



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Lech Lecha 5769

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*Parshat Lech Lecha* chronicles Avram's development and maturation into the role that God designates for him: to be the seed of a new people whose values are rooted in justice and righteousness.<sup>1</sup> God tells Avram to "be a blessing,"<sup>2</sup> a cryptic phrase for the nascent leader and for us. What does it mean to "be a blessing?" As the *parshah* unfolds, we can trace Avram's development into this role. His growth shows us what it means to embody justice and righteousness; to be a blessing.

The *parshah* chronicles Avram's actions out in the world and in his own tent, giving us a sense that justice is equally important in public and at home. A series of episodes shows us that when his actions aren't guided by justice, he fails in both arenas.

While in Egypt as a public figure, Avram pretends that his attractive wife, Sarai, is his sister in an attempt to avoid harmful relations with his Egyptian hosts.<sup>3</sup> Pharaoh takes her as a mistress and Avram gains wealth as a result. However, when Pharaoh discovers the truth, he berates Avram and banishes him and Sarai from his country.<sup>4</sup> Ramban goes so far as to claim that Avram's immorality in Egypt ultimately causes his descendants to be enslaved there.<sup>5</sup>

Avram fails similarly in his personal life when righteousness and justice are absent. At the beginning of the *parshah*, he renders his wife powerless and voiceless, both in his ruse with Pharaoh and when he leaves his land with her: the text says that he literally "takes" (*yikach*) her with him.<sup>6</sup> The power imbalance that this language implies is palpable. Sarai's silence persists for four chapters of the *parshah*, as Avram acts upon her rather than with her in their childless, inequitable relationship.

There is a pivotal change in the *parshah* when we see Avram begin to embody righteousness and justice both internally and externally. Publicly, this is most clearly demonstrated through his courageous and righteous dealings with foreign kings in a time of war.<sup>7</sup> In two completely selfless acts, Avram organizes troops to rescue his nephew Lot from captivity and returns stolen wealth to neighboring kings. King Malki-Tzedek offers to pay him a great reward for the military feat, yet Avram declines the gift.<sup>8</sup> His intent was to do justice, not to earn a profit—a stark contrast from his behavior in Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:19

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:2

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:13

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:18-19

<sup>5</sup> Ramban on Genesis 12:10

<sup>6</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 40:4

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 14

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 14:21-24

In the private sphere, Avram turns around his relationship with Sarai. She finally breaks her silence, and the text says that “Avram listened to the voice of Sarai.”<sup>9</sup> Compared with the dominant position illustrated by the earlier passage, this new language connotes an equitable relationship (*vayishma*—he listened, rather than *vayikach*—he took). After this key change, in the very next chapter, God promises Avram that his wife will be blessed and that she will bear a son.<sup>10</sup>

Avram’s public and personal maturation is poetically confirmed in the *parshah’s* conclusion. God adds the divine letter *heh* to his name, so that publicly he is to be known as Avraham for the rest of his life. He then undergoes a circumcision, altering the most private part of his body. This twofold transformation of public and private serves as a mirror image of his growth as a leader and a husband.

According to this read, *Parshat Lech Lecha* suggests that true leadership must be a combination of justice personally and politically. When we genuinely work to increase justice and righteousness in our own lives, we also cultivate these values externally; when we actively address global issues, we set the stage for developing just personal lives. All of these actions intertwined are what make Avraham, and us, a blessing.



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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 16:2

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 17:16-19

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