

*The Beginning
of Desire*

Reflections on Genesis

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg



IMAGE BOOKS
DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

LEKH LEKHA *Travails of Faith*

*That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.*

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing. . . .*

—W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

T*he starting point*

The story of Abraham is both beginning and end. Here begins the drama of the central family-nation of the Torah; here ends the prehistory, the rough drafts of God's intent. One such essay in creation had ended in exile (Adam driven from the Garden), the second in destruction (the Flood).

The first important phase of his life is introduced by God's command: "Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). There is no indication of circumstance, of previous encounter. Only a short preface, in which family context is sketched out:

When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.
Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran;

and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Avram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. (11:26–31)

Against the flow of generations of chapter 11—"This is the line of Shem. . . ." (11:10)—is set the central absence of Abraham's life: "Sarai was barren, she had no child" (11:30). *Toledot*, the word translated here as "line" and more commonly as "generations," is rich with a sense of the power of generation, of the multiple birthings, the realized consequences of potentialities inherent in each lifespan. And, ironically, it is the root of this word (*vlad*) that is used to refer to Sarai's childlessness: it is precisely this that she has not: the *vlad* that is the barest notation for some expression of self that lives on beyond self, an essence projected toward eternity.

"She had no child"—*ein la vlad*—the three pungent Hebrew words are freighted with irony. For this significant pair are marked by an emptiness, while all the "dying generations" (Yeats) effortlessly reproduce themselves. This is essentially the business of all other lives, as each generation enacts an identical ritual: the individual, generated by his father, lives a specified number of years; he then generates, projects a version of self beyond self, after which he lives a further tally of years and produces "sons and daughters." In this scheme, a central act of self-propagation is flanked by a period of immaturity and by a historically insignificant period of biological fertility. The expectation built up by the repeated formula is brought to a head in the almost feverish emphasis on Terah's generativeness: clearly, the narrative is closing in on its focus.

But here the rhythm changes: there is death (not the natural kind, but before the shocked face of the father [11:28]), and there is sterility. The resounding negation *ein la vlad* cruelly confirms: what was expected as part of the natural thrust of existence *is not*. Here, the language of the Torah enacts what Bergson calls "the peculiar possibility of the negative." In nature, Bergson argues, there are no negative conditions; only in the realm of consciousness, of desire and expectation, disappointment

and frustration, does the knowledge of the negative exist. Memory and imagination attach to a phantom object, in this case the *vlad*, the offspring, which bestrides positive reality and cries out *ein*—“no!” “Every human action has its starting-point in a dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling of absence.”¹

The “human action” of Abram and Sarai begins in this absence. The midrash expresses this paradox of generation as follows: “Wherever it is written ‘*Ein la*—there is not,’ there essentially *is*.”² A similar comment is made on the poignant leitmotif of absence in Lamentations: *ein la menahem*—“there is none to comfort her” (1:2); *ein av*—“we have become orphans, fatherless” (5:3). In the latter case, Midrash Rabbah refers to the paradigm of Esther, who is fatherless and motherless, and therefore is nurtured to a singular sensibility of absence and hope (Esther 2:7). What is suggested here in this first human experience of *ein*³ is a new and difficult mode of being and having: absence leads a man and a woman to travel far in search of a realization of self that comes effortlessly to those who preceded and surrounded them.

Abram’s wanderings

Here begins the journey of *Lekh lekha* (12:1)—with its strange order of abandonments—first land, then community (“moladatkha”—again, the *vlad* root: “Leave that which produced you as one possible realization of its potential”), and, finally, father’s house. For the first time, a journey is undertaken not as an act of exile and diminution (Adam, Cain, and the dispersed generation of Babel), but as a response to a divine imperative that articulates and emphasizes displacement as its crucial experience.

For what is most striking here is the *indeterminacy* of the journey. What is left behind, canceled out, is defined, clearly circled on the map of Abram’s being; but his destination is merely “the land that I shall show you”: from “your land,” the landscape of your basic self-awareness, to a place that you will know only when the light falls on it with a difference.

There is some discussion in the commentaries about the extent of Abram’s knowledge of his destination. Ramban considers the possibility that Abram knows from the beginning that his destination is Canaan, since his father began a family journey to that destination, which was interrupted and resumed by Abram at this point after his father’s death (11:31). However, the other possibility, radical and disturbing in its

implications, is that Abram has *no* idea of his destination when the call comes to him.

