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torah QUEERIES

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Lech Lecha – Walk Towards Yourself

by **Reb Kaplan**

Parashat Lech Lecha -- Genesis 6:9 – 11:32

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In this week’s Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, Abram (who takes on a new faith and becomes renamed “Abraham”) is told that he must travel away from everything he has known, and go forth to a new place – with the promise that he will be blessed and transformed.

Although I read Lech Lecha growing up, re-reading this portion as an adult I enjoy new understandings and feel a new empathy with Abram.

When I was a child (attending an Orthodox Hebrew day school) and I first read *Lech Lecha*, I remember being disappointed by the fact that Abram lies about his wife Sarai (Sarah) when he claims that she is actually his sister. Since I was also being taught that Abraham is someone worthy of respect, a powerful founder of our faith (revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews) I found it hard to reconcile with the fact that he would tell a lie like this. Now I understand.

I too have found myself in situations where I colluded in a lie, that my lover was my sister – and, like Abraham, I did it because I feared for my safety. In Abram’s case, as he traveled to Egypt, he was afraid that the Egyptians would find his wife very attractive and would kill him to take her. He says:

If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.

Genesis 12:12-13.

Pharaoh does end up finding Sarah attractive, and thinking that she is Abram's sister and therefore single, he takes her for himself, and as a result he suffers curses from God. When he learns the truth, he sends them both away (though without harming them - he sends them with many animals and goods).

In my case, there was a little less advance planning, but still a great deal of awkwardness. When I was newly-out and dating a woman for the first time, we went on a date to an amusement park where we, like many teenagers do on dates, hugged each other close while riding a roller coaster. When we got off the roller coaster, the men working the machine said to us, "oh, you two sisters are so sweet." Rather than claim who we are, we just said, "thanks" and walked on. Similar encounters happened on other occasions, and I know that a big part of why I agreed to pass as sisters was out of fear for our safety. Back in the late 1980s there were few people out of the closet, the Supreme Court had just ruled that it was acceptable to imprison people for engaging in sex with someone of the same sex in the privacy of one's own home. Anti-gay violence was common, and in many cases police either did nothing or even condoned or participated in the violence. Like Abraham I feared for my safety if I told the truth.

Although we did not get beaten up, the lies took a toll and cast a curse. I found that I could not "pretend" not to be lovers - not to be in love – without it impacting my soul, my relationship, and my sense of my own ability to love.

So I find it to be a great miracle of Torah timing that now I am writing about *Lech Lecha* on National Coming Out Day (I wrote this essay on Oct. 11), and feeling that the teaching of *Lech Lecha* is that we must all continually pursue a journey toward our true selves. This journey can be challenging - which I honor - but it is a journey worth taking.

Which brings me back to the beginning of this week's reading. The part that resonates the strongest for me is:

The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." 4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

Genesis 12:1-4.

Abram is asked to leave not one, but three separate things. He is told to leave “*artzecha*” – your land, and “*moladetecha*” which most closely translates as “that which birthed you” – and also to leave “*beyt avicha*” – the house of your father.

In order to start a new life, centered around a new belief system, there were three things Abram needed to release. In order to truly go forward, not just physically but also emotionally and spiritually, he would have to release three bonds from his past. He would have to let go of his ties to the land where he had been living (*artzech*). He would have to let go of his tie to his “father’s house/ *beyt avicha*” –implying letting go of the material ties to his father’s world, but also to his father’s worldview. And he must release himself from “*moladetecha*” – often translated as “kindred” or “birthplace” (and in some texts, not translated at all). By needing to let go of that which birthed him, the Torah implies that he must release himself from the belief that the circumstances of his birth determine what he can do with his life.

Abram must let go of a lot, but where is he going? To me, this is the part of the parasha which most clearly shows an act of faith. Abram agrees to go forward without knowing where he is going to other than to “the land that I [God] will show you.” Sometimes, in order to take an important journey, all we know is that we must go, without knowing the destination. Perhaps we need to let go of what is holding us back, before we can go forth, and before we can even know where we are going.

For many of us, and especially for LGBT people, our process of growing into ourselves and growing into having faith in ourselves requires that we release and free ourselves from forces from our past and from our upbringing, particularly if those ties came with messages that we were required to be heterosexual. And, perhaps not surprisingly, many of us travel far from the places of our birth to find places where we can flourish.

When we release that which we must release and journey toward our own destinies we become blessed and we become a blessing to others. When we are in our right place, unbound by our past, then not only does our own life become blessed, we also become a gift to those around us.

And I am grateful for my journey, for it has brought me 3,000 miles to a land where I experience the feeling of being blessed and being a blessing to others – to live in the city with the largest population of female-female couples in the U.S., to teach Torah, eat local organic food, and participate in healing the future of our region. When I left home, I wasn’t sure where I would end up, but it has definitely been worth it.

On a trip back to the town where I grew up, on Shabbat morning at a Reform synagogue with my mom, I was called up to bless the Torah for the portion that opens *Lech Lecha* (quoted above). This helped free me from some “guilt” about living so far from home – after all, Abraham did it. And I noticed one other thing about the text – which comes right before the opening of *Lech Lecha*. Abram’s parents began the journey with him, and start out in the same direction that he eventually travels.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.

But they don't make it the whole way there, and Abram must complete the journey without them. But even though they could not make the journey with him, and even though his spiritual development required that he move forward in his own way – their journey was not in the opposite direction, but rather, a start of the journey toward the same destination that Abram later completed. Often, what our parents wish for us, a good life, is not wrong, but they can't make the journey with us. But the Torah teaches us that it is holy, and an act of faith, to take our journey ourselves.

About the Author:



Reb Kaplan lives in Oakland, California where she serves as the first openly-LGBT elected official on the regional Transit board. She teaches Torah at Congregation Shaar Zahav in San Francisco. Kaplan obtained a Bachelor's in Psychology and Women's Studies from MIT, a Master's in Public Policy and a law degree from Stanford. She has served as a State Assembly aide, a civil rights attorney and sustainability policy advocate.