

Torat Imecha Parshat Lech Lecha:

Bonus Parsha Material:

This is a slightly more in-depth overview of the Parsha, going through each Aliyah.

1st Aliyah:

Hashem's call to Avram is in the iconic verse: לְךָ-לֶךְ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ (Lech L'cha: "Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, to the land that I will show you.")

Hashem promises Avram multiple berachot, and Avram, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot take all their possessions and travel to Canaan. Hashem has not yet told them where to go, so we can imagine them wandering from place to place until they enter Canaan and arrive at Shechem, at Elon Moreh. There, Hashem appears to Avram and tells him that THIS is the land that will be given to Avram's descendants.

Avram travels the length of the land in a southern direction. Rashi explains that Avram was drawn toward Har HaMoriah (Mount Moriah), which is to the south. However, a terrible famine struck the land, and Avram and Sarai were forced to leave Eretz Canaan for Egypt.

As Avram and Sarai approached Egypt, Avram became deeply fearful because of Sarai's exceptional beauty. He worried that the Egyptians would notice her, kill him to take her as a wife, and then kidnap her. To save his own life, Avram instructed Sarai to tell everyone that she was his sister. By doing this, he believed the Egyptians would treat him well for her sake, allowing both of them to survive. This decision was a survival tactic meant to protect both of them from the perceived danger posed by her beauty.

DEEPER LOOK:

The Meforshim debate whether Avram made the right decision. Ramban is very critical and is of the opinion that Avram should have had faith in Hashem and never should have left Canaan:

Know that Avraham our father, unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for G-d surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine G-d would redeem him

from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.

The Abarbanel argues with the Ramban and explains that the fact that this is counted as one of the trials of Avram that he successfully passed proves it could not have been a sin. Otherwise, he would not be praised for passing the test. Additionally, if what he did with Sarai had been wrong, he would not have repeated the tactic in Parshat Vayera when he went to Gerar. Not only that, but Yitzchak, his son, would do the same in the future with Rivka when they faced famine and traveled to the Pelishtim and pretended to be siblings. Clearly, this strategy had merit.

The Sforno explains that Avram knew that if he and Sarai entered Egypt as husband and wife, he would be immediately killed and Sarai taken. However, if they entered as siblings, Avram would be recognized as her brother and legal guardian.

Under this guise, anyone who desired Sarai would first have to offer Avram a dowry to obtain permission. Because Sarai was so beautiful, Avram planned to demand an outrageous dowry, believing this high price would cause people to leave them alone.

While this plan was highly clever, they did not account for Pharaoh. As the king, he bypassed the custom: he assumed the family would be thrilled with his interest, so he first took Sarai and then sent the promised dowry.

2nd Aliyah:

Even though Avram had made preliminary plans with Sarai, he still took the extra precaution of hiding her. As Rashi notes, the passuk states, "And it was as Avram came to Egypt מִצְרַיִם," mentioning only Avram. Nevertheless, Sarai was discovered and taken to the palace.

Hashem protected Sarai in Pharaoh's palace, and anyone who approached her was struck with a plague. Rashi deduces from the wording, "And Hashem afflicted Pharaoh and his household with great plagues because of Sarai, Avram's wife וַיִּנְגַּע ה' אֶת־פַּרְעֹה וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ עַל־דְּבַר שְׂרַי אִשְׁתִּי אַבְרָם," that Pharaoh was afflicted on the word of Sarai. An angel stood next to her, and any time Sarai gave the command, the angel would strike anyone who approached her. The Zohar beautifully explains that "the Shechinah did not leave Sarai all that night. When Pharaoh tried to approach her, the angel came and smote him."

Pharaoh angrily summoned Avram and castigated him for not telling the truth. He told Avram to take his wife and leave immediately.

Ramban explains that everything that happened to our Forefathers had an impact on their descendants. Just as Avram and Sarai were forced to go to Egypt but left with great wealth, so too their descendants would be forced to go to Egypt but leave with wealth. Just as Sarai was unharmed, Pharaoh would eventually decree that all the girls of Israel would live (foreshadowing the decrees in the time of Moshe).

Avram travels back to the Mizbeyach he had built between Bet El and Ai and calls to Hashem.

3rd Aliyah:

Lot also left Egypt tremendously wealthy, which led to an argument between his shepherds and Avram's shepherds. Avram suggested they separate, and Lot chose to go to the Jordan Valley, specifically to Sedom (Sodom).

