

Parshat Lech Lecha
The Demands of Love
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In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare wisely asks, “what’s in a name”? Noting that “...a rose by any other word would smell as sweet”. Meaning that a person, regardless of their name, is essentially the same person; their essence and character is what matters and endures. With these lines Juliet rationalizes that she can love Romeo in spite of her family’s conflict with his family and thus begins their secret tryst.

In parshat Lech Lecha, Abram and Sarai are commanded to change their names. Abram, meaning exalted father, is changed to Abraham, father of multitudes of nations, and Sarai, my princess, becomes Sarah, princess of the multitude. The obvious question is: why? If we accept the premise that each person has an essence and character that is durable, why would Hashem command Abraham and Sarah to change their names?

Names are significant for deeply personal and public reasons. They indicate identity, family lineage, and carry cultural and historical significance. In tribal cultures, simply stating one's last name conveys your family, religion, tribe, and region of the country from which you came. Names connect you to your past and future, they are bonds of identity, heritage, and inheritance.

Juliet never asked Romeo to become a Capulet. She loved Romeo for his character without any expectation or demand of his changing his name.

Hashem makes many demands on Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is commanded to leave his family and all that is familiar to him to go to a different land and by that commandment Sarai is also affected. Both Abraham and Sarah are expected to change their names, their identity, for the sake of Hashem. Abraham is commanded to perform a *brit milah* as a sign of his covenant with Hashem and much more.

What does this indicate about Juliet’s love, which makes no demands, compared to Hashem’s love?

Juliet and Romeo presumably fell deeply in love, yet never revealed their affair. They met in secret and publically maintained a farce. Their deep and unabiding love — a love so strong that it drove them to a mutual death – was somehow not worth the effort and toil it would take to be made public. This love is an easy love, there are no demands or expectations, yet there is also nothing to show for it.

Hashem’s love for Abraham and Sarah was publicly displayed for all to see.

וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggradanzie your name, and [you shall be] a blessing.

וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מְבַרְכֶיהָ וּמְקַלְלָהָ אֲאָר וְנִבְרַכְנוּ בָּהּ כָּל מִשְׁפּוֹת הָאֲדָמָה

And I will bless those that bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.

While Hashem's love may be more demanding, it carries a public acknowledgement that is validating.

Love is not easy; it takes work and effort. Golde in Fiddler on the Roof understood this. When asked by Tevye, "Do you love me?" she replies:

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house
Given you children, milked the cow

...

For twenty-five years I've lived with him
Fought him, starved with him
Twenty-five years my bed is his
If that's not love, what is?

Love is the effort we put into the relationships we have. It isn't the flattering claims of beauty and fidelity; it's cleaning the diapers, cooking the dinners, and caring for each other during challenges and triumphs.

We express our love in the efforts we make toward others. When we take the time to call and check in on loved ones, when we make dinner for someone who is ill, and even in the little tasks of texting a friend to ask how they are holding up during a difficult time. Love doesn't demand grand gestures and iconic moments; it demands the daily, mundane tasks.

Love is less a reflection of what demands one puts on another but what one is willing to do for another. Juliet didn't love Romeo more than Hashem loved Abraham and Sarah because her demands were less. Rather, Abraham and Sarah loved Hashem more than Romeo loved Juliet because their efforts were greater.

Abraham and Sarah's love for Hashem is seen in their daily behaviors; welcoming the guest, conducting themselves with integrity, and building altars to honor the Lord. We express our love for Hashem when we observe the mitzvot, sanctify Shabbat, follow Halacha, give to the needy, and conduct ourselves appropriately. Rather than ask about Hashem's love for us based on the level of G-d's demands; we should ask if we are expressing our love for Hashem by following Halacha.



Karolyn Benger is a student at Yeshivat Maharat (2026). Previously, she was the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Phoenix and served as the Executive Director of the Jewish Interest Free Loan in Atlanta. She is a graduate of Emory University with a degree in Political Science and a specialization in the Middle East where she studied Arab and Islamist opposition groups in Egypt. Karolyn has taught at Emory University, Georgia Tech, and Emerson College. Her love of Judaism, combined with her love of teaching and social justice, led her to join Maharat. You can find her writings in the Arizona Republic, eJewish Philanthropy, Blue Avocado, The Times of Israel, and Bina. Karolyn is a board member of the Arizona Interfaith Movement, serving as the Vice President of Education. She also serves on the Jewish Advisory Board for the Phoenix Police Department, was a member of the Valley Interfaith Project's 3rd Monseigneur Ryle Public Policy Faith Leader Institute and a mentor in the Women's Leadership Institute.