

Who Measures Our Greatness?

SHABBOS MORNING DRUSH | LECH LECHA

1. A prize - and a troubling question

Earlier this month, the Nobel Committee announced the recipient of the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize: **Navanethem Pillay, generally known as Navi Pillay.**

Who is she? A South African jurist, a former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a former judge at the international tribunals dealing with Rwanda and international criminal justice. She also chaired the UN commission investigating Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The committee points to her work against apartheid and her contribution to international law. That is its explanation for the award. Those are significant credentials. But there is another part of the record we should know. [1]

In 2022, Miloon Kothari, a member of the commission she chaired, spoke of social media being controlled largely by the "Jewish lobby" or particular organizations. He also questioned why Israel was a member of the United Nations.

American officials condemned his remarks as echoing old antisemitic tropes. Britain condemned them too. Pillay defended him, saying that his comments had been taken out of context and deliberately misquoted. **The original remarks were his; the defense was hers.** [2]

Kothari subsequently apologized and acknowledged that his description of social media as largely controlled by the Jewish lobby was wrong. [3]

And now the chair who defended those remarks is being honored as an outstanding moral voice.

We are entitled to ask: How can an institution celebrating human dignity apparently give so little weight to the defense of an accusation used against Jews for generations? A distinguished career does not make that question disappear.

When the world announces whom we should admire, what standard are we being asked to accept?

That question takes us directly into this week's parsha - and into the Torah's extraordinary way of introducing Avraham Avinu.

2. Noach gets an introduction. Avraham does not.

Before the Torah describes Hashem's instructions to Noach, it tells us: "*V'Noach matza chein b'einei Hashem*" - Noach found favor in Hashem's eyes. Then: "*Noach ish tzaddik, tamim hayah b'dorosav*" - Noach was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generations. [4]

Whatever the Midrash adds to our understanding of Noach, the Chumash itself gives us this much: here is a person of righteousness, here is a person who found favor, and now Hashem addresses him.

We understand that introduction. It tells us something about the man before telling us about his mission.

Then we come to Avraham.

From the Midrashim, we know that Avraham already had an extraordinary history. He had challenged the idolatry around him. He had stood against the world into which he was born. The Midrash describes the confrontation with his father's idols and with Nimrod, and his being thrown into the furnace. The Rambam describes his search for the Creator and his efforts to teach others. [5]

This was a life of thought, conviction, courage, and mesirus nefesh. By the time he leaves Charan, the Torah tells us he is seventy-five years old.

And where is that history in the Torah's introduction to Lech Lecha?

The Torah has told us his family relationships and where the family traveled. But it gives no comparable declaration that Avraham is a tzaddik. No account here of his discovery of Hashem. No narrative here of his heroic defiance of idolatry. No description here of his willingness to die for his faith.

Instead, suddenly: "*Vayomer Hashem el Avram: Lech lecha.*" Hashem tells Avram to go.

For Noach, the Torah supplies the credentials. For Avraham, with so much more history to tell, it leaves the credentials unstated. Why?

If you were introducing the father of the Jewish people, would you leave out the very episodes that show us why he was so remarkable?

And if a short introduction was enough for Noach, why does Avraham not receive even that?

3. What begins with "Lech Lecha"?

The answer begins with a distinction between two kinds of greatness.

There is what a human being achieves by reaching toward Hashem. And there is the relationship created when **Hashem reaches toward that human being and gives him a command.**

Avraham's earlier achievements were magnificent. The Torah's silence here does not diminish his courage or tell us that his past was unimportant. It directs our attention to what is beginning now.

Until this point, the story we know from the Midrash is largely the story of Avraham's search, Avraham's understanding, Avraham's conviction. He recognizes the truth and is prepared to sacrifice for it.

But even the greatest human understanding is human. It has a limit. Even the noblest resolve belongs to a finite person.

Now Hashem says: *Lech lecha*.

Avraham's next step has a new significance. He takes it because Hashem has called him. The bond expressed in that step is no longer measured only by the spiritual height Avraham has reached. Its significance comes also from the infinite One Who has commanded him. [6]

Think of the difference between admiring someone from a distance and being personally entrusted by that person with a responsibility. Your admiration tells us about you. Being entrusted creates a relationship between you.

That is only a human illustration. But it helps us understand why the Torah puts the command at the center.

The Torah begins here with Hashem's call because it is introducing the bond created through answering that call.

Now the missing introduction becomes meaningful. If all we saw were the achievements that came before, we might read Lech Lecha simply as the next recognition of an already extraordinary man.

The Torah wants us to notice the new beginning: Hashem speaks, and Avraham responds.

And this matters to every Jew who has ever wondered whether an ordinary mitzvah, performed by an ordinary person, can really be important.

4. The morning Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Prize

Let us return to the Nobel Peace Prize - to a very different recipient, and a very different morning.