“*To the land that I shall show you*”: he wandered aimlessly from nation to nation and kingdom to kingdom, till he reached Canaan, when God told him, “To your seed I shall give this land” (12:7). This was the fulfillment of “to the land that I will show you,” and therefore he settled there. . . . Before that, he did not yet know that that land was the subject of the command. . . . That is why he later said to Avimelekh, “God made me wander from my father’s house” (20:13). For indeed, he wandered like a lost lamb.⁴

On this view, Abram wanders from place to place, till God “appears” to him and, in a revelation that includes Godhead and Land, “shows” him the place of destination. (“And he built an altar *there* to the Lord who had appeared to him” [12:7].) This reading is powerfully underwritten by the verse, quoted by Ramban, in which Abraham himself sums up his life on the road, in his apologia to Avimelekh: “So when God *made me wander* from my father’s house . . .” (20:13). Ramban hears in the word *bitu* (“made me wander”) a resonance of the poignant image in Psalms: “I have strayed like a lost sheep; search for Your servant” (119:176). The Psalmist cries out of his sense of imperiled contingency. His journey is trackless, unmapped; but his cry evokes the ultimate responsibility of the absent Shepherd to choreograph a meeting with His lost sheep. The disoriented consciousness of the Psalmist retains a core sense of relation-in-absence: he concludes his appeal, “for I have not forgotten Your commandments.”

What Ramban evokes here is an Abraham who is set on a course of total displacement, a series of encounters with *mekomot*, geocultural environments to be entered, known, and left.⁵ This directionless traveling is in one sense a *travailing* that is intimately connected with the quest for birth. The Oxford English Dictionary glosses *travel*: “1. torment, distress, suffer afflictions, suffer pains of parturition. 2. make a journey, from one place to another.”

Rashi, too, seems to understand the nature of Abraham’s journey in this way: “When God took me out of my father’s house to be a vagrant, roaming from place (*makom*) to place. . . . Anyone who is exiled from his place (*makom*) and is not settled is called a wanderer” (20:13). Even the plural verb, strangely used for “made me wander” (*bitu*), suggests a

plurality of *mekomot*, of existential frames of being, lacking coherent connection in an unmapped universe. Rashi's final proof-text, "They wander about without food" (Job 38:41), suggests the full paradox of a vital (and in that sense tensely focused) quest, enacted in empirical randomness.⁶

Midrash Tanhuma espouses this view of Abram's first trial: "Is there a man who travels without knowing to what destination [*makom*] he travels?"⁷ A journey without apparent destination: absurdity at each step. The midrash gives us mocking voices that weave through Abram's consciousness as he travels: "Look at this old man! Traveling through the country, looking like a madman!"⁸

If the experience of indeterminacy is of the essence of this first trial of Abram (called in the midrash "the test *within* a test"—the heart of darkness within the travail of *lekh lekha*), then it is echoed hauntingly and even more explicitly in the mystery of his last trial, that other *lekh lekha* of the Binding of Isaac (22:2). Abraham is to take his son, Isaac, the long-delayed fruition of his longing, and sacrifice him on one of the mountains, "which I shall tell you." For three days he travels "to the place [*makom*] of which God had told him" (22:3). What is this "place"? Does God *name* the place? Then why the indeterminacy of the original demand? Or does he travel to No Place, to the place that God has told him He has not yet told him?

Abraham's life of vital experience ("God put Abraham to the test" [22:1]—*nissa* is trial, experiment, the knowing of self in muscular action) is thus framed by journeys that are travails of contingency, knowing what it means not (yet) to be shown, to be told.

Barrenness and alienation

"Sarai was barren"—the barrenness of Sarai evokes the other meaning of the word *akara*: the couple is uprooted, the ground cut from under their feet. Voluntarily, they respond to a call to alienation from all that gives self a placement in the world. By removing themselves from the normal conditions of fruitfulness, they—at least on the face of things—cut off vital sources of nourishment, doom themselves to a sterile nomadic existence, in which no organic fibers of connection and fertility can grow. That is why, according to Rashi (12:1), the blessings that follow immediately on the call of *lekh lekha* are so necessary and so paradoxical. The

divine command thrusts Abram and Sarai into the eye of the storm, takes the problem of *akarut* (barrenness) and has them act out all the meanings of deracination, of disconnection from a succession of pasts.

An act of radical discontinuity is, it seems, depicted in the Torah as the essential basis for all continuity: for that act of birth that will engender the body and the soul of a new kind of nation. At the very beginning of human life on earth, after God had created Eve—had made Adam unconscious, removed a rib, and closed the flesh—the narrative voice had proclaimed: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh" (2:24). The Targum translates, "Therefore shall a man leave *his parents' bedroom*": there is a profound and often wrenching act of relinquishing to be undertaken, before new unions can be established. The sterility of the child's involvement in the "family romance" has to be left behind, in order that the self may find the Other and, according to Rashi, in order that the new being, the *vlad*, may be born. The Oedipal problem indicated by the Targum here is the basis for a cultural and probably counterinstinctual directive by God.⁹

Abram's journey "from your father's house" can perhaps be seen as a realization on a much more complex plane of this original and universal demand. He detaches himself from a spurious or at least outgrown place within an organism. He and Sarai are *akarim*, they recognize the sterility of the place that nurtured them. In the full tension of that paradox, they exile themselves to place after place and encounter new possibilities of being.

