Pondering the Parsha with Rabbi Leener

Lech Lecha

1) Genesis 12:1

The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you”	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ:

Questions:

➔ Why is leaving “home” framed as a prerequisite for a religious journey?
➔ If the above verse is understood to be the first Jewish moment, what does that reveal about the Jewish experience?

2) Zohar 1:78a

Once the blessed Holy One saw his arousal and desire, He immediately revealed Himself to him, saying: Lekh lekha, Go to yourself, to know yourself, to refine yourself

Questions:

➔ Why is knowing yourself so critical in a religious framework? Isn’t our primary focus knowing God?
➔ When do you feel most inspired towards this inward search?

2) Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Honey from the Rock

Abraham, our father, was simply told to leave. This is the setting out. The leaving of everything behind. Leaving the social milieu. The preconceptions. The definitions. The language. The narrowed field of vision. The expectations. No longer expecting relationships, memories, words, or letters to mean what they used to mean. To be, in a word: Open. If you think you know what you will find. Then you will find nothing. If you expect nothing, then you will always be surprised... So it is with setting out on the path of liberation, leaving everything. He would even have to discover the way he would discover while he was on the way. Of him [Abraham] it was said, “A man who set out and did not know for which place he was destined” (Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 3)...One after another each of our fathers before us with their strange Hebrew yen for the open places heard this ancient God’s voice telling them to leave their preconceptions for the wilderness.

Questions:

➔ What other biblical characters have experienced this sort of leaving everything behind?
➔ When are you most able to leave behind a “narrowed field of vision?”

2) Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (“The Aish Kodesh”), To Heal the Soul

As a torrent river surges forth sweeping with it all that lies in its path, penetrating into deep recesses and washing away all buried things, so does the torrent of public opinion sweep along the individual mind. You may not know it, you may even deny it, but you have been brainwashed by common belief. Carried along, perhaps more, perhaps less, you now think along these twisted paths. So stay away from the middle of the river, don’t be concerned with what people say…

So look deep inside to see if you have individuated your real self. Are you a person who can stand by himself or are you just a member of the human species? Are you like a plant or an animal whose individual essence is just one of the kind? What is in the species is in the specimen, which is why they have no free will. Their instincts are not under their individual control but under that of the collective laws of the species. Their willfulness does not rise out of individual need but out of collective need of the species.

So a person must individuate himself with the essence of who he really is: not only must he not remain imprisoned by social rules, cultural customs, or accepted thought without the ability to see beyond them but he must also have a mind of his own. Without this, not only is he not a Jew but he is also not even a person. This means bringing out that which is unique within you, that which depicts your very self. Individuation is your obligation. And this is not some privilege reserved only for the great luminaries. Rather, each and every little one of us has not only the right but the obligation to express his unique and individual self. And to the degree that you are able to live in this world from the very center of your unique self, to that degree will you be able to exercise your individual free will. Raise yourself up above the crowd; bring out what makes you unique. Become a person who can choose for himself—the prerequisite for reaching God.

Questions:

➔ How are you most “imprisoned” by social rules and customs? When are you able to transcend them?
➔ Do you think of yourself as unique? If so, in what ways?
➔ When do you follow and when do you lead?