

Emily Lewis, 10/15/21

Lech L'cha D'rash, version 3

The name of this *parashah*—*Lech l'cha*--is also the name of a song that is popular with our campers and well-loved in our congregation. I assume we will all sing it in our homes tonight.

The Torah: A Modern Commentary: Revised Edition lists five parts in this Shabbat's *parashah*: Part one is the Call of Abram. We often **stop** with these familiar verses. Part two, The Wanderings, describes the famine that causes Abram, Sarai, and Lot to travel to Egypt; this part finds Abram allowing his sister/wife Sarai to join Pharaoh's harem. Later Abram, Sarai, and Lot are ordered to leave—and they do so, bringing *great* wealth with them. Abram is described as “very rich, with live stock, silver, and gold.” Lot also leaves Egypt with great wealth. They both have so many animals and so much wealth, the servants of each man want to blame the other man's servants for how difficult the work has become. The problem is solved when Abram invites Lot to choose the land that Lot feels is best. Abram, with God's help, then surveys the land that he will inhabit. This is when Abram sets up his tent at Mamre in Hebron. In this section, then, our ancestor Abram must, as the source points out, “respond to the claim of God, the claim of kin, and finally (as in the Sodom story) to the claim of all humankind.”

The third part of *Lech l'cha* deals with War and Rescue. The kings surrounding Lot's land choose to capture Lot --and it's Abram and his men to the rescue. Was that in the movie?

The fourth part deals again with covenant and with birth. Here's the way one of the commentators described this *parashah's* covenant: "The promise is made to Abram in a special most solemn form—with darkness, a smoking oven, and flaming torch." So that part of the *parashah* shows yet another *b'rit* or covenant between G-d and Abram. It seems that Abram will get a son after all—but not right away. There is a delay; the patriarch finally fathers a son, but not with Sarai. Hagar and Ishmael, thus, become "foils to the main personages."

The final section—the fifth for the *parashah*--deals with the covenant of circumcision. Can you see why I will be dealing just with the first parts?

The "go forth" that began our *parshah's* command is always so compelling for us. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's commentary strongly suggests we shouldn't assess the words "*lech l'cha*" from just the instance that begins tonight's *parashah*. Is tonight's story's use of *lech l'cha* "merely—as Ramban declares—a stylistic grace note, fairly common in biblical Hebrew?" Zornberg insists that we need to deal with *lech l'cha* in

two places: first in this parashah—then later “in God’s final call to Abram in the section known as the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. You know this story well: God tells Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac and *lekh lekha* [Thornberg’s spelling of the Hebrew], saying “go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...” We *cannot* respond to the second *lech l’cha* with a cheerful song, can we? Absolutely not. The question becomes how do we respond to *lech l’cha* tonight? *Both lech l’cha* instances are solemn and life-changing—but one could have also been life-ending and was, at the least, the end of any chance for family harmony. I maintain that our *lech l’cha* must be seen in the context of the later *lech l’cha*.

Having jumped ahead to consider the second instance of *lech l’cha*, what do we now hear? I hear “look about you, take a radical step into the unknown because your current place is no longer as right as it once was for you or for the future of your descendants.” I hear that message now, but *I cannot say* that where I am now on the world’s map is the wrong place for *me*. *Is there a safer place in the world* for me, or for any of us, for any population on this planet, to live safely?

Even in the Wanderings section of this *parashah*, with Abram and his wife and his nephew heading so soon to Egypt because that “good land” of Canaan that Abram had settled in, just a few verses earlier, could not provide

enough to feed the three-person family and their servants, while also feeding the livestock. This Wanderings section asks me to reflect on how well the earth's plants—and its animals—are doing at providing food for all of us now in our homes on this shared planet.

What is the state of agriculture in our own land? I asked Martha Alman how the farmer is doing on the property she still owns in eastern rural Arkansas. At first she said everything was fine, but then other aspects were discussed that were not so fine. In Torah we find our ancestors often desperate for water, but that's not the story in Phillips County, Arkansas. Martha told me about the new Drainage Board that was set up to deal with the effects of flooding from the adjoining creek. Log jams happen constantly as the area tries to deal with unusually heavy rainfall. The 8-foot culverts cannot manage the floodwaters. The timber is gone from the area so trees are not available to help with water absorption. And to make everyone in the county absolutely panic, government agencies now predict that **all** of Phillips County will be under water by 2050.

[Omitted Friday night: Maybe you also encountered the story about the goat farmer who had to install air conditioning for his goats because the goats were suffering in the heat extremes of this past summer and early fall. The goats were too hot to produce milk at their normal rate. We have all

become aware of similar problems that farmers are encountering throughout our world. Animals are stressed in our world—and it is not just a problem for animals at the North Pole and the South Pole as polar ice continues to melt.]

Maybe you read “the Sixth Assessment Report³ from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released on August 9, 2021.” It “paints a dire picture . . . with the U.N. chief referring⁴ to its findings as ‘a code red for humanity.’” That report, which was written by “234 scientists and reviews thousands of existing scientific studies on climate change, states that it is unequivocal that humans are responsible for climate change, and—what’s more—that the increasing frequency and severity of specific extreme weather events can be attributed⁵ to climate change with a high degree of certainty.” Who am I to tell 234 scientists that they are misrepresenting our planet’s reality? Who are we as Jews if we are not working to stay healthy through helping our planet return to health?

Is there a better place where my family and every other kind of family can live peacefully and receive all that we need from nature to survive? No. Do I, do all of us Jews, all of us human inhabitants of Earth, need to find the equivalent of Go Forth!-- *Lech l’cha!*-- as Abram was commanded to do? Aren’t we all now beginning to see that it is the whole planet that is our home? And there is no planet Egypt that we can travel to. So we must go

forth as modern Abrahams and Sarahs—indeed as modern Adams and Eves with a land to husband.

Does our *lech l'cha* now tell us to see the needs of all peoples on our planet, indeed all life on our planet? Do we need to go forth into a place that returns to Adam and Eve's roles of tending the Garden's plants and animals? Maybe our garden is the world--and includes all life in all its forms on the planet. That is the Lech L'ha that I hear as a Reform Jew today. [**Omitted Friday night**] *As Rabbi Shefa Gold points out, "Disappointment brought on by famine--or by dire reports from scientists of impending famine--can lead us to find the "core of our passion, vision, mission, and love." If we respond to the call to Lech L'cha in well-grounded ways, Rabbi Gold suggests we may fulfill the as yet unfulfilled promise that all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah.]*

Shabbat shalom.