

Parshat Lech Lecha
V'heyey Bracha: Being Extraordinary in Ordinary Moments
Atara Lindenbaum - Class of 2022

Avram and Sarai decide to leave Canaan in a surprisingly abrupt fashion. Just a few verses earlier, at the beginning of Genesis Chapter 12, Avram was told to uproot his family and venture into the unknown in order to become a great nation and a blessing for the world- *וְהָיָה בְרַכָּה*. Avram fully embraces God's promise and springs into action; he gathers his wife, his nephew, his belongings, and even a community of followers he had amassed, leaves Charan, and arrives in the land of Canaan. And yet, by verse 10, Avram and Sarai leave Canaan due to famine, and go to live in the land of Egypt. What happened to Avram's faith, his congregation, the promise of a sustaining legacy, and the guarantee that Avram would "be a blessing"?

Avram and Sarai's sudden move to Egypt is, on the one hand, bewildering. Yet, as someone who recently had the privilege of moving with my family to the Land of Israel from New York City, the feeling of wanting to leave an unfamiliar country because of complicated logistics feels pretty familiar. Unlike Avram, we spent a year planning, dreaming of what we could bring to the land, what it would give our children, and how we could be part of Avram's legacy and "be a blessing." And yet, despite the hundreds (yes hundreds!) of ziploc bags from Costco that came on our lift, the biggest obstacles to acclimating to this new country were the ordinary and mundane activities, like learning how to go shopping for food and filling our car up with gas. And while, obviously, I am not experiencing anything close to a famine, nor am I venturing to Egypt to find food, I do find myself often in the muck of the unfamiliarity of the everyday, easily losing the charm of the big picture. While I dreamt a year ago of - having a home like Avram Avinu! With four walls open! A life of contributing to the land and its people! I now spend a good chunk of my days asking Alexa to convert grams to ounces, filling out paperwork in Hebrew, helping my children with their homework, and yes, scouting out the best places to buy produce. When I have moments to reflect on my journey thus far, I find myself asking, "how can I be a blessing here when simple details feel so onerous"?

Avram reveals, through his behavior in Egypt, that yes, we can be blessings even in the most challenging of situations. Avram and Sarai face a tragic decision; Avram tells Sarai that because she is so beautiful, the Egyptians will want her. If it is revealed that they are married, the Egyptians will kill Avram and take Sarai. But if the Egyptians think that Sarai is unmarried, and that Avram and Sarai are brother and sister, they will offer Avram gifts and money in exchange for Sarai.

Avram's intuition was correct: Pharaoh's officers see Sarai and are so enamored by her beauty that they take her to the palace. Pharaoh offers Avram livestock and slaves in exchange for his "sister," and Sarai is forced to sleep with the King. Fortunately, God intervenes and plagues Pharaoh and his staff, making it clear to Pharaoh that he must return Sarai to Avram. Avram and Sarai head back to Canaan with their newly acquired wealth.

While Avram and Sarai end up in better physical and material shape, this incident – which includes the move out of Canaan to Egypt, lying, giving a woman over to foreign powers and thereby causing physical ailments to the royal house of Pharaoh – can seem like a stain on the characters of both Avram and Sarai. However, Rav David Kimchi, better known as the Radak, insists that Avram held himself to the highest moral standard while in the midst of an impossible dilemma. According to the Radak, Avram did not yet feel that he could rely on a miracle from God, since he was concerned that he might have committed some sin rendering him unworthy of such divine intervention. Still, according to the Radak, had Avram known that Sarai would be taken by the Egyptians, he would have gone hungry and relied on God for food rather than going to Egypt. It is only when he arrives in Egypt that he realizes that the Egyptians will be so enamored of her distinct beauty. Considering his options, Avram reasons that if the Egyptians kill Avram, Sarai will be left without protection. But if he claims to be her brother and avoids the punishment of death, he can keep an eye out for her. Avram was making choices in uncharted territory, and sought to maintain his ethical integrity with the information he had at the moment.

The Midrash,¹ however, adds that in these challenging moments, Avram is actually building his legacy. Avram acknowledges that Sarai is the most vulnerable character in this situation. Avram pleads with Sarai to put the plan into action, changing her from a vulnerable character to his savior:

אמרי-נא אחתי את למען ייטב-לי בעבורך וחייתה נפשי בגללך:
(בראשית יב:יג)

“Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.” (Genesis 12:13)

Avram is transparent in his motivations as well; while Sarai may remain in the palace forever, Avram will be kept alive and perhaps even rewarded with material wealth.

Avram’s tender way of talking to Sarai, to the Midrash, is passed down to Avram’s children. A few generations later, Avram’s family will also end up in Egypt, due to famine. There too, in Egypt, Pharaoh will put Jewish lives at risk, and will decree to kill all male children and keep the female children alive. But Avram’s gift to Sarai, of giving her the agency to use her voice and save his, also remains; just like Sarai lied to Pharaoh and kept Avram alive, so too, the midwives, Shifra and Puah, risk their own lives and lie to Pharaoh, keeping the baby boys alive.

Avram teaches us that opportunities to “be a blessing” are hidden in even the darkest of times, since the way we navigate challenges is exactly how we build our legacies. Egypt in Hebrew is מצרים, which can also mean ‘narrow places,’ spaces where we feel like we are not liberated to make change and bring light into the world. This year, the experience of lockdowns and the current pandemic have left many feeling like foreigners in their own homes, bringing complexity and anxiety to our most ordinary routines. While we long to return to the times where these tasks are mindless, Avram teaches us that how we speak,

¹ Breisheet Rabbah 40, Midrash Lekach Tov, Breisheet 13:1

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behave, and make choices in these challenging times are indeed how we can build our legacies, and “be a blessing.”



Atara Lindenbaum, comes to Yeshivat Maharat after completing a Masters in Urban Planning and Policy from Hunter College. Throughout Atara's time at Hunter, she researched and wrote about religious issues in urban areas, such as eruv and issues of school funding. Atara worked as a planning consultant to various towns throughout the Hudson Valley.

Atara spent two years in Jerusalem where she completed the Matan Program for Advanced Bible Studies and studied Jewish Education at the Melton School in Hebrew University. Atara then was fortunate to teach the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program, and to teach Tanach and Jewish History to high school students in both the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA and Beren Academy in Houston, TX.

Atara graduated from Stern College with a BA in History, after learning at both Migdal Oz and Midreshet Lindenbaum. Atara currently lives in Israel with her husband and three daughters.