

PARSHAT LECH-LECHA

4 - 10 Cheshvan 5786
26 October - 1 November
2025

Torah: Genesis 12:1-17:27
Haftorah: Isaiah 40:27-41:16

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

**Positive Mitzvah 241
Damage Caused by Fire**

We are commanded regarding the laws [of liability] that apply if a person sets a fire [that damages another's property].

**Positive Mitzvah 238
Damage Caused by a Ditch**

We are commanded regarding the laws [of liability] that apply if a person digs a pit [and another's animal falls into it and is injured].

WAS ABRAHAM HUNGRY FOR RICHES?

After Abraham won the war against the Four Kings and rescued his nephew Lot, G-d told him: *"Fear not, Abram; I am your shield; your reward is exceedingly great."*

Now, if someone is told not to be afraid, it is fair to assume that they are showing signs of fear. This is especially true when the speaker is G-d, Who is all-knowing and was surely aware of Abraham's state of mind.

Thus, Rashi comments that indeed Abraham worried that, "Perhaps I have already received reward for all my righteous deeds." G-d reassured him: "As for your concerns about receiving your reward, fear not, your reward is exceedingly great."

Why Did Abraham Care?

The idea that a person of Abraham's stature would be concerned about "what's in it for him" stretches credulity. We are told to "be like a servant who serves his master without being motivated by attaining reward." We should act righteously because it is the right thing to do, not in order to receive recompense.

It is especially surprising to say that Abraham, of all people, was concerned about his reward, when Maimonides singles out Abraham as a paragon of serving G-d "purely out of love." Abraham, Maimonides says, was the perfect example of someone who "occupies himself in the study of Torah and fulfillment of mitzvot ... not for any extraneous thing in the world ... nor to inherit any benefits, but does what is true because it is true." Why, then, would Abraham be concerned about using up his reward?

It must be, the Rebbe suggests, that Abraham was not interested in the reward itself, but in something that the reward signified.

Wealthy Then Wise

To help us understand, the Rebbe analyzes a highly perplexing story found in the Zohar on our verse:

Rabbi Abba once announced that anyone seeking wealth in this world and long life in the World to Come should study Torah. A bachelor named Yossi declared, "I would like to toil in Torah so I may attain riches." Rabbi Abba agreed, and titled the man Rabbi Yossi, Master of Wealth and Honor. After a while, the man returned to Rabbi Abba, asking, "Where are my riches?" Rabbi Abba was most displeased and wanted to pray that the man die for pursuing Torah study for the wrong reasons, whereupon he heard a heavenly voice saying, "Don't punish him; one day he will become a great person."

The story continues with a wealthy man who approached Rabbi Abba, offering to share his wealth with someone who will learn Torah on his behalf. Rabbi Abba designated Rabbi Yossi for this purpose, and the man gave him a cup of fine gold. Rabbi Yossi would toil over the Torah's rich and varied texts, and the benefactor made him wealthy.

Eventually, Rabbi Yossi became a sage and realized that the value of Torah is far greater than any material wealth. He wept that he had exchanged the merit of his Torah study for money. Rabbi Yossi summoned the wealthy benefactor and told him, "Take back your wealth and share it among the orphans and the poor."

The Questions

Many aspects of this story seem problematic. Firstly, why are we told that he was a bachelor? How is that relevant? Second, why does the fact that he would one day turn into a great man spare him punishment for his wrongdoing at the time? Does one get let off for bad behavior now because of potential good behavior in the future? Conversely, what was so terrible about the young man's approach that his teacher wished to pray for his demise? Are we not taught that "A person should always study Torah and practice mitzvot even not for its own sake, because doing it for the wrong reason will lead him to do it for the right motivation." So, where is the problem?

Above all, what is most troubling is the criticism towards Rabbi Yossi for coming to study to gain wealth, when Rabbi Abba had clearly announced that anyone seeking wealth should come to study! It seems that Rabbi Abba was quite OK with Rabbi Yossi wanting riches, so much so that he nicknamed him Master of Wealth and Honor. Why, then, when he actually came looking for the wealth he had been promised did it cause such a backlash?

The Source of Success

The Rebbe explains that when Rabbi Abba promised riches in return for Torah study, he meant that G-d would send the wealth. He never considered that someone would demand it from him directly. It is not acceptable to use Torah as a self-serving tool, as a route to profit and personal gain – what the rabbis termed "as an axe with which to chop." When Rabbi Yossi first approached Rabbi Abba demanding to see his wealth, that was crossing a red line.

There is a key exception to this rule, and that is if a person uses their Torah knowledge to secure a job to provide for their family. But every other type of usage of the Torah for financial gain or other personal benefit is proscribed.

That is why the Zohar points out that at the time Rabbi Yossi was a bachelor, making it clear that he had no family to support. His demand for payment from Rabbi Abba was thus wholly inappropriate.

