

Name Recognition – Parashat Lech Lecha
Rav Hanan Schlesinger

We can only find ourselves when we are not looking. This is one of the more profound paradoxes of life. Emphasis on the self leads us farther and farther from personal fulfillment. Happiness and a sense of ultimate worth and meaning are most often found by those who devote themselves to higher causes. Those who dedicate themselves to themselves, too many times end up with nothing but a profound inner void.

It's not hard to figure out why: Simply put, meaning is a matter of context. Just like the real texture of a word's meaning is found only in the framework of a sentence, and a sentence's deepest impact is only when harmoniously integrated into a paragraph, and so forth, such is true as well for the individual human being. We must have a context to live a truly meaningful life. We must be a thread in a larger tapestry, a note in a melodious symphony. Otherwise we are alone, like driven leaves battered in the wind, yearning for a tree to cling to.

In last week's Torah portion, the misguided men of the Generation of the Dispersion came together to build a tower, proclaiming "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4). They did not succeed, but were rather scattered throughout the earth, and their names are unknown. Name recognition, power and fame bring in their wake failure and destruction when they are pursued as ends unto themselves. The arrogant goal of the pursuit of renown will never spawn satisfaction and fulfillment. When I am only for myself, I am really against myself, for the meaning of life will only be discovered in the larger context. The tree which grows in order to tower over the forest will find itself towering over the forest...alone and disconnected.

While an earlier generation pursued self-aggrandizement through the Tower of Babel, the patriarch Abraham, in this week's Torah reading, tirelessly endeavors only to

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publicize the name of God. He gave up all that he had and accepted upon himself the divine missive to leave his land and his kin and his father's house. What did he do upon completion of his journey from Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel? "He built there an altar to God and called on the Name of God" (Genesis 12:8). Whether the verse means that our forefather Abraham called upon the name of God in prayer, or that he proclaimed the name of God to all those around him, the contrast with his predecessors could not be more striking: While they were concerned with their own names, Abraham is concerned with God's name. He abandons himself to the big picture, to the Painter of the tapestry of all of life, to the good of all humanity. And through pursuing the glory of God's name, his own name becomes great, he finds himself. The divine promise is bestowed upon him: "I will bless you, and make your name great" (Genesis 12:2).



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