

Lech L'cha 5784
In This Moment
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Today we are taking part in a worldwide Solidarity Shabbat organized by the Conservative Movement, both in the United States and in Israel, with extensions throughout the world. I see new faces in the room, people who might have come to join us because of Solidarity Shabbat, and I know that there were those who joined from remote locations. It is so important for us to come together at this excruciating time, to share a sense of belonging and connection and to find hope through the words and practices of our tradition. I'm so glad that we have come together. We also need to acknowledge that each of us is finding our way through the ongoing struggle. We do not all feel the same or share the same thoughts. Many of us are holding the tension of discordant thoughts and feelings, and many of us are so overwhelmed by incoming news that we struggle to hear our own hearts beat. All of that is normal. All of that is okay.

As I move through these days, I am finding comfort in Torah study. It puts me in a place of expansive thinking. It broadens my horizons about what is possible. It puts me in a space of meaning making. The questions and insecurities of this moment are not new, yet I am amazed by the relevance of Torah at this time. I would like to invite you into a way of being in this moment together that my recent study of *Parashat Lech L'cha*, with my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Elie Holzer, who is an Israeli and lives in Israel, opened up for me.

This Torah draws from the teachings of two 19th century Hasidic Rabbis: Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known as the S'fat Emet, and Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner, known as the Mei Shiloach. Each deals with the big question of our parashah, which why God chooses Avram. They also deal with the questions of why Avram is told "*Lech l'cha*"-- "Go to you," when he is then commanded to move on a journey; and why God does not disclose the destination to Avram.

"Lech l'cha," God says,

"...מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה:"

"Go. Lech l'cha--which means "go to you--from your land and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

(Genesis 12:1)

Perhaps, says the S'fat Emet, Avram is ready to hear God's call in a way that no one else in his time can—because God is constantly calling to each person, but most of us move through our experiences without the capacity to respond deeply, from the core of our being, and move differently after we have been so struck. We filter our perceptions through the various structures through which we understand who we are—habits of mind, culture, dogmas, defense mechanisms, and so on, and most of us process our world through so many filters that we are unable to decenter our habitual sense of things in order to perceive that something we have not yet imagined could be the essence of what is going on.

But Avram is prepared to be radically destabilized, to leave his “ארציות,”--his landedness, metaphorically—all that he uses to define himself—where he lives, where he was born, and who his family is, to go somewhere else and build an entirely different way of life, from a different perspective, one attuned and aligned with the hum of reality—which is God's call. That is why the text says “Lech l'cha”--Go inward, as it were, away from all of the habits and constructs that would limit your perception of who you might be and how you might act in the world. Head off into the unknown because you heard something you cannot unhear, because it thunders within you the way truth does. And so he goes, without ado:

"וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים"
“Avram went as the Lord spoke to him...”
(Genesis 12:4)

The invitation to this Solidarity Shabbat states that we will “stand in Solidarity with Israel and with all the victims of this terrible attack and ongoing war, unified in the face of hatred.” Now, that is not a simple statement. I think we have to ask: In the face of our grief over the calamity that has befallen us, the heinous massacre and abuse of our people by jihad terrorists who want to destroy us; in the face of our deep need to be connected to each other, is there room for tension? Is there room for us, really, to stand with all of the victims of the ongoing war? And, if we are being called to stand with all of the victims in the ongoing war, are we prepared to stand with the latest victims, who are overwhelmingly Palestinian civilians? And, if we stand with the Palestinian people, are we seriously committed? Finally, is unity in the face of hatred what this moment is really about, or are we being called to something more precise than that?

Because I don't think that hatred is the issue, really. Dehumanization, messianic violence, and how to undo decades of wrongdoing: these, I think, are a few of the real issues we need to unify against today.

The S'fat Emet teaches something fascinating about why God does not tell Avram where he is going, only that it will be the land God will show him: When it comes to the Land of Israel, our task is to hear how God is calling us at any given time. Not knowing where he is going does not mean that Avram is missing information. There is nothing missing in the command to go to an unknown destination. Why? It is because in this teaching, the essential quality of Eretz Yisrael is that what Eretz Yisrael means is not defined—that there are many possibilities for what that land might be.

Perhaps that helps to explain why our Bible presents the borders of the land inconsistently; they are different depending on what verse you're reading. And perhaps, too, that is why the Torah gives us a Law to live by, in that ambiguous place, and then tells us that we are to have one law for all who live there, Israelite and non-Israelite alike. The point, according to the S'fat Emet, is that our *parashah* comes to teach us about the need to be prepared to be displaced, to decenter ourselves, to go on a journey without a clear destination, to keep our eyes and ears open and be ready to change course, to take to heart new truths that we may not have let ourselves see before.

