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Parshat Lech Lecha: On Suffering

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Introduction:

Feeling God's presence, shouldn't be that difficult. "You shall walk after the Lord your God,"(Devarim 12:5) we are told; seek out God's presence. And yet, astonished, R. Hama son of R. Hanina (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a) asks, how is it possible to walk with the Shechina? Rav Hama quotes an early pasuk from Devarim that describes "... the Lord your God as a devouring Fire."(Devarim 4:24). How is it possible to get close to God without being scorched? R. Hama answers his own question: We must walk after the *midot*, after the attributes of God, not his immediate presence.

In Hebrew, good attributes, *midot*, are translated as "good measures." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, suggests that a quality is determined by its proportion. In other words our *midot* are the balance of our varied characteristic traits. To act Godly is to put our best spiritual essence forward, while trying to keep in check the inevitability of negative attributes. We are at once both good and bad, compassionate and injurious.

At Yeshivat Maharat, our students are ordained with the ability to lead, *pasken*, and teach. But, they must also be finely attuned to the nuances of the human condition. Spiritual leaders are most effective when they have confronted and understand their own *midot*, their own balance of human traits. Our Torah narratives bring to bare the multi-layers of the characteristic traits that individuals must learn to balance within themselves.

And so, I offer this weekly parsha column as a model of Yeshivat Maharat's Pastoral Torah curriculum, where we will explore the rich and varies layers of the human condition.

In the strange narrative of the *brit bayn ha'betarim*, the Covenant of the Pieces, God tells Avraham: "Know with certainty that your offspring will be *strangers (geirut)* in a land, and they will *serve others (avdut)*, and they will be *oppressed (inui)* (Genesis 15:13)." *Geirut, avdut and inui*—strangers, servitude and suffering will mark the future of the Jewish people. Suffering and discord are fundamental aspects of becoming covenantal—being full participants of the *brit*.

My natural inclination is to ask: why? Why must we suffer? There is never a good answer to this question, and yet, suffering is an inevitable part of the human experience. Perhaps, the more relevant question then, is to ask what, if anything, can come from suffering.

Rav Joseph Soleveitchik, in his book *Abraham's Journey: Reflections of the Life of the Founding Patriarch* argues that one cannot appreciate the world lest one suffers and makes personal sacrifices. In a play of words, he suggests that the *korbanot* (sacrifices) that Avraham brought-- the three classes of animals—cow, goat and sheep represent the gamut of *animal sacrifices* one may bring, which in turn each symbolize the gamut of sacrifices that one may have to make in life.

This same idea is implied in the word *yerusha* (inheritance). Part of the brit is God's promise that Avraham and his descendants will "inherit the land" (Genesis 15:7). Previously, God had promised to give as a *matana*, a gift-- the land of Israel. But now, the land must be inherited. Unlike a gift, *yersusha* implies that the land must be conquered; it will not be offered on a silver platter. But, once the land has been conquered, it becomes yours to love and hold. The difficulties and loss that comes with conquering the land, will ultimately bring with it tremendous love and care for *Eretz Yisrael*.

The second message of the Covenant of the Pieces is that in most instances of suffering, there is a glimmer of hope and redemption.

God tells Avraham to cut and divide each of the animals, but the birds being offered must remain unscathed, uncut. Birds have the ability to fly, to ride above the tragedy. If the cut animals represent the inevitable tragedy and suffering, the birds are a symbol of the undefeated Jewish spirit that continues to soar. When immersed in tragedy, it may seem impossible to see the silver lining. Yet, in the midst of describing the future suffering of the Jewish people, God implores Avraham to remember that God took him out of Ur Kasdim. And eventually, God will take the Jewish people out of Egypt. Eventually, God's *hester panim*—God's hiddenness will be revealed.

A life of ease, void of despair and suffering is just not our reality. But the *brit bein habetarim* urges us to look through suffering to a glimmer of light and hope.

After God states that there will be *inui*—suffering in this world, God promises that eventually we will leave with great wealth—*rekush gadol*. "*Rekush gadol*," explains the Rav does not mean actual silver and gold "but a spiritual treasure...that suffering will bring with it resistance, tenacity, and heroic strength." (An Eternal Covenant, *Abraham's Journey*, p.157) This is symbolized in having the three animals cut up in the center—that there will be complete enslavement, oppression, and martyrdom—but the birds will still always be soaring high.

In the course of our lives, suffering is inevitable; I can only hope that we are able to encounter *innui*, suffering with the spirit of birds. And, with Gods help, and our own fortitude we will emerge stronger, and seek to fly even higher.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.