Their *akarut*, in its double sense of infertility and rootlessness, is placed in a context of ultimate blessing. ("And I shall make you into a great nation and I shall bless you and make your name great, and you will be a source of blessing" [12:2].) However, the midrash allows us no facile resolution of the tension of their lives: "He makes the *akara*, the woman who is the essence of the house [lit., the barren woman] to sit as the happy mother of children' [Psalms 113:9]: this refers to Sarai, as it is said, 'And Sarai was *akara*—barren.'"¹⁰ Sarai is described as both the barren one and the joyous mother; these are not simply successive stages of a life, but both remain necessary functions of her identity. Her later happiness never obviates the twin image of alienation: the pun that the midrash sets in focus insists on alienation-sterility as the very condition of Sarai's significant maternity.

39. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 9:14.
40. The requirement of *dinim*—of instituting the structures of legality in society—is one of the Seven Noachide Commandments.
41. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 70:12.
42. B. Sanhedrin 108b. See also *Meshekh Hokhmah* on 8:19.
43. Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Clarendon Press: 1968), 464.
44. *Tanpuma*, Noah, 7.
45. See his commentary to Job 24:20.
46. *Bereshit Rabbah* 29:4.
47. André Neher, *The Exile of the Word* (Jewish Publication Society: 1981), 101.
48. *Tanpuma*, Noah, 5. See also Rashi, 6:14.
49. Sexually, too, he refuses to articulate his being: he has children late in life (at 500 [5:32]) “because of the sin of his generation, which he saw. Only when God told him to build the ark, he married and had children, a hundred years before the Flood” (*Ba-midbar Rabbah* 14:12).
50. *Bereshit Rabbah* 30:9.
51. *Ibid.*, 31:19.
52. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Duquesne University Press: 1969), 110–15.
53. *Ibid.*, 116.
54. “The righteous man knows the needs of his beast” has traditionally been understood to refer to this relation to *one’s own needs*, and their wise management.
55. *Tanpuma*, Noah, 9.
56. See Ramban 6:19
57. *Bereshit Rabbah* 32:4.
58. *Ibid.*, 32:8.
59. *Ma’aseh Ha-shem* 68:1. See also Targum Onkelos.
60. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 224
61. See *Tanpuma*, Noah, 11, and our earlier discussion of this midrash. This reading is based on the fact that Noah and his sons are listed *separately* from their wives, in the original instructions to enter the ark (6:18; 7:7; 7:13), but *in pairs* when they are told to leave the ark (8:16)—and, in the same breath, God tells them of the fertility-imperative implicit in “coming out.” Noah, however, leaves in sexually segregated groups (8:18).
62. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 23.
63. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 257.
64. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 23.

65. *Baal Ha-Turim* suggests that Og is a decoding of the words “Only Noah,” since they have the same numerical value (*gematriya*). This would imply an intimate—perhaps dialectical—relation between the Noah who is enclosed in the ark and the obsessional force of the giant king.
66. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 222–23.
67. See Rashi, 8:13, and B. Rosh Hashanah 12b.
68. *Bereshit Rabbah* 18:1.
69. *Ibid.*, 18:3.
70. John Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s *Homer*.”
71. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 34:8
72. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 23.
73. “You have brought us into a net” (v.11); “We have come into fire and water” (v.12); “You have brought us out to the fresh air” (v.12). Ibn Ezra reads *revaya* as air, neither desiccating like fire, nor obliterating like water. Fire and water are both dimensions of the Flood in midrashic literature.
74. See Radal on *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* chap. 23.
75. See *Tanpuma*, Tavo, 1.
76. Compare 6:5.
77. *Rabbenu Bahya* 8:21.
78. *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:10.
79. *Kobelet Rabbah* 9:22.
80. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Penguin English Library: 1965), 243.
81. Quoted from *Torah Shelemah* 9:119.
82. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Penguin: 1971), 12–13.

LEKH LEKHA

1. Henri Bergson, “The Idea of Nothing,” in *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Modern Library: 1944), 323.
2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:21.
3. It is interesting to notice, however, that the first *ein* in the Torah (2:5) speaks of the absence of Man himself. (“When the Lord God made earth and heaven—when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was *no man—adam ayin*—to till the soil. . . .”) Without human consciousness of need and desire, without the experience of the “peculiar possibility of the negative,” there can be no prayer, indeed no reality that is humanly appropriated. See Rashi’s comment on this passage.
4. Ramban, 12:1.
5. Cf. *ibid.*, 20:13.
6. Cf. Rashi’s comment on *me-artzkha* (12:1)—“Go forth . . . from your

land: Move even further away from there"—his native land he has already left with his father: the point now is to move on, away, with no specified destination.