And the S'fat Emet adds one more detail: Avram, and we, his descendents, are called to embrace this posture of heeding the essential truth of the moment, not only for *our* sake, but for the sake of “Ha’adam”—of all people. Think about that: This teaching on our *parashah* is saying that God has a vision for humanity. We are part of that vision, which is deeply connected with how we live in Eretz Yisrael. And we are to live there with a constant readiness to rethink what we thought before, to cast away old frameworks and habits, and seek the essential, divine, life-giving truth of the moment. The land is meant to represent God’s hope for all of humanity and we are meant to live out that hope, to make it real.

For those of you who are catching up, here is some of what we knew, as reported by Ha’aretz, when I was preparing these remarks yesterday:

- Israel’s war against Hamas has entered its twentieth day, after Hamas killed more than 1,300 Israelis and wounded more than 3,300 in a merciless assault.
- Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad are holding hostage more than 224 civilians and soldiers.
- Tensions on Israel’s northern border simmer, with Hezbollah rocket fire and drones.
- Hamas rocket fire at Israel, including long-range missiles, and Israeli airstrikes on Gaza, including targeted assassinations, continue. Hamas continued to target Tel Aviv and its environs with rockets on Wednesday. In the Gaza Strip, the

Hamas-controlled health ministry reports that at least 7,000 Palestinians have been killed, at least half of whom are children.

- The IDF says that it has attacked more than 250 targets in an overnight ground offensive in the northern Gaza Strip. It also claimed to have assassinated Hamas's rocket firing system commander.
- Israeli security forces arrested 46 Hamas operatives in the West Bank on Thursday overnight, according to reports from the IDF and Shin Bet.
- A Hamas spokesperson claimed that around 50 hostages were killed in Gaza due to Israeli strikes.
- Regarding humanitarian aid and the hope that Gazans would relocate, since the start of the war, 74 aid trucks have entered Gaza. That's not much. The Oxfam charity says that only 2 percent of food earmarked for Gaza has been able to enter since October 9, when Israel tightened restrictions on supplies allowed into the Strip. And in an audio recording published by the IDF, a Gaza resident is heard saying that Hamas has set up roadblocks to prevent Gazans from moving south away from the area Israel has called on them to evacuate. We also know that the roads have been so damaged by Israel's airstrikes that that, too, is a significant impediment.

I once had a professor who asked a group of professionals in his Jewish leadership course to describe the biggest obstacles standing in the way of the great work we wanted to do. Every one of us named someone, some policy or entrenched practice that stood in the way of the good we wanted to do. Of course it was a set-up for us to learn to ask: What is *my* part of the problem, and what am *I* going to do about it? At this time, if dehumanization, messianic violence, and undoing decades of wrongdoing are things we want to unify around combating, what is our part of the work?

I want to be clear: I am not equivocating. Israel did not bring Hamas's evil attack upon herself. Hamas is not the least bit interested in a two-state solution or any sort of peace with Israel, and Hamas is responsible for keeping the residents of Gaza in poverty and fear. But to eradicate Hamas elements in Gaza by force seems impossible to me if we are to do so without irrevocably selling our souls, unwittingly creating five new terrorists for each one we kill in this way, and possibly igniting a world war. Further, we cannot refuse to see the broader injustices Israel perpetuates upon the Palestinian people.

There is little we can do right now to control what Israel's military forces will do today, tomorrow, this week, and next, and I am not in any way intelligent in the ways of war. But there is plenty of soul searching for us to do.

An Israeli, whose name is Noy Katzman, had a brother who was murdered in southern Israel on October 7. His brother's name was Chaim. Noy has gone on record saying that his brother was an activist for peace and that Israel must not destroy the lives of other innocent civilians as retribution for his brother's death. *The Guardian* reports that Noy has taken comfort in online support from Israelis and also from people who said they were writing from Gaza. One of those, a Palestinian, wrote to Noy, "I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for what happened to your brother and I want to thank you a lot for not wanting us dead like everyone else."

There's an organization called Standing together. It's a grassroots movement of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel. One of their Board members, Alon-Lee Green, was quoted as saying, "You see this pain being used to go in a worse direction that promises us nothing but more pain, more blood, more loss. As a state we have the right to defend our citizens from being slaughtered, but we have to answer the very fundamental question: And then what? We conquer the Gaza Strip, and then what?"

Every couple of days I find myself doom scrolling: scouring the Internet for accounts of the horrors that befell us on Oct. 7, looking at the photos of families murdered, innocents butchered, abused, or taken into captivity, reading the stories of heroism and Shiva, woe and resolve never again to allow an enemy crouching at our doorstep to occupy our dwelling places and commit such evil on the body and soul of our people—never again!

I have also taken on a practice which in some ways is more difficult: doom scrolling on the other side, looking at the photos of Palestinians killed—innocents slain, stories of heroism and mourning, woe and resolve that feel to me like nothing less than the biblical cry of our people in Egypt that rose up to God and lit the torch of our redemption from oppression.