After Lot left, Hashem appeared to Avram and told him to look North, South, East, and West, declaring that all the land would be given to his descendants. Hashem promised Avram that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Avram then pitched his tent in Elonei Mamrei (the plains of Mamre) and built a mizbe'ach to Hashem.

4th Aliyah:

After the incident with the Tower of Babel, the four great rulers of Mesopotamia took control of the entire region, including Canaan. They forced the chieftains of the city-states of Sedom to pay tribute for twelve years. After twelve years, the chieftains rebelled and were independent for thirteen years.

In the fourteenth year, the four rulers embarked on a campaign to take back control of the Kings' Road, a highway that linked Mesopotamia to Egypt and was a major trade route. The five chieftains from the Sedom area came out to fight, but when they saw the tremendous army of the four kings, they fled. The chieftain of Sedom and the chieftain of Amorah fell into a lime pit that was in the area, and the rest of the kings and their army fled to the mountains. The defenseless residents of Sedom were captured, their possessions stolen, and their food was given to the enemy soldiers, who, true to the idiom, "marched on their stomachs."

A fugitive informed Avram that his nephew, Lot, had been captured. Avram immediately gathered 318 members of his household (or, according to some opinions, just his steward Eliezer) and pursued the captors. Together, they defeated the enemy, rescued the captives, and retook all their possessions.

5th Aliyah:

The king (chieftain) of Sodom and the king of Shalem (Jerusalem) came out to meet Avram, and both of their interactions were very telling of their characters.

Melchizedek, King of Shalem (who Rashi, quoting the Midrash Rabbah, explains is Shem, the son of Noah), was not directly affected by the war. He brings bread and wine for Avram and his hungry soldiers.

In contrast, the King of Sodom, who owes Avram a debt of gratitude, comes out to try to get back whatever he can from a situation where he really deserved nothing. He "graciously" offered Avram to keep all the possessions if he could have his people back.

Avram swore not to take back even a thread or a shoelace—meaning, from top to bottom, he wouldn't take anything. He did not want people to say the King of Sodom had made Avram rich.

However, Avram did give 10% of the spoils to Melchizedek, who was a universal Kohen (priest). He also asked for food for his soldiers and for the people who guarded the luggage to receive a portion.

After these events, Hashem appeared to Avram and reassured him not to be afraid of retribution from the Mesopotamian Kings and not to worry that he had used up his merits, because his reward would be great.

Avram asked Hashem, "What good would a reward be if he were childless and had no one to inherit him?"

Hashem challenged Avram to count the stars, because that is how numerous his descendants would be. Rashi interprets the directive to "count the stars" as a command to abandon the astrological prediction of his childlessness, because his fate was in Hashem's hands, not the stars.

6th Aliyah:

Avram asked Hashem, "בְּמָה אֲדַע" (meaning, "How will I know") that his children would inherit the land?

In response, Hashem commanded Avram to bring three heifers, three goats, and three rams, along with a turtle dove and a young bird. (Each of these animals symbolized a type of offering (*korban*) that would one day be made by Bnei Yisrael.)

In ancient times, people made covenants by dividing an animal and walking between the pieces to symbolize what would happen if they broke their word. Avram was

commanded to divide the animals, but not the birds. This is why this enigmatic ceremony became known as "ברית בין הבתרים," or the Covenant Between the Parts.

A bird of prey swooped down to try to eat the carcasses, and Avram scared the bird away. Then, a deep darkness descended. The four terms of darkness are symbolic of the four exiles that the Jewish people would endure (Ramban).

Avram fell into a deep sleep, and in it, he saw a vision of his children enduring all the future exiles. Hashem promised Avram that even though his children would be exiled, they would leave with great wealth, and the fourth generation would enter the Land of Israel. Avram himself would live to an old age and die peacefully.

Finally, a fiery flame passed between the pieces. This is symbolic of Hashem swearing to uphold His part of the bargain.

This *Aliyah* continues with the complex story of Sarai and Hagar:

Sarai was barren. Perhaps inspired by the above vision, she felt moved to take action. When Sarai left Egypt, Pharaoh's daughter joined their house as a maidservant to Sarai. Sarai freed her and convinced Avram to marry her so that she could be a surrogate mother for their child.

