

## **Torat Imecha Parshat Lech Lecha:**

### **Bonus Parsha Material:**

A deeper look at Sarai's experiences in the Parsha:

When a terrible famine struck the land, 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.

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 כָּבֹא אַבְרָם וְיֵהְיֶה קְבוּאָה אֶבְרָם 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 וַיִּבְגֵּעַ ה' אֶת-פַּרְעֹה וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ בְּגָדִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת-בִּיתוֹ עַל-דְּבַר שָׂרָי אִשְׁתִּי אֶבְרָם," 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.

Later in the Parsha we see 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 אִבְנָה 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 "וַתַּעֲנֶה 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 יִשָּׁקוּ

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.