



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

## Introductory Reflection

In her Dvar Tzedek below, from October of 2011, author Adina Roth outlines two different models of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) demonstrated by players in this week's *parasha*. The first model, "*lech*" (to depart), urges us to leave behind "all unjust systems in order to create a better world." The second model, "*shuvi*" (to return), prescribes "seeking change within the system, in a space fraught with difficulties and wounded human relationships." Roth's duality shows us that some injustices must be rejected and left behind, while others must be confronted head on.

AJWS grantee Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ) exemplifies both of these models working together to overcome the crisis of sexual violence against women and girls in the eastern Democratic of Congo (DRC)—referred to by UN officials as the "rape capital of the world." In this region that has been engulfed by conflict and genocide since 1994, the daily threat of sexual assault is tragic and frightening. Many of these crimes go unpunished because of the extremely weak justice system.

In 2006, a group of activists and female law school graduates was inspired to change this, and founded DFJ with the aim of rejecting all that is wrong with the Congolese legal system while working within the system to make the DRC safer for women and girls. DFJ provides free legal aid and psychosocial counseling to survivors of rape. It also partners with local police to implement better safety measures, trains community members to know their rights and stand up to defend them, and advocates for women's rights in the Congolese Parliament. This year DFJ won the impact category of the Namati Justice Prize for its important work.

Read more about the potential of *lech* and *shuvi* to achieve social justice in Adina's piece below, and [learn more about AJWS's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo here](#).

## Parashat Lech Lecha 5776

### *The Loftiness in Leaving and the Rigors of Return*

By Adina Roth  
October 24, 2015  
(Reprinted from November 5, 2011)

*Parashat 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."<sup>1</sup> Avram is asked to leave behind familial binds and unwanted value systems and embrace an unknown future in order to create

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:1.

a new world. The Sefat Emet, a 19<sup>th</sup>-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.<sup>2</sup>

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 *parashah*—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.<sup>3</sup>

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'i*"—a Deity of Vision, to mark her insight and epiphany.<sup>4</sup> 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 rattle our modern sensibilities. How can it be that the angel asks Hagar to return to an oppressive mistress?<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> The angel 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'

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<sup>2</sup> Sefat Emet on Genesis, 12:1.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16:9.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 16:13.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

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educations, ensuring that they will have more options than she had.<sup>7</sup> Referring to her husband, Saima says, “We have a good relationship now. We don’t fight, and he treats me well.”<sup>8</sup>

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 *Parashat 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. Adina runs B’tocham Education, which offers educational opportunities to the community, including a bar and bat mitzvah program that prepares pre-teens for their rites of passage and adult Bible classes using literature and psychology. She organizes Women’s Torah and Megillah readings, has co-chaired Limmud Johannesburg’s program for five 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, daughter and son, and is interested in developing creative and diverse community spaces within the Jewish community and beyond. Adina can be reached at [adinzi@mweb.co.za](mailto:adinzi@mweb.co.za).

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

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

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