She used the term "אֵלֵי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה", expressing that she hoped this difficult experience would help her to develop (or "be built up") to become worthy of having a child herself.

Hagar immediately conceived, and this caused her to lose respect for Sarai. Hagar rationalized that perhaps Sarai was not as great as she appeared, because then she too would have conceived.

Sarai was upset with Hagar's disrespect and angry at Avram for not defending her. Avram told her that Hagar was her maidservant, and she could do what she wanted.

The *Passuk* (verse) says that "וַיַּעֲנֶה שָׂרָי" (Sarai afflicted her). The commentaries debate what this looked like.

The Midrash Rabbah describes that Sarai made Hagar do humiliating chores, like carrying water or grinding grain. Others say she made her guard the slaughterhouse, which was degrading for someone who was supposedly the wife of the esteemed Avram.

How could Sarai have done this?

Ramban, as is his approach, criticizes Sarai and says that because she afflicted Hagar, her descendants suffered at the hands of Hagar's descendant, Yishmael.

Radatz Hoffman explains it more pragmatically: after being treated as a free woman with the elevated status of Avram's wife, it was humiliating to go back to being treated like a servant.

Abarbanel defends Sarai and explains that she was extremely concerned that Hagar, as the potential mother of Avram's heir, should have perfect character traits (*middot*). By acting with arrogance towards Sarai, Hagar demonstrated that she was lacking sufficiently in her character development. This deficiency had the potential to affect the unborn child. Abarbanel holds that to correct this character flaw, Sarai went to the other extreme by humiliating Hagar, to humble her for the sake of the character (*middot*) of the unborn child.

Interestingly enough, according to the Code of Hammurabi, which gives us insight into the norms of the time:

- Law 144 stated that if a man's wife gave him a maidservant to bear him children, and the servant did bear children, the husband was not permitted to take a second, junior wife. This protected the status of the first wife.
- Law 146 addressed the status of the servant herself. If the maidservant bore children and then "assumed equality" with her mistress, the mistress (the wife) was still not allowed to sell her. However, the wife could publicly mark her (e.g., with a slave's hairstyle) and ensure she was reckoned among the other maidservants (i.e., keep her in her slave status).

So, it appears that Sarai treated Hagar according to the norms of the time, and the commentaries debate whether this was acceptable or if Sarai perhaps should be held to a higher standard of responsibility.

Either because of the stress of the work, the humiliation, or according to Rashi, Sarai gave Hagar an *Ayin Ha'ra* (Evil Eye), Hagar miscarried.

Hagar fled to the desert. There she was met by an angel (according to the Gemara, she was met by as many as four or five angels, which gives us insight into her elevated spiritual status).

The angel told her to go back and subject herself to Sarai, because through that, she would achieve greatness and have many descendants. She would give birth to a son who would be called Yishmael (Ishmael) because Hashem had heard her affliction.

He will be:

פָּרָא אָדָם יָדוּ בְּכָל יָד כָּל בּוֹ וְעַל-פָּנָיו כָּל-אָחִיו יִשְׁכֹּן

A wild man (pereh adam), whose hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

The place of the encounter was called "בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאֶי" (The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me), and it is a place of great holiness amongst Hagar's descendants. There is an opinion that the Kaaba in Mecca is the Be'er.

Avram is 86 when Yishmael is born.

The section ends with Hashem appearing to Avram at age 99 and commanding him to change his name to Avraham, symbolizing that Avram will become a father to a multitude of nations.

7th Aliyah

Hashem commands Avraham to perform the mitzvah of Brit~Milah (circumcision). This act will be the symbol of the covenant between Hashem and all of Avraham's future descendants. Avraham is 99 when he performs a Brit~Milah on himself, and Yishmael is 13. However, all children born in the future will receive their Brit~Milah at eight days old.

Hashem tells Avraham to change Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham that he will give Sarah a son, and Avraham laughs that a man of 100 and a woman of 90 will have a child. Avraham prays on Yishmael's behalf, asking, "If only Yishmael might live before You לֵאמֹר יִשְׁמָעֵאל יְחִיָּה לְפָנֶיךָ

Hashem reassures Avraham that Yishmael will have twelve princes descend from him, but the descendant who will inherit the Land of Israel and who will continue Hashem's covenant with Avraham will be the child that Avraham has with Sarah.

Avraham gives himself, Yishmael, and all the male members of his household a Brit~Milah.

