

This week in Torah, we really get to know Avram, our forefather. Avram, who will become the first Jew. Avram, who will be named Avraham, as he enters into covenant with God. Avram who is deeply imperfect, and courageous and compassionate. Avram who, here in parshat Lech Lecha, is sent on a journey that will change everything.

Avram starts this journey with his nephew, Lot. But, the text explains - both Avram's family and Lot's family have grown too big, and are taking up too much space to be able to continue traveling together. *Vayehi reev*, and there were arguments between their shepherds, between their families. וַיִּפְּרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו: - And so they separated, a man from his brother - which is an intense and notable way to say that they parted ways. They separated, divided, a man from his brother.

In fact, this separation is cast by our commentators in a pretty negative light. A midrash in B'reishit Rabbah teaches that when Lot walks away, he leaves

behind both Avram and God - rejecting it all. Things are not well between them. Lot settles in Sodom and the next time we hear of him - he's been robbed and kidnapped by an invading army. They are the only two sets of their people in the land and it becomes immediately obvious that their division and estrangement has made both Avram and Lot significantly weaker and more vulnerable.

This story holds up an important mirror for us about the state of the Jewish people in NYC right now, in the lead up to the mayoral election. Over the past couple of months, we, too, have found reason to separate from one another. *Vayehi reev*, and there has been argument among the people. Assumptions have been twisted into accusations, there has grown distrust and anger and hurt. Social media has exacerbated our fractures, reaching a previously unmet fever pitch.

I think it's fair to say that most of those engaged in this moment were and are earnestly doing what they believe is best to protect the Jewish people. The people promoting one candidate, those promoting a different candidate, and people like us, here at CBE, speaking to all three candidates (or trying to) to ask our hard questions, voice our deepest concerns, and listen to what they have to say - all believe that they and we are doing what is best for the Jewish people, and best for NYC. And yet, one of the clear outcomes of all of this argument and anger is that we, the Jewish community of NYC, like Lot and Avram were, are *yipardu*, more divided now, weaker now, and more vulnerable now, than we were before this election season. In NYC of all places, that's a difficult reality to integrate.

But on November 5th, *whoever* is mayor, **we** will still need to be the Jewish people and **we** will still need each other, though we are fragmented and aching. So what do we do now?

I find it helpful to turn to Lech Lecha to ask: what does Avram do next? His family is divided and his nephew, Lot, without his uncle's protective presence, has been taken captive.

The text says this:

וַיְבֹא הַפְּלִיט וַיִּגַּד לְאַבְרָם הָעֵבֶרִי

A fugitive brought the news to Avram the Ivri . . . (that Lot had been taken).

When Avram heard (this), he mustered his household and went in pursuit after him.

From a state of division, perhaps even still angry, Avram goes and gets his kinsman.

Why? We can guess, but there's a hint in this text. For the first time, and in this specific context, Avram is called Avram Halvri, a name we translate as Avram, the Hebrew.

But Ivri comes from the verb "*La'avor*," to cross over, and Rashi teaches that it means: the one who came from the other side of the river. So he is called: the one who is not from here, is never from . . . here, wherever here may be. The stranger. Scholars teach that the word "*Ivri*" likely comes from the Semitic word *apiru*, which means one who is stateless. And this new title seems to wake something up in Avram. About who he is and who he is meant to be.

He remembers his call from God at the beginning of this parsha: Lech Lecha - Go, from your land, from the place where you were born, from your father's home to a different land that I will show you. He's traveled his whole life, crossing borders, from Ur of the Chaldeans to Charan to K'na'an, never

anchored to a home. Then he faces a famine, and he can't feed his family, and so he migrates to Egypt to find food. He's not safe there and eventually he has to leave again. In every place he has traveled, he has found himself to be vulnerable and a little alone.

He hears this word, this new name for himself, and he realizes that he and Lot are both so much more vulnerable without each other. He knows the soul of the stranger, having been a stranger his whole life, so, estranged or not, angry or not, he knows what he needs to do.

Avram rescues his nephew. Because he loves him, because they are family, and because they need each other. They NEED each other more than they need their arguments and their division and their accusations and their suspicions.

And it sticks for Avram - he gets it and he is changed by it. Anyone in this same position, whether they are his family or he's never met them, is profoundly vulnerable to the world around them - like he is, like his nephew was - in their aloneness. And this impacts him greatly.

The next time Avram, now called Avraham, meets a stranger, he knows what to do. In next week's parsha, three strangers come by his tent in the wilderness. They appear to be hungry and thirsty and tired and lost and alone. And Avraham famously cares for them. Because he is the *Ivri*, and he knows what it is to be alone and vulnerable and in danger. So he feeds them and he gives them water and he invites them into his home. And he is blessed by this.

The Jews of NYC are more vulnerable now in our fractured state. But there will be a November 5th and no matter who is the mayor at that time, we, the Jewish community - we at CBE who span so many political leanings and

passions, and our Israeli community, and Progressive and the Conservative Jews, and the hard left and our family at 770, and our secular Jews, and our unaffiliated Jews, our whole people - we are going to need to find our way back toward one another. And it will take time, for sure, but also we cannot take too much time before we begin to heal and return to one another.

Lot quickly experienced the very dire results of his vulnerability and so needed his kinsman to show up for him and to save him. With rising antisemitism and a real need to stand together as the Jewish community of NYC to advocate for our shared safety and values, we cannot wait until we experience the dire results of our internal divisions. We'll need each other again right away. More than we need our grudges.

And Avram leaves us this other piece of urgent wisdom from his journey. His empathic spirit weaves itself into the narrative of all that we are. It's not

limited to his own family - no, it is an amplifier - it grows and stretches, this truth, increasing in strength.

He leaves us his interaction with the three strangers, so that we might understand that everyone who is as vulnerable as he and Lot were, everyone who crossed the river to be here. The desert to be here. The border to be here. The ones who faced famine in their home and so came here. The ones who needed safety for their children and so left their homeland, the place of their birth, their father's home to go to a different land - also might know that they are not alone. The same thing in our being that helps us turn back to one another from the depths of division is what helps us also turn toward the other in love and solidarity. These turnings, which make us all less vulnerable, in fact, are one and the same.

Avram's truest essence is that of the *Ivri* and this became his lens for seeing the world - he could see how much the stranger needs compassion and

connection - whether they are himself, his family, or his neighbor. And we, the *Ivri'im*, the Hebrews, inherit this gift, this identity, from him. We can see how much we need each other - that division makes us scattered and vulnerable. And how much our fellow travelers need each other, and need us, too. So even though today we are standing on the scorched earth of the past couple of months, Lech Lecha is crying out to us to begin now to find our way back to one another and toward our neighbors who are counting on us in this moment.

The other night, I joined our members Gale Kaufman and Beth Napleton outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center - MDC, a prison up on 29th street, as part of a new project of CBE to stand with immigrants. There, we met folks from Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, including their incredible pastor, Reverend Juan-Carlos Ruiz, who led us. There are many ICE detainees being held inside of MDC right now. We prayed and we sang. We could see some of them watching us from their narrow windows, so we looked up at

them and we shouted: “You are not alone,” hoping they could hear us and know.

This is the blessing we find in parshat Lech Lecha – the one we need most at times such as this. May each of us know it deeply in our souls - that when we look for our family and when they look for us, when we look for each other, we will know we are not alone. And when we look for our neighbor, and when they look for us - we will know, and they will know, that none of us are alone. May we the Jewish people of NYC heal and find each other again soon and may the most vulnerable of this city find us standing shoulder to shoulder with them, stronger, all of us, for our being in it together, for all that lies ahead.

Amen.