

## **Our Proselytizing Ancestors: Three Tools for Holding Conviction in Mixed Community**

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At the beginning of parashat Lekh Lekha, Avraham and Sarah famously heed God's command to leave their home. This first act of conviction is immediately followed by another - proselytizing. This might feel surprising to those of us who were taught that Jews don't proselytize. But Sarah and Avraham, according to rabbinic tradition, proactively converted others. When they leave on their famous journey, they take their wealth, their household, "וְאֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן," and the souls they had made in Haran (Bereshit 12:5). Rashi, quoting Bereshit Rabbah, explains - "Avraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women." Before leaving town, before obeying God's command to go, they find people to convert.

While I teach today, I want y'all to try and relate to this vision of Sarah and Avraham. Even if we squirm at the idea of going out and converting others, I'd guess that you have a belief you would eagerly convince everyone of right now if you could just snap your fingers and make everyone agree. You really think it's correct, and that the world would be better for it. Think of one. Let Sarah and Avraham remind us that it's normal to feel conviction.

And yet, it is also normal to encounter people who strongly disagree. Sarah and Avraham travel in a world full of people with very different values. Like them, we all live near someone who disagrees with whatever we'd proselytize for. And like them, we must choose how to respond to this reality. The question I have been asking myself is, "What do I do once I've acknowledged the spiritual proselytizer in me, and that other people see the world so differently? How do I act as a person of strong conviction?"

I'm going to suggest three tools for having strong convictions in mixed community, which I learn from Avraham and Sarah, our proselytizing forebears. They are: make affinity spaces, act across disagreement, and hold spiritual humility.

The first, to make affinity spaces, I'll suggest from Avraham's altar building. After arriving in their new home, Avraham builds three altars (Genesis 12:7, 12:8, 13:18), specific places where our ancestors can practice their beliefs, alone. The Torah says Avraham and Sarah journey "וַהֲלוֹךְ וְנָסוּעַ," "in stages" (Bereshit 12:9), venturing out to interact, and then returning to their altars. I know this practice can work well for me. At times, I need to be with only Jews, with only trans people, with only Iraqis. This is not a xenophobic desire, but a truth of the safety and affirmation found in affinity. This is especially true for those who experience discrimination in mixed spaces. Time with our people gives us the spiritual strength to interact in the wider world. We journey out again in stages and we return to our affinity spaces.

The second tool, to act across disagreement, I'll suggest from Avraham's war. Avraham's nephew Lot is taken captive by warring kings (Genesis 14:12). Avraham has a clear need: to free his nephew. We learn that Avraham has three neighbors - Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre - referred to as his "בְּעָלֵי בְרִית," his allies (Genesis 14:13). These neighbors have other gods and convictions, but this does not stop Avraham from getting to know them so well that he can rely on them in crisis. When it's time to act, Avraham the proselytizer makes way for Avraham the doer. When we have a discrete, achievable action that will improve our community, it often takes a coalition to get there. We can learn this from Avraham, who knew how to ally across disagreement.

Finally, the tool I'll call holding spiritual humility. I learn this from what's not in the parashah: a *command* to proselytize. That Avraham and Sarah acted to convert others is an enduring midrash, in the Targumim, Bereshit Rabbah, and Talmud - yet none of these sources recount God telling them to convert anyone. In Mishneh Torah (Hilkhoh Avodah Zara 1), Rambam expands on Avraham's spiritual awakening and precise methods of proselytization. God does not speak once in Rambam's account. In other words, God never tells Sarah and Avraham that their path is the only righteous path. As Avraham and Sarah teach their Torah, they must hold this knowledge. Spiritual humility is less practical than affinity spaces or alliances. It's a mindset we hold when we interact with the stranger. I can believe that my path is correct. But the Jewish way is to hold enough humility to acknowledge that yours may be, too. Hashem never commanded Avraham and Sarah to make everyone conform. Hashem has never told me that you are completely wrong.

Part of why I came to JTS in the first place was to study in a mixed setting. The future rabbis who will be ordained this May hold differing beliefs on Torah, God, and politics. I have spent these years studying in a mixed space, because I believe I will work in one, too. I've suggested only three tools for moving as a person of conviction in mixed spaces. I feel we must have much more Jewish wisdom on how to believe so hard, and love humanity, who can be so other. This is the Torah I'm praying to learn more of, as I leave this mixed study hall for the plural worlds to come.