The other night, driving home from a long day, I encountered a Palestinian vigil right outside my building. My first thought was "Oh no, not this, please; I just can't bear it." But a little while later I went out there, and they were cleaning up, just the organizer and someone helping. I approached the organizer, a woman in a shirt with Arabic writing on it, and I, your Rabbi in her kippah, asked her how her vigil had gone. She told me it went very well. I asked what it was about, specifically. She said it was a vigil for Palestinian lives in Gaza, and she began to say more. And then she said again that it went very well. I said "I am so glad that it went well," and I meant it. I asked her, "was concern expressed for the Jewish victims of such terrible, brutish violence in Israel and for those taken hostage." She said, "I do sympathize with them, although those who came tonight, that wasn't their cause." She went on to say, "I know people in Gaza. I've been

to Gaza. I have family and friends there. They hate Hamas, and when Hamas attacked Israel they were all terrified and angry, imagining the retribution that would come to them.” The two of us talked a bit more. It was a very humble, quiet, sad, open conversation.

But most of the time I’m with you, and much of the time I *daven* (pray) with you. There have been many moments over the past few weeks when in the midst of davening, I had to close my siddur because I couldn’t bear the discrepancy between the lofty words of our prayers and the reality of our suffering. This is not a new problem for me, nor is it a new problem for the Jewish. Lately I have been exploring why, when the going gets tough, I feel the need to go off book. And what I have discovered is that there are times when I feel, or I fear, that I lack the spiritual strength to imagine how beautiful, how good our world could be, how God’s glory could be manifest in the peace and wholeness for which we pray, over and over, every day. And I have also come to see that I lack the spiritual strength in those moments because I am broken by grief. My usual meaning structures—hope, identity, belonging, purpose—they blink out like when a Zoom connection freezes and we must either wait for the rupture to be restored, or leave and then reconnect, and I’m sure I am not alone in feeling like I cannot cross the distance from my place of loss and anger to a place of peace and wholeness.

But then I remember: I am not alone in this. We are all in this together. We are not alone, and we can step into the unknown, just as Avram and Sarai do in today’s Torah reading. We can allow ourselves to be radically displaced because we hear and see how we are called to respond to our circumstances from a different place, with a broader intention, one that is better attuned to God’s vision for humanity and the role of the Jewish People in actualizing it.

Our prayers don’t give us a break from that hope. We pray for peace, wholeness, justice, an end to suffering of all kinds, because we believe that God is invested in those goals, because we know that if we articulate them over and over again, we just may get the help we need to be worthy of taking part in their manifestation.

I don’t know what Israel is supposed to do right now, but there are a few of orienting points that are clear to me right now—actually, five:

1. There can be no peace and no justice for the Palestinians without peace and justice for us—and specifically, for Israel.
2. There can be no peace and no justice for Israel and the Jewish People who are intrinsically linked with her destiny, without peace and justice for the Palestinian people.

3. What we have been doing is not working—for security and for retribution. Neither has served us. And it is too dangerous and destructive for us to continue to tolerate those practices. They don't work.
4. If we lose ourselves in the name of security for Israel, there will be nothing left worth protecting.
5. **There is a profound need for the kind of humanity we are meant to model for the world. For that, we need unity.**

We are being called into the heartbreaking work of resisting the entrapment of our despair and our certainty, to hold onto our moral clarity and face the unknown in a new way, not from the place where we know we are right, but from the place where we know what sort of human beings we called to be.

Being humane is hard work,” writes Israeli Michael Sfar in an opinion published by Haaretz, “Remaining humane in the face of inhuman cruelty is even more difficult. It's much more natural to take revenge, to blame everyone on the other side, to drop thousands of bombs on them, to erase them all. Human history is filled with examples of that. Apparently we have not learned.

In these terrible times, where I am sitting is with this horrific trauma that we have experienced at the hand of human beings (not monsters; monsters would be easy to eradicate—it would be like a video game—“kill the monsters!”--but by human beings who have lost their humanity)--and it hardens our hearts. And so where I'm sitting, also, is in the place where our own moral corruption is a real risk, a real fear, God forbid even a reality which is no less dangerous and perhaps more so to our survival than Hamas. We must not let “doing” overpower our need to deal with the inner chaos that confronts us.