So, where was this intense desire for wealth coming from?

Rabbi Abba thought it was because Rabbi Yossi was degenerate. But a heavenly voice informed him otherwise. He was told that Rabbi Yossi was destined for greatness, and that was the cause of the innate drive for success. The outer form that this potential for greatness assumed was a hunger for wealth, but what was really animating the desire for riches was his latent greatness.

Within his external motive of earthly riches was an instinct that he was supposed to achieve true spiritual greatness. It was coming out wrong, but it encapsulated something worthy and true. According to halacha, it is obligatory upon the community to ensure its leaders are affluent, such that Rabbi Yossi's appetite for wealth was in essence a reflection of his soul's urge to reach great leadership heights.

Reward as Recognition

Now, back to Abraham. He was not looking for reward because he sought the benefits of his good deeds, but because that was a key way for him to judge whether his life's work was worthwhile. Material success would serve as a tangible indication of his spiritual accomplishments.

He was looking for confirmation that his reward was still forthcoming as reassurance that he was doing something right. With both Rabbi Yossi and Abraham, it turns out it wasn't the reward itself that held appeal, but what getting the reward signified.

Had Abraham thought that his reward had been lost, he would have interpreted that as a condemnation of his life choices. Now that he was assured it was still intact, he received the validation he sought. It was not the recompense that held meaning for him, but what such recognition said about the virtue and correctness of his path.

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RABBEINU JONAH OF GERONA

Gerona, a small city in Catalonia, Spain, was known as a "mother-city in Israel," because it was the birthplace of some of the greatest Jewish scholars in the Diaspora, whose writings and teachings still serve as beacons of light. Among the



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famous sons of Gerona we will mention the famous blind Talmudist Rabbi Isaac Sagi-Nahor; the even more famous Rabbi Zerachiah Halevi, author of *Sefer Ha-imoor*, which he began to write at the age of nineteen; then there was the Ramban (Nachmanides), Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman; finally we will mention also the RaN, Rabbenu Nissim ben Reuben. These are names which are well known to every Yeshivah student. It was in this city also that Rabbenu Jonah was born.

Rabbenu (lit. "Our Rabbi") Jonah was a cousin of Nachmanides. His father Abraham must have been one of the most prominent members of the community. Young Jonah received his earliest education in his hometown. While many Jewish scholars of those days devoted part of their time to secular studies, Rabbenu Jonah devoted his entire attention to the study of the Talmud. He wandered through the cities of Southern France and the Provence, then the main centers of the Tosaphists (famous Talmudic commentators and exponents), increasing his Talmudic knowledge daily. Finally he settled in Montpellier, where he became the disciple of Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham.

Rabbenu Jonah's association with Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier, coupled with his upbringing and training, had a profound influence upon Rabbenu Jonah and determined his entire life and viewpoint. For his teacher Rabbi Solomon was the leader of the opposition to the philosophical writings of the Rambam (Maimonides). Rabbenu Jonah wholeheartedly joined his teacher in a determined effort to combat the influence of philosophy and secular culture on the education of Jewish youth. These great leaders in Israel viewed with concern and dismay the evil effects of assimilation on the Jewish youth of Spain and France, and blamed the lack of proper education for it. For it had become in vogue for Jewish youths to delve into the study of philosophy before they had been adequately prepared for it. Some Jewish philosophers had also made attempts to reconcile Divine religion with man-made philosophy, or to "rationalize" (explain with reason) where it was necessary to have faith, for the human mind is so limited and cannot always explain many of the commandments and precepts which were given by G-d. These great leaders in Israel therefore felt that even the philosophical writings of the great Maimonides could be dangerous to Jewish youth.

Thus it was that Rabbenu Jonah together with another disciple of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier, whose name was Rabbi David ben Saul, joined their teacher in proclaiming a ban (4998, or 1232) against all those who studied the "Moreh Nevuchim" and other philosophical writings of Maimonides. The whole Jewish

world was then divided into two violently opposing camps, for and against the philosophical views of Maimonides. Even the Jewish community in Montpellier was thus divided. Nachmanides, Rabbenu Jonah's cousin, tried to exercise a moderating influence in the conflict, but it had flared up to such heights, that Maimonides' works were publicly burned in Paris by Franciscan and Dominican priests who took advantage of the situation and burned also many Talmudic works at the same time (5002, or 1242).

This unfortunate spiritual struggle, which became a tragedy for the Jewish people in those days, made Rabbenu Jonah bitterly regret his strong stand against the writings of the saintly Maimonides. He vowed to make amends by travelling from city to city, where he would publicly declare his repentance, until he would reach the Holy Land. There he would pray for forgiveness at the grave of Maimonides in the presence of a congregation of ten Jews for seven consecutive days, as prescribed by Jewish law in cases where a deceased person is to be asked for forgiveness.

