

A LIFE OF PILGRIMAGE

A Reflection by Rabbi Mychal Copeland
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
October 24, 2004

Lech L'cha: Go on a pilgrimage to yourself

How do we tell our life stories? How do all of the pieces come together to form one complete narrative? The freshmen I'm meeting now are starting to put their first month of college into perspective. They ask themselves, "How do these new experiences and learnings fit in with who I thought I was? Have I already changed? What is essential --- me?" I invite you to ask yourselves how your college experience or other pivotal points in your life fit into your life story as you tell it today. On our lifelong quests, we return to familiar places, to locales that held great meaning for us. We return in order to revisit and deepen our relationships and our self-understanding. We come back to integrate our past with our present, and our present into our past. When we go on pilgrimages; we return to places we have lived and learned. We put those experiences in perspective, but with a different viewpoint than the freshmen I mentioned. With years having passed, there is now a longer, more complete story in which to fit these important moments.

This week in the Jewish cycle of scriptural reading, we revisited the story in the book of Genesis of Abraham's call by G'd to leave his homeland, everything that was familiar, in order to embark on a journey. "G'd said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing'". The words in Hebrew that begin G'd's eloquent speech are "lech l'cha", a difficult construction usually translated as "go out", or "go forth". But another way to read these words is "go to yourself". The Zohar, the primary work of Jewish mysticism, says of this verse, "Lech l'cha, go **for** yourself, to refine yourself, to perfect your rung." We are all on a lifelong journey, a pilgrimage, **to ourselves**. Like Abraham, we continuously leave what is comfortable to stretch our definitions of who we are. In journeying here this weekend, many of you left one place of comfort for another that *once* was home.

One of the most meaningful aspects of the Jewish cycle of reading I mentioned earlier is that at this time next fall, we will read this story of Abraham again. The words will be the same, but we will not be. Another year will have elapsed. Our personal stories will be one year richer and deeper. We will read this story of Abraham with completely new eyes. Likewise, at this time in coming years, you will hopefully sit here once again. You will return to this place and relive memories by talking with former classmates, visiting old residences. You will take a pilgrimage, once again, through your past, methodically integrating pieces of your history with the knowledge of your present self.

T.S.Elliot wrote, "What we call a beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from. We shall not cease from exploration,

and the end of all our exploring is to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

Our entire life is such an exploration. We have also come here today to honor and remember those who have come to the end of their journey on this earth. In recalling them, we come together as a community, acknowledging how intertwined we all are over so many generations. Professors, staff members, fellow students—even those some of us may not have known...all played a role in making this community vital, and will continue to do so. As G!d promised Abram, they shall be a blessing.

May you, in all the pilgrimages you may take, collect the fragments of your life story and begin to weave them together. Wherever you are called next, may your journey be a blessing.