

PARASHAT LECH-LECHA

Genesis 12:1–17:27

Parashat Lech-Lecha begins with the story of Abram leaving his birthplace in Haran. God promises the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. Because of a famine in the land, Abram takes his family to Egypt. While there, the pharaoh orders Abram's wife, Sarai, to live in his palace. Plagues come upon Egypt as punishment for what Pharaoh has done, and Sarai is restored to Abram. Returning to Canaan, Abram and his brother's son, Lot, divide the land in order to prevent any disagreements between them. Later, Lot is attacked and taken hostage by enemy kings. Abram rescues him and his family. Because Abram and Sarai have trouble conceiving a child, Sarai, in the custom of ancient times, invites her maidservant, Hagar, to have a child with Abram. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she begins to abuse Sarai, who responds by chasing away Hagar. An angel tells Hagar to return, and she bears a son whom Abram names Ishmael. As this Torah portion concludes, Abram is instructed to circumcise himself and Ishmael. Abram is told that the circumcision of all males at eight days of age will be a sign of God's covenant with him and his people forever.

OUR TARGUM

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God said to Abram, "*Lech-lecha*—go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you." So Abram and his wife, Sarai, and his

brother's son, Lot, set out for the land of Canaan, which today is the Land of Israel. When they reached the border of the land, God said to Abram, "I will give this land to your descendants."

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Because of poor crops and a shortage of food in the land of Canaan, Abram and Sarai traveled to

Egypt. Abram feared that an Egyptian might admire Sarai and want to kill him in order to take her as a wife. He therefore instructed her to say that she was his sister.

His prediction proved correct. While in Egypt, the pharaoh saw Sarai and demanded that she come to live in his palace. Shortly after she had moved in, God sent plagues upon Egypt, and Pharaoh discovered Sarai's real identity. "Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" Pharaoh asked Abram. Then, seeking forgiveness from God, he sent Abram and Sarai away with many gifts.

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From Egypt, Abram, Sarai, and Lot returned through the Negev desert to Bethel, which is located today about seventeen miles north of Jerusalem. When they reached Bethel, their herdsmen began to quarrel about where their cattle would graze. So Abram suggested that they divide the land between them. Lot chose the Plain of Jordan and settled near the city of Sodom. Abram remained in the land of Canaan, settling in Hebron.



THEMES

Parashat Lech-Lecha contains five important themes:

1. The demands of leadership.
2. Honesty in our dealings with others.

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Later, four foreign kings raided the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and took Lot as a captive. Hearing that Lot was in trouble, Abram gathered a troop of fighters and set out to rescue him. When they returned victoriously, the king of Sodom offered Abram a reward for having saved Lot and his city. Abram refused the reward. He told the king: "I will take nothing that is yours. I do not want you to say, 'It was I who made Abram rich.'"

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Now, God had promised that Abram's descendants would inherit that land, but Abram and Sarai had no children. So Sarai asked her maidservant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, to have a child with Abram. That was a common custom in that time for childless parents. When Hagar became pregnant, she began treating Sarai disrespectfully. Sarai blamed Abram for Hagar's attitude. When Abram told Sarai: "Deal with her as you think right," Sarai forced Hagar to flee from her house.

An angel saw what had happened and told Hagar to return to Sarai's house. The angel also promised that she would bear a son whose name would be Ishmael. Abram was then eighty-six years old.

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Afterwards, God told Abram: "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous." God changed Abram's name to "Abraham" (*Avraham*), meaning "father of a multitude," and promised the "land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession." As a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's offspring, God commanded that every Jewish male be circumcised at the age of eight days. So Abraham circumcised himself and Ishmael.

God also changed Sarai's name to "Sarah," meaning "princess," and said to Abraham: "I will give you a son by her . . . rulers of peoples shall issue from her."

3. Settling disagreements.
4. Rescuing captives.
5. The Jewish covenant of circumcision.

PEREK ALEF: *What Qualified Abram for Leadership of the Jewish People?*

The Torah tells us very little about Abram's early life. We are informed that he and Sarai, along with his nephew Lot, were brought by his father, Terah, from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran. After Terah's death, Abram was commanded by God to leave Haran and promised that he would become "a great nation."

