

Parashat Lech Lecha, Genesis 12:1-17:27

[THANK T. SINAI]

Shabbat Shalom --On this Shabbat in October, National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, we are uniting with 25 other Bay Area congregations who at this very moment are speaking from the bima about domestic violence in Jewish homes.

[SB Services]

This week we read in Genesis the parsha "*Lech Lecha*." God speaks to Avram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah), and tells them to leave their homeland and families and go forth to an unknown land. Our people's story begins with a journey, leaving behind the familiar and going forth into the wilderness. It is a theme often repeated throughout the Torah, perhaps because it speaks so strongly to a place most of us have been, at one time or another.

This theme of our ancestors echoes today's story of many people who are leaving their home and family for unfamiliar territory. Every day, in every community, someone is fleeing from danger in her own home. Women who have been abused by their intimate partner are faced with a difficult choice between familiar terror and a great unknown. What guidance can we offer? Some women are told to go forth: leave your abuser. How could you possibly stay in that situation? Others are told: stay home and make *shlom bayit*. How could you possibly break up your home and family?

Let us examine the theme of '*lech lecha*,' going forth.

2 most common responses to someone in an abusive relationship are

(1) not believe her [say why]

Or

(2) the lech lecha response: GO FORTH. Get out. Why don't you simply go forth, like Abraham and Sarah, and leave your home and family behind for a new beginning?

So we think the 2nd one is obviously the better response. But it's tricky, because inherent in the "just get out" response is the assumption that if you don't leave, something is wrong with you, or you are in denial, or you are making a terrible choice—and therefore you deserve whatever happens.

Now, how many of us have been in any kind of situation in our lives that wasn't so good for us? A job where we were unhappy or not being treated right? A bad housing situation? A crossroads in our lives where we needed to make a change but couldn't?

Change is hard enough; leaving everything we know is terrifying.

I'm not so sure I could follow in Avraham and Sarah's example...If someone told me today I had to leave the Bay Area and move to Tennessee to find myself and my promised land, I'm not sure I could do it.

For battered women, there are many complex barriers to leaving. Pressures to stay in the relationship can come from

- ◆ Family
- ◆ friends
- ◆ financial concerns
- ◆ fear of retaliation

Some stay out of love, or self-blame, or because of the children, or out of a desire to keep their family together. Often the victim does not want the relationship to end; they just want the abuse to stop. Convincing apologies or promises to change after an incident of abuse effectively entice the abused person to give their partner 'one more chance.'

Finally, there is just the simple fact facing the unknown and venturing away from all that is familiar can be frightening and dangerous. **G-d told Abraham to go forth to an unknown land...but also later tells Abraham that he will be a stranger in that land and his people will be oppressed for 400 years. 400 years before we find peace and safety in that unknown land? When there is no promise of tangible freedom on the horizon, it is no wonder that it is hard to venture into the unknown.**

Leaving the relationship is statistically the most dangerous time. Most domestic violence murders occur AFTER the victim has left the relationship, as the abuser declares their ultimate act of control. Women who leave know that this is the time when they are most likely to be stalked, harassed, endangered, or otherwise threatened. Even for those not in physical danger, leaving the relationship is complex and difficult; it may require leaving behind all that is familiar: home, belongings, friendships, community, hopes & dreams.

We learn from our own Exodus story that life does not automatically get easier when we venture into unknown lands, even if it is to escape slavery in exchange for the promise of freedom.

Now despite all that, many survivors of abuse DO leave [SB Stats]

They are women like [Ruth & Rachel; point out stories from the J. article today] and Arielle

Arielle is a middle-aged woman, very involved in Jewish life. She has lived with her boyfriend for 15 years. They share a beautiful home, make *Shabbos* together, have many friends in the Jewish community. But Arielle confides her deepest secret to a trusted friend: her boyfriend beats her, tells her she is worthless, reduces her self-esteem to dust. Arielle hasn't told her friends or her family why she is tired and shaken all the time. It takes her five times, over the course of several years, picking up the phone and hanging up again—before she has the courage to call Shalom Bayit for help. Now she is ready to go. But what becomes of her if she leaves? For 15 years they have shared a life together—money, a house, dishes and furniture and photo albums and memories—all in her boyfriend's name. Like many abused women, her resources are all dependent on her abuser. If Arielle leaves she will have nothing, other than the slim chance

that a costly legal battle might entitle her to some of the furniture she once carefully arranged in their beautiful home. Arielle is scared and angry. ‘Why do I have to leave my home? Why do I have to give up everything I have, and walk away with nothing, just to have my self back again? It is so unfair.’

Yes, it is profoundly unfair. And despite this injustice, women are leaving every day. They are struggling to be single moms, to find a job, to rebuild their lives. To find Jewish spiritual community that is not tainted by their abuser’s presence.

So can we really say to a battered woman: *lech lecha* (go forth)? If she leaves, she may be homeless; it may be difficult for her to support herself; the violence may escalate after she leaves. If she leaves, will we as a community support her? Believe her, even if her “ex” was a beloved member of our congregation? What is the price she will pay for her freedom? We have to consider the choices we are asking women to make.

Domestic violence is a pattern of power and control, where one partner exerts that control over the other. It can take many forms: *ona’at devarim*--oppression by means of words, intimidation, emotional abuse, financial control, sexual coercion, threats, manipulating the children, isolation from family or friends, controlling resources, and yes, physical violence. These are all tools an abuser uses to trap their victim into a cycle of fear.

