



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Lech Lecha 5772

The Loftiness in Leaving and the Rigors of Return

By Adina Roth

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Parshat Lech Lecha opens with God's command to Avram to leave everything that he has known—his birthplace, family and the pagan culture he grew up with—and move to a land “*asher arekha*—that I will show you.”¹ Avram is asked to leave behind familial binds and unwanted value systems and embrace an unknown future in order to create a new world. The Sefat Emet, a 19th-century Chasidic rabbi, suggests that Avram's departure from the familiar to the open-ended will enlarge his vision, indicating that the root of the word *arekha* is “*resh-aleph-heh*”—to see.²

Avram, with his vision of monotheism, becomes an agent for change in the Torah, and his task to move—“*lech lecha*”—becomes a compelling model for *tikkun olam* today. With its emphasis on departure, the *lech* model challenges us to leave behind all unjust systems in order to create a better world. For example, this approach is what drives the Occupy Wall Street movement, with its calls to reject business models that perpetuate disempowerment and inequity and replace them with new, more equitable practices. As a model for social change, *lech* creates distance between a corrupt reality and a more hopeful vision.

The possibilities of *lech* are so powerful that we hardly notice another pattern of movement being asked of a minor character in the same *parshah*—Hagar, maidservant to Avram's wife Sarai. When Hagar becomes pregnant with Avram's child, she feels haughty towards the still barren Sarai, and Sarai responds with harshness. The conflict intensifies and Hagar flees to the wilderness, where an angel of God issues her a command. This time it is not an injunction to leave, but to return. “*Shuvi*,” the angel entreats her—return to your mistress.³

Though return seems like the polar opposite of the injunction given to Avram, to leave, the text links the two. In language reminiscent of Avram's journey, Hagar responds that her vision has expanded. She names God “*El Ro'it*”—a Deity of Vision, to mark her insight and epiphany.⁴ Though Avram and Hagar move in two different directions, the text affirms both perambulations, suggesting that both result in shifts in vision—deep change. If *lech* offers us a model for social change that is about rejecting old systems and creating something completely new, *shuvi* is about seeking change within the system, in a space fraught with difficulties and wounded human relationships.

The *shuvi* model may rankle our modern sensibilities. How can it be that the angel asks Hagar to return to an oppressive mistress?⁵ Perhaps this text teaches us that some problems can't simply be left behind. The angel foretells that Hagar's son will be a man of conflict, “his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him.”⁶ The angel

¹ Genesis 12:1.

² Sefat Emet on Genesis, 12:1.

³ Genesis 16:9.

⁴ Genesis 16:13.

⁵ In addition, the commentaries appear to be uncomfortable with the way Sarai and Avram treat Hagar. Both Ramban and Radak criticize Sarai for abusing Hagar and Avram for making Hagar vulnerable to such treatment.

⁶ Genesis 16:12.

points out that unless Hagar can resolve the clash, her children will perpetuate the very cycle of conflict from which she is trying to escape. It is at this moment that Hagar comments that she has a new way of seeing. Perhaps Hagar perceives that *shuvi*—return and engagement within the system—is her only hope for breaking the cycle.

Though the approach didn't succeed in Hagar's case, the concept remains an important tool for many women today who are trapped in cycles of violence and must work to overcome them from within. An example is Saima Muhammed, a Pakistani woman described in Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book, *Half the Sky*. Saima endures beatings at the hands of her husband when she does not produce sons; yet, rather than leaving her family (which isn't an option for many women in her culture), she works within her context to improve her circumstances. With the help of a micro-loan, she starts a business and gradually her life begins to change. As Saima's husband gains respect for her contribution to the family, he stops abusing her. She uses her earnings to finance her daughters' educations, ensuring that they will have more options than she had.⁷ Referring to her husband, Saima says, "We have a good relationship now. We don't fight, and he treats me well."⁸

Saima's story is about finding solutions within the mire of *shuvi*. Some people are unable to leave challenging spaces and so must work from within in order to create change. Others choose to engage this way, finding *shuvi* to be an effective means to create sustainable transformation.

Both models for *tikkun olam* in *Parshat Lech Lecha* are powerful. At times it is essential to leave while at others return is appropriate. *Lech* contains an idealistic impulse. It encourages us to reject the injustice around us and create a world imbued with the best that humanity can devise. *Shuvi* locates our activism in daily reality and invites us to engage with difficult and complex relationships in familiar habitats. Depending on our personal narratives and circumstances, we may seek to create change in the empty spaces beyond, or right where we are.



Adina Roth, a native of Johannesburg, South Africa, is a clinical psychologist who holds dual master's degrees in literature. A co-founder of the Johannesburg Egalitarian Chavurah, Adina runs B'tocham Education—a bar and bat mitzvah program that prepares pre-teens for their rites of passage, and organizes Women's Torah and Megillah readings. She has co-chaired Limmud Johannesburg for three years and has studied Bible and Talmud at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, in Jerusalem, and Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, in New York City. Adina lives in Johannesburg with her husband and daughter, and is interested in creating creative and diverse community spaces within the Jewish community and beyond. Adina can be reached at adinziroth@gmail.com.

⁷ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) 185-7.

⁸ *Ibid.* 187.

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