



© Rabbi Matthew L Berkowitz, *The Lovell Haggadah*, Plate 2 (2008)

Rashi unpacks the command of *lekh lekha*: “go for your benefit and for your own good and there I will make of you a great nation.” As in the “hero’s journey” described by Joseph Campbell, Abraham must depart, initiate himself into a new reality, and then return—to himself. He returns a truer self, a renewed self. The Land of Israel, the Rabbis teach, has the capacity to affect the mind and soul: “The air of the Land of Israel sharpens one’s acuity” (BT Bava Batra 158b). There is not only a physical connection between the Jewish people and the Land, but also a deeply mystical and intellectual one. We nurture the Land and the Land nurtures us. We are a reflection of the diverse landscapes of Israel; we are richly layered and textured like Israel; and we aspire heavenward—just as the earthly furrows beckon to the heavenly horizons of our Promised Land. It all begins with a journey—trusting in that commanding voice which will take us to a beautiful land and a deeper and truer self.

Lekh Lekha 5781

לך-לך תשפ"א



A Single Star: Sarah’s Journey

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“I know this is not fun to hear on a Wednesday afternoon, but I would really look into getting fertility tests if I were you.” The harrowing text message from my sister came as I was waiting to hear back from her and my sister-in-law about their most recent cycle of egg retrieval and genetic testing. It was her way of telling me that once again, they received news that their journey to parenthood would not be a simple one. But it was also her way of reminding me that our expectations about our bodies, so deeply ingrained in us from a young age, often do not come to fruition in the ways we expect them to. My sister’s sadness was particular to this moment, yes, but also born in the gap between the expectation that she could easily give life to a healthy child, and the reality that she could not.

In parashat Lekh Lekha, our ancestors grapple with this gulf between expectation and reality, God making an epic promise whose fulfillment is dependent on the bodies of Avraham and Sarah. In chapter 15 of Genesis, Avraham, then Avram, quite shaken by all he’s endured since leaving his home, begins to question God’s ability to bring about the promise of great nationhood.

אֲדֹנָי הִ' מֵהִתְתַּלְּוֹלִי וְאֵנֶכִי הוֹלֵךְ עִרְרִי

Adonai, Hashem, what will you give me, as here I am to go on childless? (Gen. 15:2)

God offers words of assurance in return, inviting Avraham to count the stars above him if he can. So shall his offspring be upon the land that God will give to future generations. There, beneath the blanket of innumerable stars, through a series of odd rituals and a personal revelatory vision, Avraham’s faith in God is secured once more. The essential missing voice here is, of course, Sarah our Mother, whose womb is meant to bear the weight of this covenant. Through her, a single star will become millions.

Surely if God promises, then it will be so. Surely, if our bodies were created in such a way, commanded to פרו ורבו (“be fruitful and multiply”) within our first breaths of being, then they will obey the Divine commandment. Feminist biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, writing of the ancient Near East’s cultural transformation from goddess worship to monotheism, emphasizes the power of this faith, whether in the self-propagating plants of all their kinds or in the godlike power of our own bodies to bring forth new human life:

“Human beings do not have to worry about perpetuating and continuing any of the elements that God creates. As master of creation, God has the power to keep creation going. God’s mastery over the physical universe, epitomized in the creative word, is so powerful that we can assume that this universe will continue without our active efforts towards this end.” (*In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 93)

If the trees and all the vegetation spread upon the Earth’s surface can blossom once more as winter turns to spring, Sarah’s body will surely bend to the inevitability of pregnancy.

Of course, it is not so simple. Itzik Manger, one of the great Yiddish poets of the 20th century, writes for us a window into the complicated fertility journey of the house of Avraham in these final chapters of parashat Lekh Lekha. Listen as we are gifted with a midrashic exchange between our Father and Mother:

“Abie, when will we have a child? We’re both already old folks. Everyone knows a woman as old as I Is already due for the eighteenth time.”	“אָוורעמל, ווען וועלן מיר האָבן אַ קינד? מיר זענען ביידע שוין אַלטע לייט. ביי לייטן אַ פֿרוי אין די יאָרן ווי איך איז שוין דאָס אַכצנטע מאָל אויף דער צייט.”
Abraham Our Father smiles and is mute And puffs away, smoking his pipe: Have faith my wife, if He on High wills, Even a broom can shoot.”	אברהם אַבינו שמייכלט און שווייגט און פּיפּקע מיט זיין ליולקע רויך: “בטחון, מיין וויב, אַז דער אייבערשטער ווייל, שיסט אַפֿילו אַ בעזעם אויך.”

The conversation goes on like this: Sarah remains unnamed, expressing her pain plainly to her husband as he continues to respond with the same four lines above. “Every night,” she says, “I hear how my body sobs . . . Often I think that the star in the window is really the soul of our child, that wanders around every night among rain and shadows and wind.” Have faith, my wife. “I see how Hagar’s child plays with the sun in the sand, and I give him a pat on his little head, a strange sadness comes into my hand.” Have faith, my wife.

I invite you to be moved by this moment in the lives of our ancestors, when Avraham’s faith is set so starkly against Sarah’s suffering. While we know that parashat Vayera will bring the sound of Sarah’s laughter, the coo of Yitzhak’s first cries, for now nothing is yet known by our Mother Sarah. It is a powerful thing to step into Avraham’s faith, but what if we are never blessed with a personal revelation, a spectacular moment beneath the whispering stars? What if, when we fall into deep sleep, all we see is that single star, a haunting reminder of the thing we desire most in the world, just beyond our reach?

I pray that I get to be an aunt to my sister’s children, however they come into being. With each round of fertility treatments she and her beloved endure, I hope my prayers reach their bodies as much as I hope that they reach the Heavens. But we do not know. We each have a unique journey to take in this world, a particular path, a body all our own. If the still small voice of eternity brings you comfort, listen for the potential promise it may carry as you are brought outside to contemplate God’s creation. But when faith wavers, be comforted by Sarah’s sadness. Just like us, she did not know where her journey would take her.

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אחר דבר | A Different Perspective



A Land of Promise

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Abraham continually inspires us, his descendants, in his ability to place trust in the journey. God’s command to “[j]ourney forth from your country, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house” (Gen. 12:1) is striking: Leaving one’s country is doable. But to journey from one’s birthplace and familial connections is jarring—with the potential to transform one into an aimless wanderer. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his roots for an indeterminate future—for the place that God will show him. A promise. And nothing more.