7. *Tanḥuma*, Lekh Lekha, 3.
8. *Y'lamdenu*, quoted in *Torah Shelema* 12:107.
9. See Rashi on this verse: "Therefore shall a man leave": The Holy Spirit makes this declaration, forbidding incest to all mankind." The incestuous bond is primary not only chronologically, in the history of the child's development, but culturally and spiritually. A primal unity must be ruptured in order that generation take place—the removal of the rib from Adam's body becomes in Rashi's comment the paradigm for alienation-become-fruition.
10. *Bereshit Rabbah* 53:6.
11. *Ibid.*, 39:16. The imagery of coinage suggests the capacity to "mint" and reproduce, to beget in one's own image. Abraham and Sarah come to represent a transformative mode that captures the human imagination.
12. Cf. the commentary of *Etz Yosef*: "Their two situations that are reversed by the lovingkindness of God."
13. *Tanḥuma*, Lekh Lekha, 3.
14. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuva 2:4.
15. B. Rosh Hashanah 16b.
16. My wordplay on *kri'ab* and *akirah*, with their identical but inverted root letters, is not, I hope, entirely perverse. The state of alienation/barrenness (*akirah*) is one of ground torn away (*kri'ab*)—filaments of connection with past and future rent apart. Discontinuity is the essential experience Abraham comes to represent.
17. *Midrash Ha-Gadol* 12:1.
18. Cf. Rashi: "*Lekh lekha*": Go from your land—for your good, for your benefit" (12:1).
19. See the comment of the Netziv on "And Abram went as God had told him" (12:4)—"Abram went *instantly*, in response to God's word."
20. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Fontana: 1960), 201.
21. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Avodah Zarah 1:3.
22. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press: 1962), 55.
23. *Ibid.*, 62.
24. *Ibid.*, 63.
25. *Ibid.*, 64.
26. *Ibid.*, 65.
27. But see *ibid.*, 208: his theses should be of wide applicability, "for they are borrowed from other fields." Kuhn claims originality mainly in *applying* them to the sciences.

28. *Ibid.*, 64, note.
 29. *Ibid.*, 150.
 30. *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, Genesis 12:1.
 31. Cf. Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*.
 32. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 37.
 33. See, e.g., Isaiah 22:17 and *Va-yikra Rabbah* 5:5.
 34. *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:2.
 35. *Ibid.*, 39:1.
 36. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 30.
 37. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Anchor: 1970).
 38. See, e.g., *Sefat Emet* 5648.
 39. JPS translates *ohavi*, "my friend." See also B. Sotah 32b.
 40. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuva 10:3.
 41. Cf. 1 Samuel 26:21 and Proverbs 5:19.
 42. In his comment on Proverbs 5:19, he cites an Arabic source for the translation, "preoccupation"; and then adds the rabbinic reading, which emphasizes "distraction."
 43. Cf. Deuteronomy 28:34: "until you are driven mad by what your eyes behold." And the comment of *Ha'amek Davar*: the madness comes not from physical suffering but from the disruption of normal causal relationships.
 44. W. B. Yeats, *Easter, 1916*.
 45. Conversely, language always conspires to close off as it discloses meaning: "There is also another sense in which we can never quite close our fists over meaning, which arises from the fact that language is a temporal process. When I read a sentence, the meaning of it is always somehow suspended, something deferred or still to come" (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* [University of Minnesota Press: 1983], 128). Deferral, writes George Steiner (*Real Presences* [University of Chicago Press: 1989], 122) is "that postponement of settled signification, that keeping in flickering motion which adjourns the illusion, the sterile fixity of meaning."
- Note that Rashi has changed the text of his source in *Bereshit Rabbah*, which speaks of a reward for each *step*, an image obviously more appropriate, as Abraham sets out on a journey, each step of which is shrouded in doubt. Perhaps Rashi is thinking primarily of his supporting prooftexts, where delayed language is an appropriate expression of indeterminacy. The third example Rashi gives ("on one of the mountains") is his own addition to the quotations in *Bereshit Rabbah*: for him, evidently, this theme is central to the Abraham idea, and it is crucial to consider the three quotations as an organic structure.
46. E.g., *Sifrei Deuteronomy*, 326: "When God punishes Israel, He, as it were, regrets it." J. Nedariim, 9, 41b: "Is not regret of a vow like a novel [unforeseen] circumstance?" *Shemot Rabbah*, 43:11: in Moses' prayer of