For thousands of years students of Torah have been asking: "Why was Abram chosen for such important leadership? What had he done to be named the founder of the Jewish people?"

The rabbis who studied this Torah portion suggested that, while the Torah might not tell us much about Abram's early life or why he might have been selected for leadership, there was much to learn from the legends collected and passed from generation to generation by Jews.

According to some of those reports, Abram rebelled against the worship of idols in his home and in the palace of Nimrod, who ruled at that time. At an early age he saw some people praying to different stars and planets and others making gods out of wood and stone. He said to himself: "How is it possible for this wonderful world to have been created by a star or a planet, or by an idol that is made by human hands? How is it possible for something manufactured of wood or stone to be considered responsible for the development of our human ethical sense of right and wrong or of our desire to improve the world?"

The more questions Abram asked, the more foolish idolatry seemed to him. So he began asking questions of his father and of others who worked in Nimrod's palace. They resented his questions because they could not answer them. They accused Abram of being a troublemaker and a "revolutionary." When he persisted with his questions and public rejection of idolatry, his father reported him to Nimrod, and he was persecuted for his ideas and put into prison.

Abram's rejection of idolatry

When Abram came to his father's home, he saw his father's gods, twelve in number. . . . He hurried from the room into his father's outer courtyard, where he found his father seated with all his servants; and he came and sat down before his father and asked him. "Father, tell me, where is the God who created the heavens and the earth and created all human beings on earth?" And Terah answered Abram his son, saying: "Why, those who created all these are with us in the house!"

. . . So Abram took dishes and brought them into the chamber before his father's gods . . . and saw that not one of them was stretching out a hand to eat. . . . So he took hammers and . . . smashed all the gods of his father.

. . . When Terah saw this, he grew very angry. . . . "What have you done to all my gods?" And Abram answered his father . . . "I only brought fine dishes of food before them. But, when I offered the dishes to them to eat, all of them put out their hands to begin before the biggest of them all had started eating. When the big one saw what they did without waiting for him, he grew very angry . . . and smashed them all."

When Terah heard this, he grew exceedingly angry. . . . "You are speaking falsehood to me! Have these gods any spirit or soul or strength to do all you have told me? Why, they are wood and stone, and I made them! How can you tell me such lies?"

. . . Then Abram answered his father: "Then how can you worship these idols, who do not have the strength to do anything? Are these idols in whom you trust going to deliver you? Can they really hear your prayers when you cry unto them?" (Micha Joseph Bin Gorion, Mikkor Yisrael, Volume I, 15)

God chose Abram as the founder of the Jewish people because of his wisdom and bravery. He

was not afraid to ask hard questions or to stand up for what he believed. He was willing to risk ridicule, even suffering and persecution, for his convictions. He was willing to lead the minority of those who believed that idolatry was wrong and to devote his life to teaching that one God was the creative Source of all life. Those qualities made him a gifted leader.

Abram possessed other special qualities as well. The rabbis of the Midrash tell us that the prices he quoted in his business dealings were always fair, that people came to him for advice in times of trouble, and that when he was told that someone was sick he would not just offer a prayer but would visit and make the person feel better because of his concern and interest. (*Genesis Rabbah, Lech-Lecha, 11*)

Abram's priorities

Rabbi Levi explains that, when Abram was traveling through various lands, he saw people going to drunken parties. "May I not be a part of this country!" he would say. But, when he reached the location of Tyre, near the Land of Israel, and saw people working at weeding and hoeing in the proper seasons, he said: "May my portion be in this country." (*Genesis Rabbah, Lech-Lecha, 8*)

Abram valued creative work. He rejected the company of those who chose to waste their energies and time with drugs or drunkenness. He respected those who planned for the future and who were willing to work hard in order to transform their ideas and hopes into reality.

For all those reasons, our Torah interpreters tell us, Abram was selected as the founder and leader of the Jewish people.