Rabbenu Jonah started on his trip south. He passed through Barcelona, and finally came to Toledo. There one of his Talmudic lectures had made such an impression upon the Jewish community, that they begged Rabbenu Jonah to stay on to teach the young students at the Yeshivah. Rabbenu Jonah stayed, and devoted his attention to teaching the students, and to his writings. But in the year 5023 (1263) Rabbenu Jonah died of a strange illness, and many of his former opponents claimed that it was a Divine punishment for failing to fulfill his vow.

The death of this great teacher was greatly mourned by the Jewish people. Nachmanides wrote a special lamentation, entitled "Leket Tziuni," to commemorate the passing of the great man whom the Jewish people reverently termed "Hachasid," the pious.

As a Talmudic scholar Rabbenu Jonah became famous by his commentaries on Alfasi, (RIF) which were collected and edited by his disciples. Only his commentary on the tractate of Berachoth is extant, however. Numerous notes of his of Halachic interest are quoted by his outstanding disciple, Rabbi Solomon ben Adret (RaSHBA). Also, the "Shitah Mekubetzeth" of Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi contains some of his "Chidushim," (original Talmudic deductions). Rabbenu Jonah also wrote commentaries on "Pirkei Aboth" and "Mishlei" which were met with wide acclaim.

But most important for us are his great ethical works, upon which his greatest fame rests. These works, "Shaarei Teshuvah" (Gates of Repentance), "Sefer Hayirah" (Book of Piety) and "Iggereth Hateshuvah" (Epistle on Repentance) exercised great influence upon Jews throughout the ages. It is said that Rabbenu

Jonah wrote these works to atone for his earlier attacks against the works of Maimonides. But whatever caused Rabbenu Jonah to write these and his other works on ethics and morality, we must feel deeply grateful to him, for they have ever served as a source of boundless inspiration to all those who seek simple piety, modesty and sincerity, in the worship of G-d, and strive to a higher level of religious and moral living.

LECH-LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Lech Lecha," means "Go Forth" and it is found in Genesis 12:1.

G-d speaks to Abram, commanding him, "Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." There, G-d says, he will be made into a great nation. Abram and his wife, Sarai, accompanied by his nephew Lot, journey to the land of Canaan, where Abram builds an altar and continues to spread the message of a one G-d.

A famine forces the first Jew to depart for Egypt, where beautiful Sarai is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram escapes death because they present themselves as brother and sister. A plague prevents the Egyptian king from touching her, and convinces him to return her to Abram and to compensate the brother-revealed-as-husband with gold, silver and cattle.

Back in the land of Canaan, Lot separates from Abram and settles in the evil city of Sodom, where he falls captive when the mighty armies of Chedorlaomer and his three allies conquer the five cities of the Sodom Valley. Abram sets out with a small band to rescue his nephew, defeats the four kings, and is blessed by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem).

G-d seals the Covenant Between the Parts with Abram, in which the exile and persecution (Galut) of the people of Israel is foretold, and the Holy Land is bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage.

Still childless ten years after their arrival in the Land, Sarai tells Abram to marry her maidservant Hagar. Hagar conceives, becomes insolent toward her mistress, and then flees when Sarai treats her harshly; an angel convinces her to return, and tells her that her son will father a populous nation. Ishmael is born in Abram's eighty-sixth year.

Thirteen years later, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham ("father of multitudes"), and Sarai's to Sarah ("princess"), and promises that a son will be born to them; from this child, whom they should call Isaac ("will laugh"), will stem the great nation with which G-d will establish His special bond. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his descendants as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you." Abraham immediately complies, circumcising himself and all the males of his household.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 4 Cheshvan 5786 - 26 October 2025 **Purim Algiers (1541)**

In 1541, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of Spain, led a fleet in an attempted attack against Algiers. Miraculously, a storm capsized many of the attacking boats, resulting in the expedition's failure and rescuing the city's Jewish community from Spanish anti-Semitic rule. In commemoration of the miracle, the local

community marked 4 Cheshvan as a "minor Purim," omitting the penitential Tachanun prayers and partaking of festive meals.

Thursday, 8 Cheshvan 5786 - 30 October 2025 **Passing of Rabbi Jonah of Gerona (1263)**

Rabbi Jonah was a thirteenth-century scholar who lived in Spain. Although originally opposed to Maimonides' philosophical works (most notably, his *Guide for the Perplexed*), he later changed his

views, and even vowed to travel to Maimonides' gravesite to posthumously beg for forgiveness. (He indeed began the long journey but passed away before completing it.)

Rabbi Jonah authored *Shaarei Teshuvah* (an ethical work on repentance), a commentary on Rabbi Isaac Al-Fasi's halachic compendium, and a commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers*, among other works. He passed away on 8 Cheshvan 5023 (1263).