



The Pre-history of Shpilkes

Throughout history, Jewish people have wandered from place to place, whether coerced or not. We call it Shpilkes. Abraham had it too. But why did he disobey G-d's command to settle in the Land of Israel?

A Jewish Condition

“Shpilkes.”

It is one of those famous Yiddish words that every Jew, Yiddish speaker or not, is acquainted with. In English we call it ‘pins and needles’ or ‘antsy pants.’ It means someone who cannot sit still for a significant length of time.

It is not just a Yiddish word. Shpilkes is also a condition that Jews suffer from. Jews have never stayed anywhere for very long. We are always on the go, moving, traveling, or touring. Some even go out into the middle of the ocean on cruise ships because dry land – apparently – is not big enough for them.

Jewish communities also suffer from shpilkes. In every city in the United States, Jewish communities constantly move from one neighborhood to another and children always leave the communities where they were raised and move to a more modern one.

Why Did Abraham Abandon Ship?

It seems that shpilkes is a hereditary condition that we inherited from our father Abraham. The name of this week's parsha is “Lech Lecha,”

where G-d commands Abraham to leave his home and to travel to an unknown location, and Abraham embarks on a long journey until he finally reaches the Holy Land.

When Abraham finally settles down in the land of Canaan (later to be renamed Israel), famine struck the land and Abraham changed his plans. He took his wife Sarah and traveled down to the land of Egypt.

All the sages ask the same question on this story:

“How could Abraham leave the land of Israel, seemingly violating G-d’s instructions?”

In fact, Ramban (Nachmanidies) goes as far as to say that “by leaving the land to which G-d had sent him, Abraham committed a sin, for G-d would have saved him from death in the famine. As a result of his decision, it was decreed that his descendants would be exiled in Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh.” As the first Jew he should have placed his trust in G-d that He would sustain him even during the famine.

This really is a very difficult question. How could Abraham have left Israel because of a famine? Chassidim who were instructed by the Rebbe to move to faraway place to spread Yiddishkeit would never desert their communities in times of danger. Even today, there are Shluchim who live in very dangerous places like Morocco, Tunisia and Argentina.

Whenever there is a national disaster, whether tsunami, hurricane and war, the local Shluchim make every effort to assist the people of the ravaged areas, and work day and night trying to ease the plight of their fellow countrymen. To tuck tail and run would never enter their minds! It is something we surely wouldn’t expect of Abraham.

In fact, this famine wasn’t necessarily life threatening. As we will read in a few weeks, there was a famine of the same magnitude in the days

of Isaac. When Isaac wanted to leave Israel and go down to Egypt as Abraham did, G-d revealed Himself to Isaac and said, "Don't go down to Egypt." So, Isaac remained in Israel - and he didn't die; he survived the famine while remaining in the Holy Land. The famine in the days of Abraham wasn't a life or death situation. Perhaps it was like the Depression of the thirties or even somewhat worse, but did it warrant transgressing G-d's command?

Abraham's Chabad Center

The obvious conclusion is that Abraham must have had a good reason to go to Egypt.

We find that after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham moved to Gerar. Rashi explains that since these great cities had been destroyed and there were no more travelers passing by Abraham's tent, Abraham felt compelled to leave.

Abraham lived his life solely for the sake of spreading the belief in the one G-d. Whenever he felt that his present place was not conducive to fulfilling his life's mission, he would immediately begin searching for a better place.

The Midrash relates that Abraham's method of teaching people was through food. When people would pass by, Abraham would invite them into his tent and feed them a luscious meal and as they sat and ate Abraham would speak to his guests about G-d. Often, his guests would be convinced by the time they finished eating. (If not, there were other ways of persuading people.)

In other words, Abraham's Chabad center revolved around food. Clearly, not much has changed; even today, food or refreshments are served at business meetings and any other sort of encounter. The best setting to influence people is over a good meal, because a full stomach equals an open heart.

This explains why Abraham moved to Egypt. When famine struck and there wasn't enough food available to continue his work properly, he immediately went in search of a new place to carry on his holy work.

Abraham had another reason for going specifically to Egypt. At that time, Egypt was the center of learning and philosophy. It was specifically there that Abraham and Sarah wanted to try spreading the concept of belief in G-d, to try and break through the heretical beliefs of (what was then) the "modern world." Abraham was on a mission to 'conquer Egypt.'

The Journey of Life

Since then, Jews have constantly been on the move, never staying in one place for too long. It is in our genes from Abraham, who was constantly on the move, going from place to place spreading G-dliness in the world. And along with the shpilkes, we inherited the reason for the shpilkes. People think that they travel around the world for work or pleasure. The truth is, however, that G-d wants His G-dliness to be spread throughout the world, so He orchestrates reasons for Jews to travel, and then He arranges that the traveling Jew should meet a local Jew who needs some help doing a mitzvah or encouragement in his Judaism in general.

This concept gave birth to the custom of giving '*Shliach Mitzvah Gelt.*' Before someone leaves on a journey, we give him a dollar or two to give to charity at his destination. Thus, the entire trip becomes a mission to spread G-dliness.

In reality, life as a whole is one long journey. Therefore, every morning when a Jew wakes up, he must know that he is a Shliach Mitzvah - he has a mission to influence another Jew to do a mitzvah.

There is another Jewish tradition we do on travels. We recite Tefilat Haderech - a prayer that G-d should deliver us to our destination

safely. This applies to the journey of life as well; we must constantly pray that G-d direct us along the correct path and that He grant us success in fulfilling our mission.