

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Lech L'cha*

Genesis 12:1-17:27

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### *Parashat Lech L'cha* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Womb Power: Sarah and Hagar's Story

Theme 2: Whose Covenant Is It, Anyway?

## Introduction



How does one acquire an identity, both individual and communal? *Parashat Lech L'cha* comes to teach us how. According to this portion, we acquire an identity in three critical ways: by physically journeying from one place to another, through the giving and acceptance of a name, and by virtue of our connection to Abram's covenantal relationship with God. *Lech L'cha* shows the reader that while our most profound relationships have the potential to take us to exalted heights, they are simultaneously tied up with the messiness of human existence—deception, jealousy, competition, impulse, hungers, hatred, and loss. At the beginning of this portion, Abram and Sarai embark on a journey of both physical and spiritual dimensions, guided by a God whose purpose is not yet clear. Later in the portion, they experience the richness of material possessions and the emptiness of infertility. Individually and as a couple, they respond simultaneously with generosity and withholding, open hands and constriction. In the course of this parashah, God bestows them with new names as a sign of their special relationship with the Eternal, and God's expectations of a covenanted people begin to take shape. This study guide will focus on two aspects of this parashah, first the story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16, and then the question raised by Genesis 17: Whose covenant is it, anyway?

## Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on page 59 and/or survey the outline on page 60. This will allow you to highlight some of the main themes in this portion and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger parashah. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.



## Theme 1: Womb Power: Sarah and Hagar's Story



In one of the Torah's most poignant stories, two women compete for power and place. In the male-dominated society of biblical times, fertility was one of women's few means of control and status. In its absence, a woman's standing might rapidly tumble from privileged to marginal. Sarai is an Israelite and wife of Abram. Hagar is a foreigner, an Egyptian slave. As such, she does not fully own her own body or its capacities. Rather, her reproductive power may be harnessed by her mistress, in compensation for Sarai's own physical insufficiency. Yet the story is about something far more complex than a straightforward transaction between master and servant. Both women engage in exploitation, and both women suffer as each one uses the power she does have to inflict pain on the other. This story reminds us that loss and scarcity do not always ennoble. Rather, such conditions also have the power to evoke the all-too-human capacities for cruelty, aggression, and brutality.

### 1. Read Genesis 16:1–6.

- a. Read Susan Niditch's comments on "The Tale of Hagar" and "Barrenness and Surrogate Motherhood" on pages 70–71. According to Niditch, what was the relationship in biblical times between a wife, her husband, a female slave, and the child conceived by the slave and the master? Whose body belonged to whom?
- b. According to Niditch, in biblical literature, what is an "annunciation"? How did infertility function for a woman both as a force for her marginalization and as a means of her elevation?
- c. According to the Central Commentary on Genesis 16:1, what were the different roles within the hierarchy of slaves?
- d. Read the Central Commentary on 16:2. What are the possible meanings of the ambiguous Hebrew translation "Maybe I will have a son through her"? What do you think motivated Sarai to engage Hagar as a surrogate? What do you think Sarai initially expected from this arrangement? Why do you think that Abram "heeded" his wife's voice?
- e. Once Hagar conceives, the balance of power between the two women shifts dramatically. What was Sarai's prior status, and what is it now? What about Hagar's position? What is the source of each woman's power? Why do you think that Hagar exploits her ability to become pregnant, using it as an opportunity to taunt and wound Sarai? How does Sarai respond and why?
- f. According to the Central Commentary on 16:6, Abram now also feels powerless. How does his sense of helplessness manifest itself? Why do you think he responds to Sarai's accusation the way he does? Reading between the lines, what does this brief interaction as well as Abram's "heed[ing] Sarai's voice" in verse 2 suggest about their relationship?
- g. Imagine that you have been asked to construct an alternative text to Genesis 16:4b–6, that is, to rewrite this part of the narrative. What would your story be? In your account, how would each woman act, and what would motivate her? What role would you assign to Abram in your story?

