

Shabbat shalom. This is an amazing week in Torah. We meet Avram! Like - THE Avram. The one who will become the first *Ivri*. The one tapped by God to be the ancestor of the Jewish people. And this parsha, Lech Lecha, has such gorgeous opening verses that we can't help but sing it. Avram will become Avraham, his wife, Sarai, will become Sarah, *v'ehyeh bracha* - and they will be a blessing to all they encounter.

And so their journey begins. But it's just ten verses later when it all takes a turn for the worse. Or at least a turn for the human. And the somewhat disappointing. There's a famine in the land, so Avram and Sarai go to Egypt to procure food. Before they enter, Avram turns to his wife and he says to her: "I know what a beautiful woman you are." See, it starts out real romantic.

He continues: "If the Egyptians see you and think: 'that's Avram's wife,' they will kill me." His insinuation here is that they'll want to marry her and so will need to get rid of him. So he asks of her this terrible thing: "Please, say you are my sister, *l'ma'an yitav li va'avurech*. So that it will go well for **me**, because of **you**."

The unspoken consequence here is that the Egyptians, thinking Sarai is not married, would be intimate with her as they wished.

In short, her function will be for the good of Avram. *Ba'avurech* - because of you, because of how I use you in this situation, *yitav li* - it will be good for **me** - I'll get what I need or want. That is a **tough** text.

Now we might say - well, she loves him and so she's willing to do this thing for him to save him. And that may be. Though he did have choices - they could have not gone to Egypt, too. But, also, that may also not be the whole picture.

In fact, it seems that Avram **isn't only** worried about his life. Rashi reads these words: *l'ma'an yitav li va'avurech*, "because of **you**, it will go well for **me**" to mean that Avram is saying: do this thing, and "they will give me presents." And actually, that **is** what happens. Pharaoh takes Sarai into his palace, into his harem, and because of his brotherly relation to Sarai, they give Avram sheep, oxen, donkeys, **slaves**, and camels. And so he builds his wealth. On Sarai's back.

Rabbeynu Bachya interprets this way that Avram treated Sarai ungenerously as well, saying: "This was a **sin** committed by Avram; it caused the eventual **exile** in Egypt of his descendants." It was during this exile that we were slaves in Mitzrayim for hundreds of years, so this punishment is particularly well matched to Avram's actions. A slave is someone who is used to fulfill the needs or further the advancement of the person who enslaves them. *Ba'avurech* - because of

the enslaved people, the enslaver prospers. While the enslaved person is used as a tool for the enslaver's gain, and is seen as less than a person. This was the case in Mitzrayim and of course, also in the United States.

Now this is a lot to put on Avram. But our ancestors are not meant to be a model of perfection, as much they are a mirror for humanity to gaze into and find ourselves there, and learn to do better. We may have inherited this *Ba'avurech*, but we don't have to keep it.

As we know, this transactional way of relating to another human being is actually a very common mode of being. People use other people to get what we need all the time.

Sometimes it's not nefarious at all. We take an Uber. The driver is our means of getting to where we need to go, and we are their fare. We go buy milk at the grocery store - we need milk, the checkout person needs us to be efficient in our bagging. It's often mutually transactional.

But this question of how we relate to other people, how we use other people to fulfill our own needs, and whether there is an alternative to that way of being, is the heart of the philosopher Martin Buber's teachings. You may be familiar with him - he wrote the book called *I and Thou*.

Buber teaches that there are two basic ways of relating to another human being.

I-Thou and I-It. An I-it relationship is where we relate to another person as a means to an end. A way of getting our own need met, whatever that need may be. An I-Thou relationship is one in which we encounter the full humanity of another person and engage with them not for what they can do for us, but as a whole person.

He describes what happens between two people who relate as an I to a Thou - as "revelation" - the word we usually use to describe the moment we received Torah at Sinai. But **he** teaches that revelation happens every time two people meet in this way. In fact, he says, encountering another person as a Thou is also how we access God. That's where God is - between the I and the Thou, when we are not "itting" each other.

Now, it's hard to be **that** present with each other all the time, for sure. It takes practice, it takes making a deliberate choice to want that. But it is very human to want that.

Sadly, we are constantly witness to the devastating consequences of what happens when we treat others as an "it," as a transaction. *L'ma'an yitav li* - and use another person for our own benefit, or gain, or power, or pleasure.

In a terrible recent example, we've watched with horror the unfolding story about events at Cornell University, and the University of Chicago. Young men who, for their own gain, have used these young women as a tool for their own power, their pleasure, their status. Who encounter this other human being not as someone to see in her whole humanity, but as a means to their own end. There are many things to decry, to condemn, and to learn from these stories, but among them is surely that we need to be teaching the humanity, dignity, and wholeness of every person - and each person's responsibility to seek that out in every person that they meet. Part of what crushes us when we hear these stories is that we see a human being treated as an object. When we know . . . we KNOW . . . the destruction that this causes and we KNOW the inherent holiness and worth of a human being and we KNOW, we think maybe we know, what is possible when we see each other's actual light.

We experience this *ba'avurech* posture as well when we see how some public figures talk about immigrants - using them to further their own political ambition. How Vice President Vance told lies about Haitians in Ohio - used them as a prop for his own needs, not caring that it increased violence on their communities and fear in their children. Using actual human beings to gin up a base is an I-It relationship - transactional, and in this case, morally depraved and incredibly dangerous. Human beings are not a means to an end.

And actually, for Buber, it's also not just human beings. His relational theology is a way of encountering all living things. He famously wrote: "I contemplate a tree." And he goes on to note all the ways he could essentialize or objectify its existence, but then he writes: "But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. . . . What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad (a tree nymph), but the tree itself." Understanding that this tree is not there for his own use, and so desiring and expecting nothing from it, Buber pens the antithesis of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*.

Imagine if we walked this world with Buberian eyes - yes, in how we see trees, and for sure, animals, and deeply so, human beings. Our Uber driver. The person checking us out at Lidl. Our patient. Our doctor. Our librarian. Our mechanic. Our teacher. Our partner. What if we practiced seeing them always as a whole person, with a story, with complete worth. Not as a tool. Not as a transaction. Not as a way to get something we want or need. But as a possible holy interaction, perhaps even a connection to the divine. How would that change how we walked in this world? How we meet each other face to face?

Buber wrote: "when we encounter another individual truly as a person, not as an object for use, we become fully human." We . . . not "I" . . . not "they," but we. Become fully human. He

explained that no one of us is complete just as the “I” part of the sentence. When we say I . . . hidden inside there somewhere, what we express, every time, is “I-Thou.” We are whole in relation. If we could see that truth around us, that none of us is merely an “I,” could anyone again use another person as a mere object to benefit from?

We have inherited the idea of *ba'avurech*, but it does not have to shackle us. We could learn from it, grow from it, refuse its tempting efficiency. We could redeem Avram from his fear-soaked decision.

As we make our way through this Shabbat, this week, this life, may we look deeply and discover the wholeness in one another, may we become fully human together, may we teach it to our children, our college students, our leaders and our world, and may we perhaps even choose to be the I to each other's Thou. Amen.