PEREK BET: Is It Ever Right to Lie?

Abram and Sarai find themselves in a dangerous situation within our Torah portion. They have gone to Egypt in order to escape from famine in the Land of Israel. Fearing that some Egyptian will admire Sarai and kill him, Abram tells her not

to reveal that she is his wife. When the pharaoh of Egypt asks her who she is, she tells him that she is Abram's "sister."

Later, after Pharaoh discovers the truth, he confronts Abram and asks: "Why didn't you tell me that she was your wife?" The Torah does not tell us what Abram answered. We are only informed that Pharaoh sent him away with Sarai and with all the riches he had acquired in Egypt.

Should Abram have lied? Was it permissible for him to say that his wife was his "sister" in order to save himself?

A half-truth

It was not a lie for Abram to call Sarai his "sister" since Sarai was his niece, and relatives may be termed brother and sister. (Midrash ha-Gadol 12:12)

On another occasion, Abram also told Sarai to say that she was his "sister." In his explanation of what he had done he said: ". . . she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife." (Genesis 20:12)

Ramban (Nachmanides)



Faced with the fear that he might be killed by the Egyptians, Abram may have decided to tell a "half-truth." He would say that Sarai was his "sister" which, in fact, she was, but he would not reveal that she was his wife. The commentator Nachmanides condemns Abram for his behavior. He says that Abram "committed a great sin" by not telling the truth about his wife. "He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings. . . ." (*Genesis 12:9*)



Hirsch

Other commentators disagree. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a leading scholar who lived in

Germany from 1808 to 1888, argued that Abram's actions were honorable. He knew that the Egyptians would not deal harshly with an unmarried woman traveling with her brother but that they would kill the husband of a beautiful woman and rape her. So he acted to protect both Sarai and himself. In fact, he was really telling the truth. She was the daughter of his father and actually his "sister."

The issue remains unresolved. Was Abram justified in lying? Is using a half-truth lying? And what about Sarai? Was it her responsibility to tell the truth rather than follow Abram's instructions?

PEREK GIMEL: *Dealing with Differences*

When Abram and Lot left Egypt, they took with them many flocks and herds. They had both become rich. When they reached Bethel, the Torah tells us that their herdsmen began to quarrel with one another.

What the Torah does not reveal are the reasons for their arguments. Those are suggested by the interpreters who commented on this section of our Torah portion.

One commentator explains that Lot's herdsmen paid no attention to posted borders or signs that read Private Property. They allowed their animals to graze wherever they happened to wander. Abram's herdsmen saw what they were doing and accused them of robbery.

What they argued about:

Rabbi Berekiyah said in Rabbi Judah's name: Abram's cattle would be muzzled and then taken out so that they could not graze in land that was not permitted. On the other hand, Lot's herdsmen refused to muzzle their cattle. As a result they grazed wherever they went.

When Abram's herdsmen asked, "Is what you are doing not robbery?" Lot's herdsmen replied, "Abram is a barren mule who cannot have children! Therefore Lot will inherit everything that belongs to him. If his cattle now graze on Abram's land, it is as if they were already grazing on what belongs to Lot!" (Genesis Rabbah 41:5)

Like many arguments, the one between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen began with a disagreement over what was considered the right thing to do and ended with Lot's people hurling public insults at Abram. "He's a barren mule who can't have children," they said. And Abram's herdsmen may have answered, "Lot has become an idolater, a dishonest unbeliever!" According to the rabbis, it was the insult that turned their disagreement into a bitter battle.

Yet there may have been another reason for the disagreement between Abram, Lot, and their herdsmen. The commentator Nachmanides explains that Abram and Lot had come back to Canaan with huge herds and that Abram opposed letting them graze together because he feared that the inhabitants of the land (the Canaanites and Perizzites), seeing how great they were, might decide to rise up and destroy them. So he ordered their herdsmen to graze their animals in different places.

Lot and his herdsmen paid no attention. They did not seem to care about making trouble with the other people of the land or about their security.