2. Read “Another View” by Amy-Jill Levine on page 78.
  - a. Levine suggests that in two different Genesis stories, first Abram and then Sarai exploit someone less powerful than themselves in order to further their own needs. In your view, what are the similar wishes or needs that each pursues in these stories? What are the differences? Do you find the actions of one more justifiable or acceptable than the other? If so, which one and why?
  - b. In both stories, God rescues a desperate and helpless woman, one Israelite and one foreigner. What might be read between the lines here about the relationship between God and Israel or between God and other nations?
  - c. Levine characterizes Abram’s and Sarai’s actions as a “cycle of abuse,” noting that the next generation (Abraham’s sons Isaac and Ishmael) breaks this pattern in order to bury their father peacefully. Do you agree with Levine’s characterization of their behavior as abusive? What other layers of meaning can you find in their conduct?
  - d. Think of a time when you were either the perpetrator or recipient of harsh behavior. What were the factors that motivated your actions in either role? Looking back now, how might you have “rewritten” that story, that is, how might you have acted or reacted differently if you had been able?
3. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Dvora E. Weisberg on pages 78–79.
  - a. According to Weisberg’s discussion of Genesis 16:1, what significance do the Rabbis give in casting Hagar as Pharaoh’s daughter?
  - b. Drawing on the same verse, how do the Rabbis read piety and prophetic powers in Sarai’s actions toward Hagar?
  - c. In *B’reishit Rabbah* 45:4–6, the Rabbis criticize both Sarai and Hagar, while in 45:7, Hagar is described as being protectively surrounded by five divine messengers. Why do you think that the Rabbis chose to see *both* Sarai and Hagar in nuanced ways, that is, as full human beings capable of both virtue and villainy and both meriting God’s protection? What purpose(s) would this serve?
4. Read “And These Are Hagar’s Poems to This Very Day” by Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir in *Voices* on page 84.
  - a. Who is the speaker in this poem? Whom does the speaker address in the poem?
  - b. What is the source of the accusation and bitterness expressed by the speaker? In what ways does the speaker feel wronged?
  - c. What is the speaker’s fantasy about how the carpets’ patterns could act on her behalf? What does this fantasy convey about the speaker’s sense of personal agency and ability to control her own fate?
  - d. The speaker cites “your tranquility” and “my disgrace.” What is the “disgrace” and whose is it? What is the “tranquility” and, according to the poet, who experiences it?
5. Read “My Freedom” by Else Lasker-Schüler in *Voices* on page 83.
  - a. Who is speaking in “My Freedom”? How would you characterize or define the tone of this poem?
  - b. To whom does the writer speak in this poem? What can be read between the lines about

- the writer's relationship to "dear Mother"?
- c. Read as commentary on Genesis 16, how can this poem be understood as turning the biblical story on its head?
  - d. What sustains the poet in "My Freedom"? What personal qualities or beliefs does the poet utilize to cope with the situation depicted in this poem?
  - e. Recall a time when you were challenged by a particularly difficult, threatening, or complex situation. What personality traits were you able to call upon for strength and coping? Have you acquired additional personal qualities since that time? If so, what are they? How did you develop them? What additional traits to cope with life's vicissitudes would you like to develop in the future that are not yet yours?

## Theme 2: Whose Covenant Is It, Anyway?



In Genesis 17, God reappears to the ninety-nine-year-old Abram, reiterating the profound covenant between them and establishing circumcision as its physical, tangible sign for all eternity. Abram receives a promise of abundant descendants and land sufficient for their dwelling. In return, circumcision is to be performed not only on Abram and his male descendants, but on slaves as well. The penalty for failing to observe this rite, and thus breaking the covenant, is both severe and terrifying: those who do so will be "cut off from [their] people" (17:14). The specific nature of this covenantal mark raises significant questions. Since circumcision is only performed on males, what is the nature of the covenant between God and Sarai's descendants, the women? Is it less than, or equal but different? Can one be truly part of the covenantal relationship with God without a tangible marker? How else might the relationship be established and known? How valid are covenantal rites or ceremonies that do not derive from Torah?

### 1. Read Genesis 17:1–8, 17:15–16.

- a. How does God self-identify to Abram in this passage? Read the Central Commentary on 17:1 by Susan Niditch. What are the meanings of the name "El Shaddai"? How does the use of this particular name of God enrich the meaning of this particular passage? How do the different meanings of this name affect your associations to and images of God? If so, which one and how?
- b. In this section, God renames Abram. What is the symbolism of Abraham's acquiring a new name?
- c. What does God promise Abraham? Why do you think God chose these things as defining features of the covenant? What is the significance of "[being turned] into nations" (17:6)? Would you have added anything else to this list?
- d. Earlier in this parashah, God promises to make Abram "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), and in Genesis 17:6 God tells Abraham that he will be "exceedingly fruitful." How does God propose to fulfill these promises to a man who has no children and whose elderly wife, Sarai, is infertile?
- e. Read the introductory commentary to 17:15–22 on page 76. How is God's blessing of Sarah parallel to that of Abraham? What are the key differences? What do you think accounts for the differences?
- f. God states that the covenant will be carried out only through Isaac, the son that

Abraham has with Sarah. Yet the tangible mark of this covenant is male circumcision; there is no comparable mark for women. How do you reconcile the former statement with the latter?

