

**Parshat Lech Lecha  
October 16, 2010  
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How many of you believe in the hereafter? Now some of you might immediately be willing to raise your hands – others, might as quickly be prepared to deny that there is any “hereafter” and a good majority of you probably would want to know what exactly I meant by “hereafter” before you commit yourself.

For our purposes this morning – I am going to loosely define the “hereafter” as any sense that there is another world that exists along side this one. That there is in addition to the world of time and space which we occupy during our earthly journey – some sort of spiritual world – that exists beyond time and space – a world of which we know practically nothing other than that it seems to be there and from time to time we seem to catch glimpses of its existence beyond the familiar world of our every day experience.

There is a prayer I recite every time I do a funeral, every time I stand beside the open grave as a loved one is being laid to rest – it is an English summary of the traditional *Tziduk Hadin* prayer and this is what I read: “The dust returns to the earth as it was; the spirit returns to God who gave it. It is only the house of the spirit, which we now lay in the bosom of the earth. The spirit itself cannot die...Receive in mercy, O’ God, the soul of our departed loved one. Grant him/her that everlasting peace which You have laid up for us in the world to come. Though no human eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor mind has compassed it, it is still our sure inheritance and our everlasting portion.”

I recite that prayer at every funeral I do. I recite it beside every open grave that I stand – and my question to you this morning is, do you believe it? Do you believe that, “the spirit itself cannot die?” Do you believe that something “everlasting” awaits us in the world to come? And even though, no human eye has seen it that no human mind has compassed it – do you believe it exists?

There is a new movie by Clint Eastwood that is titled “Hereafter” and it apparently explores some of the same questions that I have raised with you this morning. I haven’t seen it – as it just opened in theaters last night (which means I hope you haven’t seen it as well) - we saw a preview of it in the theater last week – and Edy leaned over and said to me – “I am not going to see that movie...it did seem a bit scary” which means if I want to see it I am going to have to find another date. And I was willing to write it off except for a couple of things, which subsequently caught my attention. Obviously – the subject matter – intrigues me. The fact that it is a Clint Eastwood movie intrigues me – as he has done some very interesting and quality movies in recent years (like *Gran Torino*) – and finally a review in the *New York Times* caused me to rethink that this might be worth some of my time. Here is the part of the review that caught my attention: “Hereafter is quiet, gorgeous and contemplative...it composes a world of rich, deep shadows and heavy saturated colors, making you aware of encroaching darkness, but also of the intense, almost tactile beauty of existence. The inhabitants of this world – ordinary people whose plans and expectations are knocked off course by intimations of an afterlife...” And then the reviewer A. O. Scott really piques my interest when he writes, “Persuasion is really not the point, though if anyone could make me believe in ghosts, it would be Clint Eastwood. And the afterlife itself remains, throughout the film, a vague, conjectural

place, a zone of speculation rather than a freshly discovered and surveyed continent. The fuzzy digital ghosts that occasionally flutter across the screen are more symbolic placeholders than literal apparitions. Something seems to be out there... and finally he concludes: "What does seem new – newly strange, newly beautiful – is what "Hereafter" makes of the here and now. It is a curious movie in both sense of the word: an unusual experience and an open-eyed inquiry into something nobody can really claim to understand. It leaves you wondering, which may be the most fitting way of saying that it's wonderful."

Well, I have to tell you I am intrigued. Both by the subject of the hereafter itself – and this new movie and the way it seems to treat the subject. It is impossible to wade very far into the study of our bible without having to confront this issue. Do you believe that something exists above and beyond the world that we occupy? Do you believe that there is, as the traditional *Tziduk Hadin* seems to intimate – an everlasting world – even though no human eye has seen it, no ear has heard it – no human mind has compassed it?

I do.

I haven't checked my concordance, but I would be willing to bet that the opening words of today's torah portion, are probably the most often repeated words in the Torah – in fact they are repeated so often that we have come to overlook them, ignore them, treat them as background music to the words that follow – when in fact they are so incredible, so remarkable that we should stop and pause every time we read them, we should be caused to wonder every time we confront them – we should be amazed by the possibility of them – every time we consider them.

The torah portion opens today – as so many others do with the words: "*Vayomer adonai...* The Lord said," – in this case "The Lord said to Abram...." Throughout the Bible, we have this over and over again, the Lord speaks to Abraham, to Sarah, to Isaac and Jacob, to Miriam and Moses, to Aaron to the entire people – and every time we read these words – we quickly pass over them as we are appropriately more interested in what exactly the Lord had to say than in the simple fact that God was saying anything at all. So for one moment, allow me to focus your attention – on this simple fact – do you realize what an incredible moment this is? Can you imagine what a remarkable statement this represents? "And the Lord spoke...." What does that mean? These simple words represent some kind of connection between our world and another one – between the world of the here and now with some kind of world – there and beyond. The opening words of today's Torah portion deal with the election of Abraham – the beginning of Jewish history, the inauguration of a story that began 4000 years ago and half a world away. 4000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia God spoke to one man. And we, 4000 years later and half a world away, cannot yet estimate the end result of that religious experience, as the end is not yet in sight. One man and his vision changed the course of human history. His detour became the road we still travel today. *Vayomer Adonai el Avram....* And the Lord spoke to Abram.