At least one-fifth of the women in this room will experience, or have already experienced, abuse from a partner. At such a magnitude we cannot name this violence an “interpersonal issue,” a “family matter,” or even a “women’s issue.” It is a societal and communal issue that requires a societal and communal response. So, how do we respond as a community? When a battered woman tells her story, we can listen and believe her; validate and support her. We can ask, “What do you need? How can I help you?” We offer whatever we can give. Sometimes just asking the question is enough.

Battered women need safety, and they need resources. But they also need to tell their stories. It is scary and painful to tell the truth about what happened to you, yet it is incredibly healing. If the woman is still with her partner, talking can help her to explore her options and sort through her feelings. If she has already left, it can help her stay strong on the journey. And if she is thinking about going back, it can help her remember why she left, and what goals lie in her promised land. Telling the story makes it real.

Telling her story also breaks the silence and the isolation, two things that perpetuate abuse in the Jewish community. Let’s talk a moment about isolation. Most battered women have been incredibly isolated—both by the shame and guilt they feel about their situation, and then by their partner’s actions. Some examples of isolating behaviors are: extreme jealousy, controlling where she goes or how she spends her time; threatening or intimidating her; controlling the money; interfering with her relationships with family, friends, or her spiritual life in the congregation. If abusers succeed in isolating their partners, then they have won total control.

Each time a woman tells her story, she is reclaiming a piece of her identity. This too is a theme explored in this *parshah*, as we read of Avram and Sarai becoming Abraham and Sarah. The new

spelling of their names reflects the divine covenant into which they have entered. Changing one's name can be part of claiming new identity or mission, or 'becoming another person.' In a very different way, *l'havdil*, battered women also become someone else. A woman who was once strong and independent with high self-esteem becomes a person filled with doubts, living in fear. When she is told by her most intimate companion that she is crazy or worthless or stupid, she begins to believe it. Her life and reality are defined by the abuser, and she is forced to see the abuse from the batterers' perspective: as consequences for her own 'misbehavior.' This might mean coming home ten minutes later than expected, or making a telephone call 'without permission.' Anything that suggests independence on the part of the abused is a threat to the batterer's control, and the battered woman is cut off from anyone who might challenge the abuser. She begins to lose her identity.

And so when an abused woman tells us her story and we believe her, we are helping her to rename herself, break the isolation, and rediscover her true self free from her abuser's control. This is what helps women to break free of an abusive relationship. They will need a strong community of supporters to do that: no one can do it alone.

So what can we do to be that community of support? Can we all venture together now into the new and unknown territory where domestic violence no longer exists? Where we all treat each other with the utmost respect, when partners and parents and children and strangers all see one another as *B'tzellel Elohim*, see the magnificent spark of the divine in each other? When controlling one's partner becomes an unthinkable thing of our past, a strange phenomenon that once occurred, back in the day when we needed an organization called Shalom Bayit to help those who were abused? Can we imagine stepping into a land where we as a people are so strong in our ability to stop this problem, that there is simply no longer a need for domestic violence services?

I invite each of us this Shabbat to consider what it would take – not only for us as a society to wage peace so strongly, but for each of us as individuals. What actions can we take to create that just and peaceful land of our dreams?

To anyone who is being controlled by your partner right now, I say Lechi Lach: Go forth—to the land of yourself, to the land of your soul, to find your true essence and know that you are good and worthy and do not deserve to be belittled or mistreated. I cannot assume that you are able to journey forth to an unknown land right now, but if you do choose to GO FORTH I promise that I will say "Hineini" – here I am, by your side, ready to walk with you wherever you need to go.

To those of you who have harmed an intimate partner or child or dear one, I say Lech Lecha: Go forth to a land that you perhaps cannot yet see, a land where you let go of your need to be in control, a land where you no longer need to blame or criticize others; a land where you see the reflection of love and goodness in yourself strongly enough to give that back out to others; a land where your loved ones are equal to you and where you share love & decision-making and power together with those around you; a land where it is no longer hard to take responsibility for your actions and where you commit to lifting up those around you so that they in turn feel blessed and whole. This Shabbat Lech Lecha, I invite you to take one small step in that direction.

To all you caring members of our community, I say Lechi Lach: Go forth into a land that is perhaps unfamiliar; experiment with something new. Push out of the comfort zone: if someone you know is being harmed, tell them you are concerned for them. If you see a friend behaving in a way that you feel is harmful, tell them you think what they are doing is not OK. If someone confides to you that they are being abused, believe them. Walk with them on the journey. Tell them “Hineini,” here I am, with you.

To all you teens and young people out there, I say Lech Lecha: Go forth into the land of healthy relationships, of friendships that do not involve bullying, to a place where we follow our hearts and become who we feel called to be instead of succumbing to intense peer pressure and popularity contests. Lechi Lach – you are our future -- go out and create the community that you want to live in.

I bless you all for a true Shabbat Shalom -- that you may have true peace and wholeness in your hearts, this Shabbat and always.
Thank you.

Based on drash by Naomi Tucker and Rebecca Schwartz, 2002; adapted by Rachel Marder and Naomi Tucker, 2009. © Shalom Bayit.

Lechi Lach

Lyrics by Debbie Friedman & Savina Teubal (based on Genesis 12:1-2)

*Lechi lach to a land that I will show you
Lech li-cha to a place you do not know
Lechi lach on your journey I will bless you
And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing
You shall be a blessing lechi lach*

*Lechi lach and I shall make your name great
Lech li-cha and all shall praise your name
Lechi lach to the place that I will show you
Li-simchat chayim, li-simchat chayim
Li-simchat chayim lechi lach.
And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing
You shall be a blessing lechi lach.*