Seeing that there were considerable differences between them, Abram suggested that they go their separate ways. Furthermore, according to the Torah, he gave Lot his choice. He said to him, ". . . if you go north, I will go south; and, if you go south, I will go north." Lot agreed. He journeyed eastward, and Abram remained in the land of Canaan.

PEREK DALET: *Abram Rescues Lot*

It was not long after Lot had settled in the city of Sodom that it was attacked by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam; Tidal, king of Goiim; Amraphel, king of Shinar; and Arioch, king of Ellasar. They stormed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, seizing their wealth and taking Lot as a captive.

Hearing what had happened, Abram immediately organized an army to pursue them and to rescue his nephew. He defeated the kings and saved Lot. Upon Abram's victorious return, the king of Sodom praised him for his bravery and offered him a large reward. Abram refused to take anything.

Several questions come to mind: "Why, if

Abram and Lot had separated from each other, did Abram feel obligated to risk his life to rescue Lot? Why did he not take some of the spoils of the battle?"

Nachmanides suggests that, even though there had been disagreements between them, Abram remembered that Lot had been a faithful companion and friend. Another interpreter points out that Abram realized that, when a person is taken captive, others must see him as a "brother" and rush to rescue him. (*Akedat Yitzhak*)

Rescuing the captive

Pidyon shevuyin, or "rescuing the captives," is one of the most important commandments of Judaism: Abram was ready to sacrifice his life in order to save Lot because he believed that saving a life by freeing a victim of oppression was one of the highest forms of serving God. (*Genesis Rabbah* 43:2)

Rambam (Maimonides)



Abram's rescue of Lot became an ethical model for Jews throughout the centuries. According to the great twelfth-century teacher Moses Maimonides, *pidyon shevuyim*, the "rescue of captives," is a more important mitzvah even than charity for the poor. The rabbis of the Talmud ordered that charity set aside for building a synagogue could be used to ransom Jews from their captors; they taught that whoever delays in rescuing a fellow Jew is regarded as if he had spilled his blood. During the Middle Ages, in many Jewish communities, associations were formed to collect funds for the ransoming of captive Jews. Thousands were saved from pirates, kidnapers, and hostile armies. (*Mishneh Torah, Aniyyim* 8:10, 12; *Baba Batra* 8b)

Abram's immediate and brave action to save his "brother," Lot, set the standard for fulfilling the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyin*, the liberation of captives.

Yet, having fulfilled his obligation to rescue Lot, why did Abram refuse any reward?

The rabbis of the Midrash suggest that Abram was concerned that, if he took anything, people would say that he had gone to battle in order to increase his wealth and not to save his "brother." He wanted his purpose understood. His concern was with Lot's safety and welfare, not with acquiring more riches. (*Genesis Rabbah* 43:12)

Reward for a mitzvah

Concerning the doing of a mitzvah, Antigonos of Socho taught: "Be not like servants who work for their master only on condition that they receive payment, but be like servants who work for their master without looking for any reward; and be filled with reverence for God." And (Simon) ben Azai commented that the "reward of doing one mitzvah is the opportunity of doing another." (*Avot* 1:3 and 4:2)

While most interpreters praise Abram for his rescue of Lot and refusal to take any favors for it, Rabbi Yochanan, a famous third-century teacher in the Land of Israel, was very critical of Abram. He believed that Abram had missed an opportunity to convert Lot, and even the king of Sodom, to his new faith. Rabbi Yochanan argued that they were both in debt to him and that he should have taken advantage of them. (*Nedarim* 32b)

Most commentators disagree with Rabbi Yochanan's criticism of Abram. They praise Abram for refusing any reward for his rescue of Lot. Because he did so, his example of *pidyon shevuyin* and of doing a mitzvah without strings attached, without conditions or rewards, still stands as a powerful ethical model.

