

## THE WORLD'S FIRST REFUGEE

A commentary on *Parashat Lech Lecha*  
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In *Parashat Lech Lecha* Avraham receives a divine command to leave his home and country and uproot his family to the new and unknown land of Canaan. In return Avraham is promised he will become the founding father of the Hebrew nation – a considerable reward for daring to make such a significant move:

‘And the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name and [you shall] be a blessing” (Bereshit 12:1-2)

When they finally arrive at the land of Canaan they face a great famine that forces them to uproot again and make another journey to Egypt. And later on Avraham leaves Egypt again and travels back to Canaan.

It is not easy to leave all that is familiar and safe and take a journey into the unknown, let alone three times. This is a story of a young family that is forced to travel, experiencing a journey of uncertainty yet they do it willingly, driven by the belief in G-d and guided by the promise of greatness.

For over 60 million refugees today who have fled their homes there is no promise of greatness, of ‘leading a nation’. But rather a simpler belief their journey will lead them to a life of safety. That is what has driven over a million Syrian refugees to make the dangerous journey in difficult weather conditions, and often at the mercy of human traffickers, to reach Europe where they seek refuge.

When in Spring of 2013, Faez al Sharaa understood that life in his hometown of Daraa, in

southern Syria, was becoming too dangerous with daily fears of dying in the civil war, he and his wife packed their bags with clothing, photos from their wedding and a few keepsakes and left their home and their life behind.

Like Avraham and his family, Faez’s and many other families have left their homes, their culture and all that is familiar to embark on a journey to the unknown and to seek refuge in a new and safe place. And like Avraham who had to uproot his family again, many of the refugees reaching the shores of Europe are forced to continue to seek refuge when one, two or even three countries refuse to accept them.

Throughout our history, war, conflict and natural disasters have forced people to uproot their families and start a journey if not to the ‘promised land’ then at least to a ‘safe land’. Avraham’s journey teaches us that although we are now landlords, the inhabitants of the land, we should always remember that we too were once strangers seeking refuge, and of the obligation we have to treat the other, the way we would have liked to be treated.

One of the most repeated tenets in the Torah is the commandment: ‘When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for

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*you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d.”* (Leviticus 19:33-34). This tenet is repeated in different versions 36 times in the Torah, and stresses the important principle for human society to provide safety and protection to the stranger, and is as relevant today as it was then.