential philosopher Kierkegaard famously observed, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Often the same is true of Torah. Sometimes to understand what is happening now you have to know what has happened before.

In this week's Torah Portion Avram (his and his wife Sarai's names will not become Abaraham and Sarah till later) receives a call from God to leave everything that he knows, his land, his birthplace, his father's house and go to a place that God will show him. Commentators point out that the command to go, *Lech Lecha* is not just get up and go, but rather go for your self.

Lech Lecha - break free from everything that makes a claim on you and strike out on your own. The command is not so much about where he must go but rather what he must leave. Avram doesn't know where the journey will take him; he only knows that he can't stay here. Leave everything behind God tells him - except your wife and nephew – and go make a name for yourself. Of course, Avram has a name, but its his father's and by telling him to leave it behind it is clear that the real instruction is: don't associate or be defined by these people any more , even if they are your family – you must be your own man.

The command to leave his family and his community seems counter to the Jewish imperative *Al tifrosh min hatzibur* - Don't distance yourself from the community (Avot 2:5).
The strength of our people these so many years is that we have banded together as a family and a tribe and yet the model of our patriarch Avram at this moment is just the opposite. It begs the question; how do you know when to leave a group?

To find Avram's answer we must look backward to the story just prior to this moment of individual distinction. In the chapter before we encounter the story of collective disgrace in the Tower of Babel. It was then that human beings joined together in a monumental and misguided building project that showed the collective power (and folly) of humanity. The individual counted for little; indeed, the midrash teaches the building bricks were more important than people; what the majority deemed important became everybody's standard. (Midrash Yashar Noah)

Where Avram shows the courage of his conviction to break free of the spiritual enslavement of his family, the tower builders place greater importance on conformity. For them the greater value is to act as one. Speak as one. Think as one. How many monuments real and figurative have been built because no one had the courage to ask why, let alone lay down their tools and walk away?

Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great 19th philosopher and scholar wrote, "Every individual is directly responsible to God for his/her personal conduct. If it becomes necessary, if the values practiced by the majority are not ones that the individual believes are proper, then the individual must go alone, his own way, with God."

The example of Avram reminds us that community is not a value in and of itself, rather community is the product of shared values. Avram's father was an idol worshiper; indeed, it was the family business – when he could no longer subordinate his intellect to his family's immature theology he had to leave them or risk losing himself.

Avram's courage reminds us that we must be willing and able to do the same; to go left when everyone else is going right, to speak up when we are surrounded by silence – to vote with our feet.

How could we have survived today as a people had we not received from Avram the courage to be a minority when our values demand it of us? Sometimes that courage exacts a heavy price. We like Avram must step away from our community, our home, our family and there may not be anyone to greet us on the other side. Having the courage to stand up when everyone else is sitting down can be one of the loneliest feelings in the world. But it can also be as it was for Avram - life affirming. In leaving what he knew what was comfortable and familiar, he found himself, his values, his voice, and his purpose.

As a reward for Avram's courageous independence, God informs him, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing." (Gen 12:2) A nation of individual thinkers, of non-conformists, of what the great social justice advocate Leonard Fein called, 'nudniks for justice'. That is the blessing of being a Jew and the message of *lech lecha*. Sometimes when you walk out of a group you don't agree with you stand alone… but sometimes your act of courage is the first step of a parade that follows behind you.