On October 14, 1986, Elie Wiesel received the news that he had been chosen. The telephone call came around 4:30 in the morning in New York.

Soon his home filled with the machinery of worldwide attention: reporters, producers, technicians, lighting and sound people. Calls and requests for interviews kept coming. By eleven, reporters were still waiting in the hallway.

Then Wiesel remembered that he had not yet said his morning prayers.

He went into an empty room, closed himself in, and put on tefillin. He later recorded the episode in his memoir. [7]

Pause.

The scene is worth staying with.

Outside that room, people wanted the Nobel laureate. Inside it, a Jew put on tefillin.

Tefillin had accompanied Wiesel through very different circumstances. He recalled rising early with his father in Auschwitz to use a pair shared among prisoners. Decades later, amid the attention surrounding the Nobel Prize, that same mitzvah still had a place in his day. [7]

What do we normally regard as the important event that morning? Naturally, the announcement. The recognition. The interviews. The whole world taking notice.

But the tefillin ask us to consider a different kind of significance.

The award was an exceptional honor. The mitzvah was part of the ordinary rhythm of Jewish life. Yet that ordinary act carried a relationship no award could confer.

The world could give him a title. It could not give him what a mitzvah already offered: a way to answer Hashem.

We should appreciate the good a person can accomplish through public influence. But we should also recognize the greatness of an act whose value does not depend on who is watching.

That is the thought I want us to carry from the room in Wiesel's home back to our own lives.

5. "But I did not feel very much"

A Jew says: "I davened, but it was not my best davening. I gave tzedakah, but I was not overflowing with generosity. I did the mitzvah, but I did not feel what I thought I ought to feel."

Of course we should work on our kavanah. We should learn, understand, and try to bring our hearts into what we do.

But there is a mistake hidden in the conclusion: *If I did not feel very much, perhaps very little happened.*

My feeling is one part of the mitzvah. It is not the whole measure of the relationship.

When Hashem asks something of a Jew, and that Jew answers through action, the significance of that response is greater than the person's ability to describe it or feel it.

This also changes how we encourage another Jew. We need not insist that he first understand everything, resolve every question, or feel completely ready before taking one real step. Help him do a mitzvah. Continue the conversation. Let learning and practice strengthen one another.

The act matters now.

6. Answering the question

Why does the Torah tell us that Noach was righteous, but omit the great account of Avraham's earlier achievements before Lech Lecha?

Because at this turning point, it wants us to see more than the greatness Avraham had achieved. It wants us to see the relationship Hashem was initiating.

That is why the story begins with the call.

And that is why its lesson belongs to us. We may never receive a public honor. We may never have a house full of reporters. We may also have days when our own spiritual achievements seem modest.

Still, there is a mitzvah waiting to be done.

This week, approach one familiar mitzvah with a fresh thought: Hashem has asked something of me, and I am answering.

That is a greatness we do not have to wait for the world to recognize.

Sources & speaking notes

NOT FOR ORAL DELIVERY

[1] Norwegian Nobel Committee, "Announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize 2026." Official identification of Navi Pillay, her career, and the committee's stated rationale. [Read the announcement.](#)

[2] Jamey Keaten, Associated Press, July 28, 2022, "Israel, US decry rights monitor's remarks as 'antisemitic'." Documents Kothari's remarks, official criticism, and Pillay's defense. Do not attribute Kothari's words directly to Pillay. [Read the report.](#)

[3] Tovah Lazaroff, The Jerusalem Post, August 4, 2022, "UN investigator apologizes for Jewish Lobby remark." [Read the apology report.](#)

[4] Bereishis 6:8-9. These statements of Noach's favor and righteousness are explicit pesukim, not merely Midrashic descriptions. The contrast concerns the absence of a comparable spiritual introduction to Avraham at Bereishis 12:1; it does not claim that Avraham is wholly absent from the preceding chapter.

[5] Bereishis Rabbah 38:13: idols, Nimrod, and the furnace. Rambam, Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 1:3: Avraham's intellectual search and teaching. Bereishis 12:4: age seventy-five on leaving Charan. [Midrash](#) | [Rambam](#).

[6] Torah framework adapted from Rabbi Eliyahu Wolf, Me'at Min Ha'or, "Mahuso Shel Yehudi," pp. 27-30, based on Likkutei Sichos, vol. 25, as cited in the supplied text. This single attribution covers the adapted Torah framework throughout the drush. Contemporary examples and transitions are editorial applications.

[7] Avraham Rosen, "Elie Wiesel, Tefillin and the Holocaust," quoting Wiesel, All Rivers Run to the Sea, p. 258. The factual account is followed by the speaker's reflection; no invented dialogue or private thoughts are attributed to Wiesel. [Read the account.](#)

Delivery: Allow the questions on page 2 to stand before turning to the answer. Pause after the tefillin episode. The political opening introduces the issue of moral recognition; the Torah question carries the drush.