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Parshat Lech Lecha: On Shattering Glass Ceilings

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Hillary Clinton planned to give her acceptance speech at the Javits Center, a building purposefully selected because it has a glass ceiling. The imagery was not lost on me. This would have been a ceiling shattering moment in our history.

And, while the ceiling now has “18 million cracks¹” in it, and girls around the world know that they too can run for president, that highest ceiling, for now, remains intact.

I am familiar with the phrase -- women who work towards changing the status quo, are often referred to as “ceiling breakers.” But, I have begun to wonder if, perhaps, in order to move forward from this tumultuous and divisive election, we need a new metaphor, a new mold to shake up and change the status quo. If we cannot shatter the glass ceiling, we must get up and go, and leave the building all together. This is our *lech lecha* moment. Our opportunity to create a new destiny.

In one of the most famous phrases in the Torah, God instructs Avram:

"Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you (Bereishit 12:1) לְךָ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ: (בראשית יב:א)

In order to really leave, to begin a journey anew, God acknowledges that Avram must leave his land, birthplace and his father's house. The order, at first seems illogical since, geographically, when one leaves, first he must step out of his house, then traverse through his neighborhood (birthplace), and lastly he leaves his city (the land). However, emotionally, it is much harder to break ties and leave your home, your *bayit*. And yet, leaving the house behind, though it may be the hardest step, is crucial to begin a renewed journey. As Rashi explains, God tells Avram to create distance, and truly sever ties with his home.

"From your land...Distance yourself more from there and leave your father's house" (Rashi 12:1) מֵאֶרֶץ...הִתְרַחַק עוֹד מִשָּׁם וּצֵא מִבֵּית אָבִיךָ

And, Avram does not immediately enter into another physical space:

And Avram traveled, continually (12:9) וַיֵּסַע אַבְרָם הַלֹּךְ וְנֹסֵעַ

He went from place to place, pitching his tent for a few days at a time and experiencing the world at large as he made his way towards Jerusalem.² Avram left his home and began a journey that would allow him to create a new destiny,

¹ Hillary Clinton's concession speech, June 2008

² Rashi 12:9; "continually traveling: lit. going and traveling. [He traveled] in intervals, staying here for a month or more, traveling from there, and pitching his tent elsewhere. And all his travels were southward, to go to the south of the Land of Israel, and that is to the direction of Jerusalem."

הַלֹּךְ וְנֹסֵעַ: לִפְרָקִים, יוֹשֵׁב כְּאֵן חֹדֶשׁ אֶל יוֹתֵר וְנֹסֵעַ מִשָּׁם וְנוֹטָה אֵהָלוּ בְּמִקוֹם אַחֵר, וְכָל מַסְעָיו הִנְגִּבָה לִלְכַת לְדְרוֹמָה שֶׁל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהוּא לְצַד יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

leaving behind the mold of his past, the culture and beliefs of his father's home. He began walking towards a place that would be filled with God's promises of protection, peace, and justice.

However, one may argue that Avram didn't actually *do* anything. He was simply following God's command: *lech lecha* -- get up and go. And yet, a well-known midrash subverts the verse, making Avram the initiator of his new destiny.

Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *bira doleket*/castle in flames. He said, "Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it? The owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the castle." Similarly, because Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that this castle has no guide, no one to look after it?," the Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, "I am the Master of the Universe." ... Hence, God said to Avraham, Lech Lecha (Bereishit Rabbah 39:1).

"וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּגְוֹ", ר' יצחק פתח (תהלים מה, יא): "שִׁמְעֵי בֵּית וְרָאִי וְהִטִּי אֲזַנְךָ וְשִׁכַחִי עִמָּךְ וּבֵית אַבְרָם" אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממוקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם (יב): "וַיִּתְּאוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ יִפְיָךְ כִּי הוּא אֲדוֹנֶיךָ" "וַיִּתְּאוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ יִפְיָךְ" ליפותיך בעולם "וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִי לוֹ" הוּי "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ וּגְוֹ":

A man is traveling from place to place, on the road. He looks up, and sees a castle on fire. And so too, Avram sees his world, his father's home, has gone awry. Without a caretaker, the flames burn wildly, threatening to destroy its surroundings. Avram's question, "is it possible that this castle has no guide?" catalyzes God into action. The way of the world, Avram implies, is no longer sustainable. Something must change. God hears Avram and has an awakening. "I am the Master of the world," God realizes, and sends Avram away from the *bira doleket*, the burning castle, into the world. Avram sees the fire and then God acts. *Lech lecha*. Begin the journey anew. Break free from what you know, and seek a new destiny.

Like Avram, we can no longer patiently stay in the castle, waiting for glass ceilings to break. The world demands more of us. And so, with one foot in front of the other, I walk. I walk towards a future where I can be a catalyst of change. I walk with a renewed sense of responsibility to bring moral justice into the world. I walk with a commitment to lead with love and chesed (kindness). I walk into a future that is unknown, but knowing that I am guided and guarded by the divine. I walk, seeking partners to walk forwards with me.

I no longer need to shatter glass ceilings. I want to create and shape a new destiny.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.