2. Read Genesis 17:9–14, 17:19–22.

- a. In this section, God lays out the expectations for Abraham and his descendants. What are these expectations? According to the Central Commentary on Genesis 17:7–10, whom does God address here?
- b. According to the comment on 17:7–10, what is an *ot*? How is it used as a symbol of group identification? What other or different *otot* (pl.) mark your sense of self as a Jew?
- c. Read the Central Commentary on 17:11. Given the exclusionary nature of the central covenantal requirement of *b'rit milah* (circumcision), what do you think of Niditch's assertion (on vv. 7–10) that “membership in the covenant is not limited to males”? To use a contemporary concept, is this a “separate but equal” covenant? Do you believe that there can be such a thing?
- d. Circumcision is commanded for “every male among you” (17:10), including slaves. Read the Central Commentary on 17:12. Why would it be necessary to include non-Israelites in this commandment? What would circumcision accomplish in these circumstances?
- e. The punishment for failure to circumcise is to be “cut off” (Genesis 17:14) from one's people. Turn to Leviticus 7:20 and read the Central Commentary there to verse 20 on page 601. What are the different ways to understand this expression? Why do you think that these consequences would be an appropriate or fitting response? Since the verb form *k-r-t* can refer to both cutting off and making a covenant, what do you think could be the relationship between these two practices?
- f. Read the Central Commentary on Genesis 17:16 and on 17:19, 22. Without circumcision, what is the *ot* or “sign” of Sarah's integral role in the covenant? In what ways is it similar to Abraham's? How do you think it compares in significance to men's *ot* or role?

3. Post-biblical Interpretations by Dvora E. Weisberg on pages 78–79.

- a. Read Weisberg's comments on 12:2 on page 78. How do the Rabbis in Midrash *B'reishit Rabbah* 39:11 describe God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah? How does this compare to your own perception of the biblical covenant examined above?
- b. Read Weisberg's comments on 17:15 at the end of page 79. In *B'reishit Rabbah* 47:2, Rabbi Aha upends the traditional notion of the marital balance of power. What might have compelled this rabbinic author to establish Sarah and Abraham's relationship as exceptional among marriages? What theological purpose(s) would be served by doing so?

4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Ruth H. Sohn on pages 80–81.

- a. Sohn notes that God's direct communication with Abraham as well as the male-only ritual of circumcision might be understood as excluding women as full covenantal

partners. What are some of the ways she suggests that God binds Sarah equally to the covenant?

- b. What basis underlies Sohn's contention that circumcision and childbearing are equivalent physical manifestations of the covenant? What do you think of this interpretation?
- c. All men can be circumcised, but not every woman may be able to bear children or may choose to do so. If circumcision and childbearing are the acts that bind men and women equally to the covenant, what becomes of women without children? In this model, men become covenantal partners independent of any other human being; that is, the relationship requires only a circumcised man and God. However, this implies that women require others (children) to enter into this relationship. How would acceptance of this paradigm have an impact on notions of women's autonomy and individuality? Where do you think the text stands with regard to this issue?
- d. Have you been part of or attended a *b'rit bat* (covenant of the daughter) ritual to enter a baby girl into the covenant? In your experience, how did the *b'rit bat* compare—in meaning, symbolism, and importance—to a *b'rit milah* (covenant of circumcision)? Absent the ritual of physically marking the body, some *b'rit bat* ceremonies include a different physical ritual, namely feet washing. In what ways do you think that these two physical acts, while dissimilar, can be equally powerful?
- e. Imagine that you have been given the task of designing a ritual of group identification, initiation, and welcome. What elements would your ritual contain? Why did you select these elements, and what would they communicate to those who attended your ceremony? How important would it be to you for your ritual to be either gender-neutral or gender-specific?

### *Overarching Questions*

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be bound by a covenant, a pledge of mutual obligation and responsibility? Do you feel yourself bound by any such agreement? If so, what is it? Who or what empowers your covenant? Under what circumstances, if any, would you consider it appropriate or fitting to abrogate it?
2. How might scarcity or loss be harnessed for constructive purposes rather than becoming a motivation for human beings to abuse or mistreat one another? Is it realistic to think that this could come to be? If so, what would be necessary to encourage such behavior?

## Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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