



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Lech Lecha 5771

By Rachel Travis  
October 16, 2010

The young man stood among the debris. Shattered torsos, crumbled appendages, clay and stone that moments before had posed as gods littered the ground. He quickly planted a stick into the still hand of a large idol—the only one left standing—as his father’s footsteps echoed on the threshold. Avraham’s father, Terach, returning to his shop, surveyed his decimated wares and cried out, “Who did this to them?” His son answered, “A woman brought a grain offering for the idols, and they argued about who would eat first. Then the largest got up, took the stick and shattered them all!” According to the midrash, Terach bellowed, “What nonsense are you telling me—are they then conscious?” Avraham rhetorically replied, “Do your ears not hear what your lips are saying?”<sup>1</sup>

This midrash is one of the best-known rabbinic anecdotes of the life of Avraham, the forebear of the Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> It introduces us to a young revolutionary, recently awakened to monotheism, passionate and determined to rip the blinders off of a complacent, hypocritical society. He is not only a radical but is even willing to risk everything for his belief in God. So why does God remain curiously silent throughout Avraham’s youth?<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Avraham is seventy-five when, in this week’s *parshah*, God addresses him for the first time.<sup>4</sup> And it is to him that God offers an unparalleled challenge and promise: “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.”<sup>5</sup> By this time, Avraham has developed from a lone revolutionary into a respected leader and has learned to channel his unbridled faith into productive social reform. He is a wealthy man, the head of a large household, and together with his wife, Sarah, he has already converted a dedicated following to his cause.<sup>6</sup> God speaks to Avraham now because he has proven himself a capable emissary, prepared to pursue sustainable change. This Avraham is ready to heed God’s directive to change society from the ground up, in essence creating history’s first grassroots social movement.

Nonetheless, Avraham soon discovers what many of us have learned through our own work: that the path to substantive, enduring change can be daunting. From the outset, his mission is beset by obstacles, but Avraham does not lose sight of his ultimate goals. When faced with a potentially destructive schism with his nephew, Lot, Avraham chooses an amicable separation over internal divisiveness.<sup>7</sup> When he is forced to become involved in a local war, he

<sup>1</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 38:13.

<sup>2</sup> Although Avram and Sarai’s names are not changed to Avraham and Sarah until midway through *Parshat Lech Lecha* in chapter 17, I will refer to them as Avraham and Sarah throughout, since I am not directly addressing the name change in this Dvar Tzedek.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best example is found in Bereshit Rabbah 38:13, which describes Avraham’s rebellious stance against the tyrant Nimrod. Avraham risks his life to defend his beliefs, and as the punishment for such impertinence and heresy, is thrown into a fiery furnace. God saves him, but still does not actually address Avraham at this point.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:4.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 12:1–2.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 12:5, especially Rashi’s commentary.

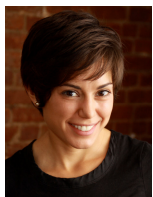
<sup>7</sup> Genesis 13:5–13.

engenders long-term alliances and refuses any spoils.<sup>8</sup> Throughout, Avraham remains committed to reforming society through positive and sustainable means.

However, as Avraham and Sarah age beyond the normal period of childbearing, he despairs of his ultimate success. His faith is unshaken but, understanding that enduring reform cannot be achieved in one lifetime, he fears that the movement will die with him.<sup>9</sup> The advancement of his mission hinges not only upon the promise of an heir, but also on the development of an entire nation forever charged with improving the world.

Many of us, like Avraham, have experienced a revelatory, idol-smashing moment. Inspired by a personal experience, a stirring article or a role model, we are galvanized to work towards radically transforming the world, immediately. And yet, as we learn from Avraham, true change requires patience, dedication and perseverance. Ultimately, Avraham could not build a religion out of the rubble of his father's broken beliefs. Enacting substantive reform required that he leave the comforts of home and endeavor to construct a community of like-minded souls.

As we face contemporary challenges to building a more just society, we can look to the dedication of Avraham and Sarah in *Parshat Lech Lecha* for strength and reassurance. We, like them, can only truly reshape society by committing ourselves for the long haul—even when the journey is bumpy and the future is uncertain. When God directs Avraham to set forth, God simultaneously offers the promise of an opaque reward, telling Avraham that he will “be a blessing.”<sup>10</sup> As Rashi explains, “to be a blessing” is to be entrusted with a power once reserved for the Divine: the ability to bestow blessings upon others.<sup>11</sup> In other words, our reward is that which Avraham and Sarah so deeply desired: the knowledge that we are links in an unending chain of social reform. Even when the progress is difficult to tally, together we are creating the foundation for sustainable change and bringing blessing into the world.



**Rachel Travis** is currently the Curatorial Assistant for the Roman Vishniac Archive at the International Center of Photography. After earning a Masters in Jewish Art and Visual Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rachel has worked at a number of museums and Jewish institutions, exercising her belief that art can serve as a vehicle for social change. Born in Manhattan and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, she currently lives with her husband in the Upper West Side where they enjoy biking, baking and urban farming. Rachel can be reached at [rachel.dvartzedek@gmail.com](mailto:rachel.dvartzedek@gmail.com).

---

<sup>8</sup> As described in Genesis 14:12–24, Avraham becomes involved when Lot is kidnapped by one of the warring kings.

<sup>9</sup> In *Parshat Vayera*, God's promise is fulfilled, and Yitzhak is born to Avraham and Sarah. He will follow in his parents' footsteps and seeks to reinforce the positive changes they brought about in their society.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 12:1.

<sup>11</sup> Rashi on Genesis 12:1.

©2010 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/dvartzedek](http://www.ajws.org/dvartzedek).

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)