



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Lech Lecha 5773

By Sarah Mulhern

October 27, 2012

One of the things I find most inspiring about studying Torah is that the biblical characters are human. They may be our valorized, mythical ancestors, but they also consistently make mistakes, leaving a record of paradigmatic human foibles from which we can learn. There is one biblical failure, however, that I have always struggled to understand as a useful example. It occurs for the first time<sup>1</sup> in this week's *parashah*, as Avram goes to Egypt to avoid the famine in Canaan:

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. 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." When Avram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Avram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.<sup>2</sup>

Each time I read *Parashat Lech Lecha*, I want to scream—how could Avram describe Sarai as unmarried and allow her to be taken into Pharaoh's harem?! Later in the *parashah* Avram bravely gallops off to war to save his kidnapped nephew Lot,<sup>3</sup> yet here he puts his wife at risk of sexual exploitation to protect himself. Worse, only a few chapters later Avram refuses to be sullied by "so much as a sandal strap" of the spoils of war,<sup>4</sup> but this passage implies that Avram accepted a great deal of wealth in return for this appalling quasi-sale of his wife.<sup>5</sup>

The medieval biblical commentator Ramban seems similarly disturbed by Avram's actions, saying "know that our father Avraham sinned grievously . . . because he feared for his life."<sup>6</sup> While Ramban condemns these actions, he and other commentaries emphasize that Avram's fears were legitimate. Rashi points out that the story ends with Pharaoh sending Avram and Sarai away with armed guards,<sup>7</sup> which Rashi believes Pharaoh finds necessary to protect them from the Egyptians, who are prone to violent and immoral attacks on travelers.<sup>8</sup>

While this context of vulnerability does soften the story somewhat, it is Ramban's next comment that finally enables me to learn from this troubling story. He sees this passage as an example of *ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*, the idea that the actions of biblical ancestors cosmically influence future events for the Jewish people. In this case, Ramban asserts

<sup>1</sup> Parallel stories of presenting a wife as a sister and giving her to a king during a famine occur in Genesis 20 and Genesis 26:6-11.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:11-16.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 14:13-16.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 14:23.

<sup>5</sup> See Rashi to Genesis 12:13 where he reads "in order that it go well with me because of you" to mean "that they will give me gifts."

<sup>6</sup> Ramban to Genesis 12:16.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:20.

<sup>8</sup> Rashi to Genesis 12:20.

that Avram's sin causes the future enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> On a simple level, Ramban associates Avram's travel to Egypt with his descendants' later enslavement in the same place. However, I believe the connection between the two episodes runs deeper.

Throughout the story, Avram relates to Sarai not as a person, but as a tool that can bring him safety and as a commodity whose sale can bring him wealth. This dehumanization of Sarai creates a pattern: Avram engages in the same deception again later in his life, and his son Isaac tells the identical lie about his wife, Rebecca.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this action led to the enslavement of the Israelites because it indicates that the idea that a person could be a tool or commodity had become part of the culture of the community. Avram's descendants thus needed to experience being exploited themselves in order to break their negative pattern of dehumanizing others. Only as former slaves could they fully understand how destructive this mindset is and most deeply appreciate the personhood and rights of themselves and all other people.

Around the world today, many women are, like Sarai, viewed by their men and by society as tools and commodities rather than as people—particularly in situations where they, too, are made vulnerable by displacement from their homes and communities. In Liberia, women refugees fleeing violence in their native Côte d'Ivoire have reported being offered food and housing by local villagers—on the condition that they accept their hosts' sexual advances, as well.<sup>11</sup> Cambodian women who work as domestic help in Malaysia are frequently denied freedom of movement and are exposed to terrible work conditions.<sup>12</sup> These women and others around the world are treated as means for the fulfillment of others' desires, rather than as people with their own desires and rights to security and freedom.

How can we break this damaging cycle? Is a communal experience of slavery the only way to teach that all people must be treated as human beings with rights? Our *parashah* offers another way forward, by way of a striking omission from the story—that of Sarai's voice. Strangely, even though Avram asks Sarai for her permission or cooperation with his plan, her response is missing. In fact, she never speaks at all, nor does the narrator tell us what happens to her in Pharaoh's palace. Here, then, is what we need to do to break the pattern—we must create opportunities for women to raise their voices and share their experiences so that it will be impossible to ignore their stories, their personhood and their rights. Only then can women forge their own destinies, breaking the cycles of slavery and abuse and achieving equality and freedom.



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<sup>9</sup> Ramban to Genesis 12:16.

<sup>10</sup> See Genesis 20 for Abraham's deception of Avimelech, king of Gerar and Genesis 26:6-11 for Isaac's deception of Avimelech, king of the Philistines.

<sup>11</sup> "Liberia: Protect Refugees Against Sexual Abuse," *Human Rights Watch*, 21 April 2011. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/20/liberia-protect-refugees-against-sexual-abuse>

<sup>12</sup> "They Deceived Us at Every Step," *Human Rights Watch*, November 2011. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/cambodia1111\\_brochure\\_low.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/cambodia1111_brochure_low.pdf)

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