

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

Distance Learning from the Back of Shul

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

When we think of “the book” (as in “the people of the book”), we picture a bound volume with pages sitting open before a reader on a table or a lap. If we are speaking of the Torah, that book is typically a *humash*, which will often be found in the seat back of the seat in front of you in the synagogue. The same is true of a prayer book.



The image here is a page from a High Holiday *mahzor* completed in Esslingen, Germany, in 1290. Notice the huge word—*melekh* (“king”)—in the middle of the page, surrounded by the image of a castle. This is a massive volume, and the word could have been seen from anywhere in the synagogue. For congregants who had no prayer books themselves, this would have been a crucial piece of instruction. All they would have needed to know is one Hebrew word, and they would immediately have understood one of the central themes of the High Holidays—that God is King of the Universe. How brilliant a way to teach a lesson, and how beautiful!

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TORAH FROM JTS



לך לך תשע"ח

Lekh Lekha 5778



Land and People—When Things Get Real

Dr. Hillel Gruenberg, Director of Israel Engagement, JTS and HUC-JIR

Lekh Lekha is one of my favorite parashiyot because it marks the entrance of the biblical narrative “into history.” Putting aside the historicity of the Bible—the subject of no small scholarly debate—Lekh Lekha departs from the preceding biblical text as it introduces us to the lands, people, and civilizations that will serve as a backdrop for the millennia of triumph and tribulation that await Abraham, his descendants, and their contemporaries. Until now, the story has been fundamentally supernatural and ahistorical—the creation of the world and all that is in it, heavenly gifts and divine punishment, a cataclysmic flood, and extensive genealogies of the forebears of future nations, whose lifespans number in the hundreds of years.

In Lekh Lekha, however, the geographic and sociological backgrounds to our story are quintessentially worldly even as its plot depends on God’s injunctions and promises to Abraham. We now encounter the geographical context for most of the biblical narrative: Canaan in the center, Egypt to the west, and Mesopotamia to the east. Moreover, we discover aspects of the culture, politics, and everyday concerns of the inhabitants of these regions. Mesopotamian city-states sought to expand their wealth and influence by invading settlements on the other side of the great desert to their west, the ancient Egyptian elite had less than savory practices regarding other people’s spouses, and infertility and scarcity of resources present ubiquitous concerns. The introduction of these geographic and cultural elements frames the narrative of the Bible, making it more real and perhaps, by extension, more meaningful than a story relying entirely on supernatural struggles and fantastical phenomena.

This “creeping realness” is especially notable in relation to the Land of Canaan, where Abraham settles after leaving his ancestral home. Though this piece of

the Earth approximates the Land that is promised to Abraham and his descendants, it becomes very clear very quickly that “inheriting” this territory will require more than a divine snap of the fingers. On a local level, Canaan is not empty of inhabitants at the time of Abraham’s arrival, and the potential for conflict over the Land exists not only with the local tribes but even within Abraham’s own household as strife emerges between his followers and those of his nephew Lot. *Lekh Lekha* also underscores the precarious situation of Canaan as a geopolitical crossroads, inherently vulnerable to the cultural and military intrusion of great empires to the east and west. Abraham’s journey from Haran and Ur Kasdim, his flight to and return from Egypt, and his participation in battle against Mesopotamian armies not only foreshadow the Children of Israel’s eventual oppression by and liberation from the Pharaohs and Babylonian emperors but also the centuries of shifting political control to follow.

The issue of the Promised Land’s unclear borders surfaces even within this very parashah as Abraham and his descendants are promised ownership of a section of land three times. The first instance refers to “this land” (Gen. 12:7), presumably the land of Canaan, which is mentioned in the immediately preceding verses, and the third explicitly outlines Abraham’s allotment as “all of the land of Canaan” (17:8). The second territorial promise God makes, however, is for Abraham and his descendants to inherit the land of several peoples, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates—a massive swath of territory encompassing all of modern-day Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan as well as parts of Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. These are just the first conflicting prescriptions for the borders of the Holy Land that we see both in the Bible (Exod. 23:31; Num. 34:1–12; Ezek. 47:13–20; to name just a few) and in later Jewish texts (e.g., Mishnah *Shevi’it* 6:1; Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Terumot* 1:1–6). Here in *Lekh Lekha*, we have the seed of a debate that will follow through to the modern period as Zionist thinkers, British colonial officials, Israeli leaders, and Palestinian nationalists have continued to argue over the borders of this hotly contested piece of the globe.

Abraham’s own initial experiences in Canaan also portend the complex, elusive, and at times paradoxical relationship that the Jewish people and tradition have had with *Eretz Yisrael* and the concept of a “Promised Land” for millennia. A mere few verses after we see Abraham arrive in the country that God promises as his descendant’s rightful home, we find that there is a famine in the Land. This in turns leads Abraham and his household to leave

for Egypt, a development that seems to imply that the land to the west is, in terms of sustenance and material well-being, more fruitful and promising than the Promised Land itself!

Even as Abraham returns from Egypt, it is immediately clear that his lot, and that of his descendants, will be to wrestle with the Land and all that comes with it—hostile neighbors, limited resources, intra-communal squabbles, and foreign incursions. Indeed, credit is due to this parashah for not sugarcoating the social, political, and environmental conditions of the Promised Land. Following this initial encounter, the Land’s connection with the Jewish people will always be one of paradoxes. It will be both a “land of milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8, 3:17, 13:5; Num. 13:27; Deut. 6:3, etc.) and a “land that eats its inhabitants” (Num. 13:32). Later, within a single page of Talmud, residence in the Land is described as imperative upon all Jews (and residing outside the Land equated with idol worship), and aliyah to the Land of Israel pronounced as transgressing a positive commandment (BT Ketubot 110b)!

Lekh Lekha lays the very foundation for our communal narratives and national myths regarding the Promised Land, its borders, and its connection with those to whom it has been so promised. It makes clear, both implicitly and explicitly, that the road ahead will not be an easy one, and that the relationship between the people and the Land (both of which will come to be known as *Israel*) will forever be one of struggle and negotiation. Though it may not seem so at first, *Lekh Lekha* delivers the message that both the Land and the promise will involve inherent and unavoidable complication, contradiction, and confusion. Even as the Torah engages us in tales of Abraham’s epic exploits and divine promises, it impels us to focus on the real rather than the ideal, reminding us that dealing with the implications of these deeds requires persistent and active engagement with the people, norms, and conditions of our world.

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