

D'var Torah: Lech Lecha, Walking With Fear

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Temple B'nai Chaim

Rabbi Rachel Bearman

In the opening verses of this week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, we watch as God calls to Abram and tells him to leave the only life and home that he had ever known and to go out to an unknown land. The portion traces the beginning of the journeys of Abram and his wife Sarai- including the incredible and mystical holiness of God's covenant with Abram as well as the family's struggles and the moments when they failed.

We find these chapters of Genesis directly after the unimaginable destruction of the flood and the confusion that came after the Tower of Babel was destroyed.

The first verse of Lech Lecha, when God calls to Abram, is understood to be the beginning of the Jewish people. Abram and Sarai's first steps on their journey to a new land are the first steps of the Jewish story.

Our tradition's commitment to identifying this woman and man as the first people to take on the mantle of Judaism is fascinating because the story that comes after God's call to action is not without its failings. Abram and Sarai are complicated characters. At times they are remarkably unlikeable while at other moments each is incredibly sympathetic. Ultimately, they are very human. And, when I find myself struggling with or failing to live up to some ideal of perfection, I take comfort in knowing that- according to our people's own story- we come from very human roots.

In the past, when I have read this parashah (Torah portion), I have been struck by the bravery and confidence that Abram and Sarai must have had in order to embark on a journey that would lead to lives so drastically different than the ones that they had known. I imagined them as if they were the characters in an old movie- packing their bags and hitching their horses (camels) to their wagons while laughing with one another and dreaming of future adventures.

This afternoon, as I sat down at my computer to write this D'var Torah, I couldn't call up that rose-tinted picture.

A little more than 24 hours ago, I got a phone call telling me that there had been a cruel and painful anti-Semitic message left on the locker of a Jewish child at Wilton's Middle School. Since that phone call, I have spoken to many of our students and to congregants from multiple towns. I have watched them struggle through their tears to verbalize what they're feeling. I have coached our students on how to politely but resolutely end conversations with those whose respect for boundaries has been overridden by their curiosity.

At 9am this morning, I sat down next to my interfaith colleagues, town leaders, and school administrators and listened to the stories, feelings, and fears of members of our local community. I watched with pride as members of our congregation shared honestly and passionately with the hundreds of people whose outrage had motivated them to assemble. At noon, I met with representatives from the police force, town government, school administration, Anti-Defamation League, and our Interfaith Clergy Association to discuss everything from how we can best to serve those who are hurting right now to how we will work together as we move forward. The past twenty-four hours have been an emotional roller coaster for so many of us, and all of these experiences combined to make it impossible for me to imagine these first Jewish people as the happy-go-lucky optimists that they had always been in my mind.

Instead, when I sat down to write this D'var Torah, I couldn't help but wonder how much fear they must have been feeling. Abram, at least, gets to hear God's voice articulate this change in his destiny. I imagine that his fear of an unknown future would be tempered by the knowledge that his path had been chosen by a being far outside of his understanding. Sarai does not receive even that comfort. Instead, she hears of their new plans, their new lives, from her husband who can only assure her that he had been told by God's voice to completely upend their lives and to abandon the only home they had ever known.

Today, after listening to the fears of our members as well as those of others in the community, I was unable to imagine Abram and Sarai as anything less than terrified. But, when I shifted the framework for their journeys from excited anticipation to faithful fear, I realized that their vulnerability made their characters and their stories even more important- especially for our community on this Erev Shabbat.

Abram and Sarai, the two people who we identify as the father and mother of all Jewish people were scared. They were human and imperfect, and their faith did not keep them from feeling afraid.

The fact that they struggled so much and so consistently in the first few chapters of their journeys can be more easily understood if we imagine that each step was made with shaking feet. The fact that they were sometimes so unkind to one another makes more sense when we consider that they were battling with their individual insecurities and against their concerns for what the future might bring.

Abram and Sarai, the first Jewish people, lived lives that included fear. But, the most important lesson for us to learn is that their fear did not keep them from living. At the end of this week's portion, God tells Abram that he will- from that moment on- be known by the name Abraham. Sarai, similarly, also receives a new name and would from then on be called Sarah.

As I read these words this afternoon, I realized that these name changes do not come at moments when Abraham and Sarah have completely evolved into who they were destined to become. These name changes come in the **middle** of their journeys. God

changes their names to honor the fact that they had walked with their fears and had been transformed by their experience.

The Sarai and Abram who left their homeland had not vanquished their fears but had instead refused to allow those concerns to keep them from living, from walking forward even as their legs shook and their palms were damp. They may have been scared, but they kept moving forward.

And, that was an accomplishment so profound, so transformative, that God was forced to honor them as new people whose new names reflected both their past struggles and the possibilities of their future.

In our world, being Jewish and belonging to a Jewish community are not always easy. We walk with fears and concerns on our shoulders that people from other faith traditions might not share or even understand. When we experience days like this past one, we may wonder how to move forward or even remain standing.

And, in moments like this one, we should remember that the first Jewish people were brave not because they were fearless but because they were scared.

We should remember that being Jewish is not about being born Abraham and Sarah but is instead about transforming ourselves from Abram and Sarai.

We should remember that there will be moments when our steps will falter and our hands might shake, but, even so, we are lucky because, unlike our spiritual ancestors, we are not traveling with a tiny group of people. We are traveling on this journey into our futures with a mighty multitude.

Lech Lecha. Go forth.

We journey not without fear but through fear.

We journey with the support and love of friends and family of other faiths.

We journey because we are scared but determined.

We journey together.

Chazak. Chazak. V'nithazek.

Be strong. Be strong. And, let us strengthen one another.

Shabbat Shalom.