

Parsha Lech Lecha  
October 24, 2015

Today I'll start with a story that should help those of you who send your kids to Jewish day school feel good about spending that money.

Last December, Jake and I received a long text from the mother of one of Nora's friends at her secular Montessori school, and it was one of those texts that is so long that you know right away this is going to be something to deal with. And it said "Ok Roths. Please clean this thing up. I felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach when my kid said, 'mama, is Santa real? Nora said Santa isn't real.' I don't know if my beloved Nora said this, but if she did, would you mind telling her that some families believe in Santa? I'd really appreciate it."

Now, this sent the Roth household into a little bit of a tizzy. We talked about pluralism, and we talked about lies, and we talked about religion, and we talked about culture, and we talked about manners, and we talked about assimilation... (I should note that this was the Roth parents. Nora was living her life, happily oblivious to Santagate.) And amid all the Big Topics kicked up by this little text, we kept circling around to this: "She shouldn't have asked!" It became a fretful repetition. She shouldn't have asked, we insisted, she shouldn't have asked.

But why? Why come to that conclusion of all possibilities? After all, don't we belong to cultures that value asking for and giving help and support? As parents, as educators, as liberals, as Jews? So many Jewish traditions, customs, and ritual objects – you can answer "Why do we do this?" with "So you should ask." Ask me to tell you the stories. Ask me to take the time to remember. Ask me to know what my rituals mean to me. So why this priggish response, this annoying insistence that she shouldn't have asked?

This week's parsha is a case study in asking. It is characterized by asking. It is bracketed, first of all, by two pretty big asks that God makes of Avram, that begin to establish him as righteous, a faithful follower, a partner in the creation of the Jewish people. But between God asking that Avram go forth from his country and that he forego his foreskin, there are two parallel stories that center around moments when people ask something from each other. So it offers, I think, a meditation on what we ask of each other, and how we ask it,

on whether and when we shouldn't have asked, in the midst of what God asks of us.

So, in Lech Lecha: Avram asks Sarai to pretend to be his sister, and therefore available to Pharaoh. Later, Sarai asks Avram to go to bed with her maidservant Hagar. What I'd like to do is talk about these episodes side-by-side, as a significant narrative element of the parsha, in the same way that we might think of the larger context in Bereishit of God's requests of (or commands to) Avram.

First, the content is similar. Both Avram and Sarai are asking a spouse to bend or break long-standing expectations of fidelity. The parallel is reinforced by Rashi, who tells us that Hagar is not just an Egyptian, but an Egyptian princess, Pharaoh's daughter, given to Sarai as a maidservant following the "why did you tell me she was your sister?" episode. Also, both are doing this asking, ostensibly, to preserve and continue life. Each asks the other to commit adultery for what they perceive as the greater good; in turn, each pretends consent – both to their spouse and to this new sexual context. In the parsha, Sarai's response to Avram is silence. He says, "Say you are my sister," and she says nothing, but soon she is "taken into Pharaoh's house." She won't say no, either to Avram or to Pharaoh's men, but neither does the Torah record her saying yes. Similarly, Ramban points out that after she asks him to go to Hagar, the Torah says that he "hearkened to her voice" rather than that "he did this," emphasizing that even though he is desperate to have sons, he acts only on his wife's request. So he is consenting to Sarai but not precisely to Hagar. Reluctance. Silence. Pretended consent, pretended consensus.

This leads me to the second parallel. Quite a bit of the commentary on each of the two episodes has focused on justifying those – pretty big, pretty serious – requests that Avram avinu and Sarai imeinu make of each other. Some, like Ramban's, give us emotional detail. Others focus on providing us with cultural context to suggest that the requests themselves are not unusual, and therefore obviously fine, totally reasonable. The Egyptians, we hear, strictly observed the prohibition against sleeping with someone else's wife – they were just in the habit of observing it by making her a widow. Avram knew this, we are reassured, just as Sarai knew it was common in ancient times for slaves and servants to act as surrogates in matters of inheritance and family-building.

The commentary, in other words, is pretty sure of the reader's response to both episodes: "He (or she) shouldn't have asked." And is designed to assure

us otherwise, to offer us midrash that make it okay for Avram to have asked Sarai to pretend she was available when Pharaoh's men saw her beautiful face. Acceptable for Sarai to have grown impatient for the prophecy they'd been traveling toward so long to be fulfilled, and to insist that Avram's seed start growing already, even if it meant pushing him into Hagar's bed.