What do those words mean? What was the nature of that encounter? Did God speak? Was there a voice? Was it male, deep and resonant? Or was it feminine and high-pitched – soft and soothing? Are these descriptions even relevant or was it a communication of a wholly different nature? We do not know as the torah tells us nothing other than these simple words: *Vayomer Adonai el Avram....* And the Lord spoke to Abram.

That is why I loved the words of the NY Times reviewer in speaking about Clint Eastwood's new movie – what was it that he said: “And the afterlife itself remains, throughout the film, a vague, conjectural place, a zone of speculation rather than a freshly discovered and surveyed continent. The fuzzy digital ghosts that occasionally flutter across the screen are more symbolic placeholders than literal apparitions.” It is as if the Torah and Clint Eastwood came to a similar conclusion as to how best deal with the subject – best to keep it a vague, conjectural place, a zone of speculation rather than a freshly discovered and surveyed continent. And indeed when we do catch a more detailed glimpse of this world, as we will in next week's torah reading as Abraham sits in the opening of his tent and the strangers that we will later learn are – angels of the Lord? The Lord Himself? The torah is wonderfully ambiguous – we know they look like regular people, and at first Abraham will treat them as such - strangers in need of refreshment and rest – and gradually it dawns on Abraham that these are no ordinary guests – but he is once again standing in the presence of the Lord – “the fuzzy digital ghosts that occasionally flutter across the screen are more symbolic placeholders than literal apparitions” writes A.O. Scott of Clint Eastwood's movie – but the same words could be written of the strangers who visit Abraham – indeed they to seem to be more “symbolic placeholders than literal apparitions.”

But there is one additional reason that I am intrigued enough to want to go see this movie – (sorry Edy) – beyond the fact that both it and our Torah seem to have a very similar approach to the subject of the Hereafter – and that is the question that inevitably emerges from their similar treatment of the Hereafter. If in fact neither the torah nor the movie has much to say about the nature of the hereafter; if it has no real substantial information to convey to us – other than it exists; if it leaves us to merely speculate and conjecture about the nature of a world it only intimates in vague and symbolic ways – why raise the subject at all? Why explore the matter in the first place –if there is nothing substantial you can add to the conversation? Here is how A.O. Scott answers that question with respect to the movie: “Persuasion is not really the point... Something seems to be out there, and this movie and its cinematic technology provide an available shorthand to indicate its presence. What does seem new,” he goes on to write, “newly strange, newly beautiful – is what “Hereafter” makes of the here and now. It is a curious movie in both senses of the word: an unusual experience and an open-ended inquiry into something nobody can really claim to understand. It leaves you wondering, which may be the most fitting way of saying that it's wonderful.”

You see that is precisely what I would have said of our torah. That the reason we are told so little of the nature of God's interactions with Abraham and everyone else in the Bible – is that persuasion here is also not the point. The Bible – like the new Clint Eastwood movie assumes that Something is out there and instead of using cinematic technology the Bible uses literary technology to provide an available shorthand to indicate its presence: “*Vayomer Adonai el Avram....* And the Lord spoke to Abram.”

What seems new to the New York Times reviewer about the Clint Eastwood movie – is the same thing that seems new and fresh every time I read the torah, every time I study parshiot like today's *Lech Lecha* – it is not so much what the torah makes of the hereafter – but how it uses its awareness of that hereafter to teach us of the here and now. That is the insight drawn from the review of a contemporary movie – but it is the insight I try and draw week in and week out in our journey through the sacred text of our torah – as A. O. Scott said of the movie – I will say of our Bible – “it is an open-ended inquiry into something nobody can really claim to

understand. And each week as we read the torah and study its wisdom “it leaves you wondering which may be the most fitting way of saying that it’s wonderful.”

I live to sense the wonder of this world that God created. I know that there is a mystery that exists in a world to come – even though no human eye has seen it, no ear has heard it and no mind has compassed it.

Is it possible that a movie can really help me sense that it exists? I’ll let you know. But I know that a book can – and I know a book that does – as we study it day in and day out, week in and week out. 4000 years ago, *Avraham Avinu* embraced this wonder for the very first time – and began his journey to live a life infused with that sense of wonder and amazement. Today – 4000 years later we reread his story, in the hope that we can reenact his journey - it is indeed wonderful.