PEREK HEI: Berit Milah—The Covenant of Circumcision

The Torah informs us that, three years after Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, God promises to establish a *berit*, a "covenant" or "contract," with Abram. The symbol of that covenant was *berit milah*, or "circumcision." Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin from the penis of the male child. In our Torah portion God instructs Abram: "At the age of eight days, every male among you throughout

the generations shall be circumcised. . . . Thus shall My *berit* be marked in your flesh as an everlasting covenant.” (Genesis 17:12–13)

So Abram circumcised himself, his son Ishmael, and every other male who was a part of his community. As a part of the ritual, God changes Abram’s name to *Avraham*, meaning “father of many nations,” and Sarai’s name to *Sarah*, meaning “princess.”

The practice of circumcision was common among many ancient peoples in the Middle East. It was the custom of the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites, and later it became the practice of all Moslems. Among most ancient peoples, circumcision was performed just before marriage in hope that the “sacrifice” of the foreskin would make one a father of many children.

While the promise connected to Abraham’s circumcision and change of name is that he will be the “father of many nations,” the timing of the ceremony of *berit milah* was set at eight days after birth. Within the Jewish community, circumcision was not done to guarantee many children but, rather, as a way in which a male child became identified as a Jew. *Berit milah* became a ceremony of pride, an initiation of the newborn child into the faith and community of the Jewish people.

Perhaps that is why Jews have observed the *berit milah* ceremony with such care through the ages and why enemies of the Jewish people have tried to prevent its practice. Rulers who wished to destroy Jewish loyalties and put an end to Judaism very often prohibited Jews from practicing circumcision.

When, for instance, Antiochus Epiphanes (165 B.C.E.) declared war on the Jews by forbidding them to observe their Sabbaths and festivals or to practice the traditions of their Torah, he also made a special point of proclaiming that all Jewish sons should be left uncircumcised. He ordered any parent who arranged for a *berit milah* to be put to death. Those who attended such ceremonies were also threatened. The Maccabees, however, refused to follow the orders of Antiochus and declared a war of liberation against his oppressive rule.

For some Jewish teachers, circumcision represents more than a sacred sign of Jewish identity or a symbol of the covenant of the Jewish people with God. There are those interpreters who be-

lieve that circumcision is a way of teaching human beings that the world is imperfect and requires *tikun*, or “improvement.” In the Midrash, the rabbis report the following:

The Roman general Turnus Rufus once asked Rabbi Akiba: “If your God is so powerful, and wanted male children circumcised, then why isn’t each child simply born with the circumcision already done?”

Rabbi Akiba replied: “God gave all the commandments to the people of Israel so that they could perfect themselves by doing them. God wished that individuals would take on the responsibility of perfecting themselves and the world through the practice of the commandments. The commandment of circumcision reminds us that, just as we need to improve ourselves physically, so do we need to improve ourselves and our world spiritually.

(*Midrash Tanchuma* and *Sefer ha-Hinuch* 57)

In other words, circumcision is a sacred lesson. It is a powerful symbol of Jewish identity. It serves as a reminder to Jews of their ethical tasks and responsibilities. It also teaches us that our talents and abilities require improvement. Our defects and deficiencies should be corrected and repaired. Just as the male baby requires the improvement of circumcision, so the world requires human beings to perfect it. *Berit milah* is the sign that Jews were “contracted” to God for the work of perfecting both themselves and the world.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What qualified Abram to become the founder of the Jewish people? How would you compare his qualities of leadership with leaders of our own times?
2. Did Abram do the right thing when he lied to Pharaoh about Sarai’s identity? Is a half-truth or “white lie” permissible when it can save a life? Under what other conditions might half-truths be justified?

3. The commentators present Abram as a model for solving conflicts between competing factions. Which of his techniques, as described by the interpreters, might be applied today to international and personal disputes?
4. How can the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyin* be carried out today? Is it still the obligation of individuals or are international matters so complex that we must leave liberation of the oppressed to the “experts”?
5. Since a Jewish male child is only eight days old when he is circumcised, the *berit milah* is hardly a demonstration of his commitment to Judaism or to the Jewish people. What, then, is the meaning of the ceremony? Might the same be asked about the naming of a baby girl?