The French Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas who was imprisoned in Nazi Germany and who posed the question in his book *Ethics and Infinity*: How does one begin to think? And he answers: through traumatism, or gropings, to which one does not even know how to give a verbal form. We don't begin with words. We begin by looking inward—Lech l'cha, go inside—and feeling. From the shattering of our experience we then shape our questions and lay out the tasks before us in language and ideas. But we need that radical shock if we are going to think truly, rather than respond reflexively. Levinas was concerned about how we and others ought to respond to real life trauma. Drawing on the famous words of Hillel, he taught: אמ אין אני לי מי לי—If I am not for myself, who will be for me? We have a spiritual and moral responsibility, he taught, to stand up for ourselves while constantly asking ourselves: Am I still myself if I only take care of myself? (notes from Elie Holzer's class)

Esther “Etti” Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish author. She wrote confessional letters and diaries that describe both her religious awakening and the persecutions of Jewish people in Amsterdam during the German occupation. In 1943, she was deported and murdered in the Auschwitz concentration camp, and she left behind these words: “What matters is not that we preserve our lives at any cost, but *how* we preserve them. If we don’t face the inner challenges, we are not a viable generation. We are meant to draw new meaning from our suffering.” (notes from Elie Holzer’s class)

The Mei Shiloach adds a nuance to how we might understand Avram’s experience of deep attunement and displacement. Only Avram, he teaches, was able to feel inner turbulence about the need to rescue the Divine hope from a world on fire. Nobody else in his time could articulate the questions that needed to be asked about how beauty and brokenness come to be in our world and how we are called to help make our world habitable place where the Divine hope has a chance. When we discover the essential questions of the moment in which we live, he teaches, we experience a profound disquiet, like inner thunder. Avram models for how to be called into that turbulence, to listen deeply and find our role in it. Our journey begins in that place of disquiet and complexity. Lech l’cha: go into the thunder and turbulence and listen hard to its contours. Feel the complexity, dig into it, and see what we could not see before because we allowed our usual habits to hold us back from its power, because that is the place of Revelation. Just as Sinai thundered and shook us to the core, our task is to let ourselves be shaken, and move from there. Only through readiness to confront the thundering disquiet can we discover the truths that will save us.

The need to find words in this moment and the need to think forward cannot be done in a knee jerk way. The spiritual, theological and moral issues must be reckoned with. **We need to live in the inner chaos right now. That’s where we are. And I think that’s where the hope lies. We need to live in that place where we are right now and take in its teachings fully, with our eyes open and our ears open so that we can learn something new**, because God knows, we need to learn something new. (notes from Elie Holzer’s class)

Avner Gvaryahu, a former Israeli soldier, now part of a group called Breaking the Silence, stated, “For a decade plus we have been telling ourselves fairy tales, that we can ignore the fact that we are controlling millions of people by force. That has totally burst. This conception that we can ignore an occupation, ignore that there are millions in Gaza without rights, millions in the West Bank without rights. This could be a moment that cements it, or this might be a moment when we could help change the tide. That is the biggest challenge ahead.”

I'd like to bring us to Yehudah Amichai's poem "From the Place Where We are Right:"

FROM THE PLACE WHERE WE ARE RIGHT
Flowers will never grow In the spring.
The place where we are right Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined House once stood

My friends, I pray that we may hear that whisper, and that we may we heed it. And may that be our blessing. I say this, after all, as a proud Jew and a lover of Israel and the Jewish People.

I'd like to invite you now to sing with me the song "From a Distance," which I think speaks to this moment. This song was written by Julie Gold. She's Jewish and she says that she wrote it informed by Jewish tradition. What I love about these words for this moment is that they do decenter us and everyone who sings them, and allow us to see our world and our circumstances from a much broader place. Please sing along as you you can.

FROM A DISTANCE

"From a Distance" is a song by American singer-songwriter Julie R. Gold, initially penned in 1985. Nanci Griffith, who first recorded it for her 1987 album Lone Star State of Mind. A successful cover version by Bette Midler was released in 1990. (From a Distance lyrics © Wing And Wheel Music, Julie Gold Music)

From a distance, the world looks blue and green
And the snow-capped mountains white
From a distance, the ocean meets the stream
And the eagle takes to flight

From a distance, there is harmony
And it echoes through the land
It's the voice of hope

It's the voice of peace
It's the voice of every man (sing: "every one")

From a distance, we all have enough
And no one is in need
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease
No hungry mouths to feed

From a distance, we are instruments
Marching in a common band
Playing songs of hope
Playing songs of peace
They're the songs of every man (sing: "every one")

God is watching us, God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance
God is watching us, God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance

From a distance, you look like my friend
Even though we are at war
From a distance, I just cannot comprehend
What all this fighting's for

From a distance, there is harmony
And it echoes through the land
And it's the hope of hopes
It's the love of loves
It's the heart of every man (sing: "every one")

It's the hope of hopes
It's the love of loves
This is the song for every man (sing: "every one")
And God is watching us
God is watching us
God is watching us
From a distance
Oh, God is watching us
God is watching us

God is watching us
From a distance

May we close that distance.
Amen.

Thank you for indulging me. I've done what I could to cut some corners so we'll still get out of here by dinnertime, hopefully sooner.