

**Parsha Lech Lecha - Why Jewish History Begins With Avraham
and Not Shem**

By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

We are all familiar with Avraham Avinu as the first Jew. We are familiar with the midrash about Avraham being thrown into the fiery furnace in defiance of the idol worship of his time. He taught the world about Hashem being the only g-d, an infinite being and not a statue of wood and stone. He built up a following of monotheists. Even those who were still worshipping idols accepted him as a great sage. It is easy to see why he has such an important place in our history and identity. What is not so clear, however, is why Shem the son of Noach was not given a similar place in our religious order.

What were Shem's great accomplishments? The Torah tells us [Bereshis 9:18-29] that when Noach got drunk and uncovered himself in his tent, it was Shem who led the way in preserving Noach's dignity. While the Torah Shem and Yefes took a garment to cover their father, Chazal note that the verb Veyekach to take is written in the singular form to emphasize that it was really Shem who was motivated to place this garment over their father. Yefes went along because he felt it would 'appear to be the proper thing to do.' Yefes was only motivated by appearance of decency and morals. Of course, Cham, who according to the simple reading was mocking his father but according to the midrashim did far worse things, exhibited the worst behavior. As a result of this incident, Cham's descendent Canaan was condemned to slavery to his brothers, Yefes would merit being part of the building of the second Bais Hamikdash through his descendent Koresh the king of Persia, and Shem would carry Hashem's message to the world. We see from Chazal that Shem and his great-grandson Ever started the first batai midrashim. These batai midrashim were where Yaakov went to later on in his life and were important for Yaakov to receive certain mesorahs from the beginning of time. Furthermore, Malkitzedek, king of Yerusahalayim then known as Shalem was actually Shem. Perhaps we can see Shem taking charge of the holiest places in the world till Am Yisroel comes into existence. From all of the above we can see that Shem was a great religious personality. Yet, it was not till Avraham that Am Yisroel and Judaism came into being. What was missing in Shem that he did not merit

to build Am Yisroel? True, Avraham was a direct descendent but still the line of Avos and our entire identity begins with Avraham.

My Rosh Yeshivah, Harav Dovid Feinstein, Shlita, was posed this question by the chaburah of his shiur . He suggested a few possible answers. Firstly, Avraham came to the realization of Hashem's existence totally on his own. Shem, on the other hand, was taught by his father and others about the existence of Hashem. There is much to be said about Avraham coming to the realization and knowledge of the truth through his own soul-searching inquiries instead of just hearing about it from someone else. Secondly, as great as Shem was, he did not feel a need to go out and teach the truth to the world. He had his Bais midrash and it was open to whoever wished to come in and hear the truth. There was no outreach of any kind performed and he let the world sink in its idolatrous beliefs. Avraham, however, felt a need to change the world. It was not enough for him that he had found the truth. He felt he had to change the world's view about Hashem and religion as a whole. It bothered him to no end that people were living off of the world Hashem created and worshipping statues of wood and stone created by man's hands. Furthermore, Avraham saw that Hashem abhorred the horrors that went with idolatry such as sacrificing one's own children. He understood that Hashem wanted all people to live a happy, moral life. When he saw the world was doing the exact opposite of what Hashem wanted, he felt the intense need to go out and change the world. This too, made him worthy of being the father of Am Yisroel. Rav Dovid Feinstein also suggested another possibility. The Torah tells us [Bereishis 18:19] that Hashem saw that Avraham was going to command his household and descendents after him to follow Hashem's ways to do righteousness and justice. In other words, Hashem saw that Avraham would teach all of Hashem's ways of justice, morality, and holiness to his future descendents. That being the case, it would only be logical that Am Yisroel, who was to bring Hashem's message to the world would come through Avraham Avinu.

Rav Moshe Eisenman, Shlita, of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, has some added insights to the above discussion. Shem and Avraham represent the nations of the world and Am Yisroel, respectively. Shem called the holy city Shalem

meaning complete and Avraham called the place of the altar Hashem Yireh. Based on this, chazal say that the name Yerusahalyaim is a fusion of Yirah fear and Shalem completeness. Shem was a great personality but he felt complete and therefore, no need to constantly strive to be better. Avraham, on the other hand, was not satisfied with his previous accomplishments and was always striving to go higher in his self-improvement and his relationship with Hashem. Some of the meforshim understand that even after the akeidah, the ultimate test ,Avraham was still tested further in his faith in Hashem and the promise to inherit Eretz Yisroel. When he had to buy a burial plot for his wife, Sarah, he had to deal with Efron who was extremely greedy and in the end, Avraham payed far more than it was worth. Wasn't the akeidah enough of a test already? Yet Avraham remained the same Avraham Avinu he was before and was prepared to handle any new tests and came out with the same emunah in the end that he had along. Rav Eisenman understands from here that our mission is not to stay in one place, spiritually. No matter what one has attained he/she can and should always strive to go higher and higher.