

In our Torah portion this week, Lech Lecha, Avram and his wife, Sarai, take a journey. They have already left home with Avram's father and nephew at the end of last week's parashah. Home was *Ur Kasdim*, Ur of the Chaldeans. One midrash cited by the commentator Or HaChaim suggests that this first move was precipitated by a hope for change in luck – Avraham and Sarah were childless, and Terach hoped that a new location might make them more fertile. Other commentators suggest that Avram already sensed a sacred pull to the land of Canaan, though Hashem had not yet called him there. In any case, by the end of Parashat Noach, they come to as far as Haran, where Terach, Avram's father dies.

They are presumably still processing their grief at the beginning of this week's parashah, when Avram receives the call to go forth to a new land. This is the promised land of Canaan, where he is told he will create his spiritual dynasty.

Avram arrives in Canaan, but he doesn't stay there. Within Canaan, the family wanders from place to place. Ten verses into the parasha, a mere 4 verses after Avram and his family arrive in Canaan, a famine forces them to seek hospitality in Egypt. So they become, depending how you would prefer to think of it, either climate refugees or economic refugees.

When they arrive in Egypt, posing as brother and sister, they endure forced family separation. Sarai, who is exceedingly beautiful, is trafficked to Pharaoh, and only escapes being instated as a permanent member of his harem because a plague forces him not to touch her. At the end of the first Chapter of the parashah, Pharaoh expels Avram and Sarai from his borders, although with many gifts so as not to bring the wrath of God upon him.

Avram and his family return to Canaan, and proceed to try to build a life there. It is not without hardship. Tense over negotiating narrow spaces, Avram and his nephew Lot part ways. Lot is taken captive in a war, and Avram goes to his rescue.

Avram is referred to in this parashah as Avram halvri, “Avram the Hebrew,” we would say, but literally, it is from the verb “avar” – to cross a boundary.

Commentator Rashi says that Avram was so called because he came from across the Euphrates river. So we see that not only is Avram someone who repeatedly crosses borders, but the label of the outsider is attached to him, even after many years in Canaan. Ultimately, Avram and Sarai’s names are changed to Abraham and Sarah, and Benny will discuss in detail tomorrow the significance of those name changes.

There are many ways of telling any story in Torah, and each year as each parashah comes around, there are new lenses from which to consider it. Tonight, I choose to highlight the narrative of Avram and Sarai as migrants, first religious emigres, then climate refugees, then deportees, then settled outsiders, because the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, one of the oldest refugee resettlement organizations in the country, has designated this weekend as National Refugee Shabbat. This year, the global refugee population has risen by more than three million, and the US has resettled a mere 20,000- less than half of our administration’s refugee ceiling, which is again only half of the number of refugees that we were resettling under the previous administration. As world refugee populations increase, the country in which we reside is closing its doors. So we would do well to remember what it means to be a descendent of Avram *halvri*, Avram the border crosser.

I actually interned for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society as a rabbinical student back in the academic year of 2012-2013. One thing that impressed me about the organization was their commitment not only to resettling those who had official refugee status, but their commitment to advocacy and aid to immigrants of all kinds. My direct supervisor in my internship did a lot of pro bono work for DACA recipients, those teenagers granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals under Obama. I remember him saying to me once, “Some people only want to support the ‘good refugees’ – those who were maybe being actively persecuted for their religious beliefs in their home countries. They see a distinction between those folks and the ‘bad’ economic migrants, who come to take our jobs away. We don’t understand the distinctions to be as morally clear between the different reasons that people might need to leave home and seek welcome elsewhere.”

Indeed, in our parashah, Avram, Sarai and family start as perhaps religious pilgrims, but by various turns are climate refugees, victims of family separation and sexual trafficking, and deportees. Do we really want to try to create a calculus of which experience was hardest?

Ma’asei avot siman l’vanim – “the deeds of the ancestors are a sign for the descendants,” is a commentary often applied to Avram’s initial journey down to Egypt, foreshadowing the slavery in Egypt generations later. But too, all of his journeys foreshadow each time a Jew has moved for religious freedom, or economic opportunity, or to avoid being coerced into war or captivity. And too, the ways that we have been labeled as *ivrim* – not just “Hebrews” but transgressors, boundary crossers, dangerous influences and dissidents.

We spiritual descendants of Avram and Sarai, of all people, must resist the discourse that demonizes those who cross borders, and be sensitive to the varied needs of migrants and refugees everywhere.

In our own state of Oregon, there is an opportunity to take action to defeat measure 105, which, if passed, would repeal Oregon's 30 year-old anti-profiling law and make it legal for law enforcement officers to profile targets based on perceived immigration status, as well as to do the job of Immigrations and customs enforcement, which would interfere with their responsibilities towards community policing. There are many reasons to oppose this measure, and there is canvassing every weekend, and phone banking every weekday between now and election day. The Oregon chapter of the ACLU is organizing these efforts, and I encourage all of you who can make the time to get involved.

Nationally, it is important that we keep the pressure on the administration to let them know that we cannot stand for policies such as family separation, indefinite child detention, and continually lowering the refugee ceiling.

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society website, HIAS.org, offers yet more opportunities to take action, and I encourage you all to check it out.

Finally, my last charge to all of you is that we not lose hope. That is the final thing we learn from our history – no matter how terrible a given policy may be, no matter how entrenched a status quo, we are *ivrim*, we are boundary crossers, and we know that the state of the world is dynamic, that each of us can make a difference. As Avram and Sarai did, we will end this chapter in a different place. And as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov wrote, *asur l'hitya'esh* – it is forbidden to despair.