But what if the point of these stories is that asking, or asking in this way, was not okay? What if our readerly instinct to think he or she shouldn't have asked is, in fact, the moral ground here? Let's take a closer look at the way Avram and Sarai ask each other, the final parallel between these episodes, to see if we can identify just, what, exactly, is wrong with asking your spouse to do you a favor, and a life-or-death favor at that.

Here's Avram: "**Hinei na, behold now**, I know that you are a woman of fair appearance... Please say that you are my sister, in order that it go well with me because of you, and that *my soul may live because of you.*"

Here's Sarai: "**Hinei na, behold now**, the Lord has restrained me from bearing; please come to my handmaid; *perhaps I will be built up from her.*"

These have the same syntactic and argumentative structure. First, **hinei na**: an observation of the present situation and the problem it presents. Second, the request, which is presented as a solution to the problem. Third, *a prediction* of the future which will follow compliance with the request. So, though each request is simple in itself, it is grounded in a complicated system of assumptions, ideas, and hopes.

When we look at this repeated structure, we can see that these asks are essentially one-sided conversations. Stuck in the fog of fear or frustration, Sarai and Avram stop working together and start trying to problem-solve alone. They think through and articulate the problematic situation alone. They posit a solution and its positive outcome alone. And, alone, they ask their spouse to undertake the solution. These one-sided conversations indicate a moment of failure to trust, either in one another or in the future that God has revealed for them.

So in both stories, there is no possibility of consensus, because there is no back-and-forth. Asking works as a kind of coercion. Avram and Sarai both do what their spouse has asked, but neither does so wholeheartedly. The consent is, morally, imperfect. But this is not only the phenomenon of a different time

and place. Avram's and Sarai's situation is not exceptional. A 2008 study by Francis Flynn of the Stanford Graduate School of Business found that people frequently miscalculate how willing others are to say yes to a direct request, because they fail to account for "the social pressure to be benevolent." Folks who will say no to, or avoid, a subtle, indirect, or written request, feel a significant obligation to assent if they are asked point blank. They feel an obligation; it is awkward for them to refuse. Asking is coercion. This is perhaps good news for business (and charities), but troubling news if we are hoping for a real unity of purpose between asker and askee.

In other words, this parsha is about the power of asking, asking as power – power, that like any power, can be used positively or otherwise. Avram shouldn't have asked, as in requested. He should have asked, as in inquired. "Sarai, I am afraid of what will happen to me, and what will happen to God's plans for us, when we cross into Egypt. Are you afraid? What do you think we should do?" Sarai shouldn't have asked, she should have engaged, started a real conversation. "I have loved only you for as long as I can remember, but God says you'll be the father of nations and I am the mother of no one. I am starting to think I should let you consort with Hagar. Can that be right? Are you worried, too?" To inquire is to open a conversation, to distribute and extend power. The power of understanding, of decision-making, of planning.

These stories, if they are stories about the power of asking, are not, as some in our tradition are, about gross abuses of power, overt and intentional. Think King David sending Uriah into battle, or even Sarai banishing an insolent Hagar to the wilderness. Avram and Sarai were on an epic road trip – I don't know about you, but extended overland travel does not always bring out the pleasant, composed, and cooperative in me. They were human, and stressed, and their inappropriate exertion of power was half-accidental and only on the tiny everyday scale of the long-married couple.

*We* are human, and stressed, and live on the scale of the everyday. So the complex moral mandate of these stories is precisely ours. This parsha makes a virtue of Avram's compliance with God's requests, but just as consistently questions what people – even trusted partners and allies – ask of each other and their willingness to comply. We cannot model our requests on God's – that is not the relationship we have with one another. Neither human partner can ever request something with a sure knowledge of the outcome, or of all perspectives. We must constantly be building that knowledge together, even

when we already know and trust one another. According to MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle, who studies our growing reliance on technology, empathy utterly relies on conversation. Without back-and-forth, we don't learn how others might respond. Before we request, we should inquire. We should allow conversation to shape not only the solution, but the problem. Otherwise, we shouldn't have asked.

Of course, we cannot always refrain from asking. If we are not for ourselves, then who will be for us? But Sarai and Avram remind us to keep in mind the potential coerciveness of asking. We must strive to be aware of what our asking requires of the other. We must advocate for others even as we self-advocate. We must have chutzpah, but we must also have chesed.

Shabbat shalom.

Postscript: People asked me afterward what I did about Santagate. I ended up leaving that out because I'm not sure my response was the ideal, wise one that warranted teaching! I said nothing, to the mother or to Nora, hoping it would blow over (and it more or less did).

