

The Faith to Move  
Shabbat Lech L'cha 5790  
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Our Torah portion this Shabbes, Lecha L'cha, is the Jewish people's origin story: It is the master narrative of how we became a people—God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave their land, head to a place where the Holy One will show them; in return for their faithful obedience, they will be rewarded with offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But the Torah itself doesn't answer basic questions:

Why did the Divine select Avraham and Sarah?

Why did they heed God's call?

What was going on in their lives that compelled them to leave everything behind and set out for a new home?

What do we know of our mythic ancestor's story—the origin story of our people?

We know that Avram was the son of Terach, who began his family at the age of 70, in the land of Ur—somewhere in the neighborhood of Mesopotamia—likely Iraq today; in the place of Kasdim people.

We know less of Sarah—then called Sarai—who is named only as Avram's wife and that she is barren.

We know that Terach had set out for the land of Canaan, but stopped for reasons unknown in Haran, and set up camp there, where he died at the age of 205.

And we know that Avraham is 75 when Sarah accept God's call to go forth—*lech l'cha*—and leave Haran on their way to Canaan.

That's it. That's all we know.

Two wandering souls called forth by the Divine to create a family as numerous as the stars in the sky, crossing borders and boundaries, without any documentation, seeking out a new land.

There's something spiritually potent about the origin story of our people being one of movement, of leaving one place and seeking out a new one, a home full of children free to play, abundant food to eat, freedom from worry about violence and strangers; a home where Avraham and Sarah would covenant with the Divine and open their tent flaps wide to welcome strangers from all directions, setting the moral table for radical hospitality for all the generations that would flow from them.

This idea of movement—of leaving one place in search of another—becomes the master story of our people: Rivkah leaving her home to find her beloved Isaac; Yaakov fleeing his brother to wrestle with an angel in the dark of night to escape his father's misfortune and build his own family; Yosef's casting away into Egypt by his jealous brothers only to rise up and save his family; and then, our epic story of Exodus—a motley band of former slaves fleeing Pharaoh's bondage in Egypt, seeking a new home and a new life in the Promised Land. The movement continues with the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the exile of our people, the Crusades of the Middle Ages as our forebearers were forced to flee their homes in Spain, the Pale of Settlement when Jews were attacked by Cossacks and fled Russia in one of the greatest migrations of human history, the time of the Shoah, and the movement of Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries to Israel in the 1950s and 60s.

Our Jewish story is one of movement, of fleeing in the dark of night, sometimes with nothing more than the clothing on our backs, to run from terror, to protect our families, to build a life where our children could grow up safely. It is our religious story, our people's story, one that we elevate in Torah and that we read and study and exalt.

A few years ago, amidst the devastating civil war in Syria and the mass migration of more than 2,000,000 Syrians—many fleeing in homemade life rafts—countless people were dying in the raging waters. There was a photo of a terrified father, weeping, as held on to his child for dear life. It reminded me of the Somali-British poet, Warsan Shire, now in her 20s, who writes in poem, Home:

**no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well**

your neighbours running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you  
fire under feet  
hot blood in your belly  
it's not something you ever thought of doing  
until the blade burnt threats into  
your neck  
and even then you carried the anthem under  
your breath  
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilets  
sobbing as each mouthful of paper  
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

**you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land**

We Jews took a very human experience of movement and migration and we crafted a theological narrative to explain them and rituals to remember them: Avraham and Sarah were called forth by God to serve, to leave their homes, to leap into the mysterious unknown, to wander forth as an act of religious commitment. We were slaves in Egypt, God heard our cries, we were liberated.

Movement isn't simply a physical act for the Jewish people; it's a theological commitment to dream a new world into being, a call to empathy for all who are suffering, a cry to understand our individual and particular stories amidst the backdrop of epic human suffering and migration.

Which is precisely why as a people we must be theological and morally outraged by what this president and his grotesque administration are doing to migrants on our borders! We know the heart of the immigrant, Torah commands, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We see in the faces and in the stories of people at our southern border our story, the story of Abraham and Sarah; we see in them our origin story—people fleeing violence and slavery and war; people seeking out a new life for themselves and their children, to pray, to play, to live, freely without fear, without violence. We are rightfully insulted when we hear human beings called drug dealers and rapists by morally vacuous political leaders; said “leaders” are not merely insulting the migrants seeking a better life for themselves and their children; they are insulting us, our religious tradition, our Torah, our moral commitments as a Jewish people. Yes, the texture and contours of our stories differ across time and space with our own particular contexts and circumstances; but the underlying religious commitment remains the same: all people—especially the vulnerable—are to be treated with compassion, decency, and righteously.

On January 20, 2017, Shir Tikvah declared ourselves a Sanctuary congregation to stand with those human beings who may lack documentation but whose humanity we witness and we celebrate. We vowed as a community to welcome anyone seeking sanctuary, to protect them with the power of our tradition and the moral clarity of our religious voice; to nourish them with abundant food as Avraham and Sarah did in their tent; to help educate their children and tend to their weary and traumatized souls. It is a commitment that has taken powerful moral leadership from members of this community, endless hours of care and concern and activity, and a deep, embodied commitment to live up to the responsibility that Judaism is ultimately a human dignity project and that our task in these painful days is to expand the boundaries of our moral imagination to create humane communities of compassion and care and love.

The Talmud [Sotah 46b] teaches, “Rav Yehuda says that Rav teaches: Anyone who accompanies his friend in a city will come to no harm by accompanying him. The Gemara relates: Ravina accompanied Rava bar Yitzḥak in the city. He came close to harm, but he was saved.”

Our story—the ancient one we encounter in Torah and and we live today—is not risk free. For people fleeing war torn lands, who seek to build lives here, who have lived here for years, they are taking great risks. We who believe that it is our religious duty to advocate with them, to challenging the morally repugnant policies of our current administration, who join in a network of more than 70 sanctuary synagogues across the nation, our work to do what is just and right is not risk free either. To do this holy work means being close to harm, intimate with the possibility and consequences of agony and grief and loss. And still, we do it anyway. Why?

Because our religious story is one of movement.

Because human beings are not political footballs.

Because this is the story of our Torah: We hold humanity at the center of our lives and in the heart of our communities, we take seriously God’s commandment to show compassion to our neighbors, to welcome them into our homes, to love robustly the wandering, the yearning, those who have taken excruciating risks for themselves and their families to be here. It is up to us—the descendants of Abraham and Sarah and Ravina and Rav bar Yitzchak—to accompany them in the city, as they heed the call—lech l’cha—to go forth, to do our very best to keep them from harm, so that one day they—and we—might be saved.

Shabbat Shalom.