

For Torah Queeries - Jewish Mosaic  
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Beth Chayim Chadashim

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This week's Torah portion, *Lech-lecha*, tells the story of the formation of the Jewish people, beginning with God's first call to Avram, not yet Abraham, telling him to "go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" [Genesis 12:1]. Avram goes, as God commands. He takes his wife, Sarai (later Sarah) and his nephew, Lot, with him, and all the wealth they had amassed, and the persons they had acquired and they set out for the land of Canaan and arrive there [Genesis 12:4-5]. If you wonder what LGBT people could possibly have in common with the patriarch and matriarch of Judaism, with Abraham and Sarah, read the whole story. It reads like an episode of "Queer as Folk" or "The 'L' Word."

Twice in their story [here in chapter 12:10f and again in chapter 20, *Parashat Vayera*], Abraham while sojourning as a *ger* (resident alien) in foreign lands becomes afraid that strangers will kill him when they find out who his partner is. Knowing as he does that resident aliens lived without legal rights and protection, depending on the goodwill of the local community [footnote] (sound familiar?), he asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister instead of his wife. Complications arise, of course, and Abraham learns it is even more dangerous to be closeted than forthright about one's relationships.

In the middle of this portion, Avram, called by God Godself to go on a journey, is labeled *Avram ha-Ivri* – usually translated as Avram the Hebrew, but *ivri* comes from the Hebrew root meaning "cross over," "boundary crosser," "other." Maybe literally because he crossed the river Euphrates, but the midrash suggests perhaps it is because of his "differentness": "All the world was on one side (*eiver*) and he on the other side." [Genesis Rabbah 42:13, as quoted in *Etz Chayim* Torah commentary, note to Genesis 14:13].

About the *Ivrim* (the Hebrews, the "others") that Abraham is to father, God informs him in this portion that his "offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end thy shall go free with great wealth" [Genesis 15:13-14]. We may still be waiting for that promised freedom, but at least we've had a taste.

The plot thickens. Avram and Sarai, a long time couple, yet never able to get pregnant themselves, decide to see if one of them can impregnate a surrogate. They succeed, but their relationship with the surrogate (Hagar) gets a little strained, and she runs away. God convinces her to return. A child is born to them, but the relationship with Hagar remains difficult [Genesis 16]. Sound familiar? Even in those days there was little support for non-conforming family structures -- one dad and two moms provided plenty of parenting challenges.

Later in this same portion God reveals to Avram that, at age 100, he will father another child, this time by Sarai (age 90). His response? What would yours be? He throws himself on his face and laughs. God demonstrates a sense of humor too and tells Avram to name the son "Isaac,"

meaning, “he laughed” [Genesis 17:15-19]. It proves no easy task being an older parent, but both Abraham and Sarah delight in it.

Two more points about Abraham and Sarah and why we might identify with them actually come from outside our immediate text, but related to it.

Some of us may know by heart the promise God makes to Avram not because we’ve memorized the Torah verses per se, but because we’ve learned a song whose lyrics quote God’s promise. The song was one of Jewish singer songwriter Debbie Friedman’s first and still biggest “hits.” **Lechi Lach** will no doubt be sung in many congregations this Shabbat, as it has been in growing numbers of congregations ever since it was written in 1986 (as well as during Debbie’s sell-out Carnegie Hall concerts).

### **Lechi Lach**

Lyrics by Debbie Friedman & Savina Teubal (based on Genesis 12:1-2)

*Lechi lach to a land that I will show you  
Lech li-cha to a place you do not know  
Lechi lach on your journey I will bless you  
And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing  
You shall be a blessing lechi lach*

*Lechi lach and I shall make your name great  
Lech li-cha and all shall praise your name  
Lechi lach to the place that I will show you  
Li-simchat chayim, li-simchat chayim  
Li-simchat chayim lechi lach.  
And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing  
You shall be a blessing lechi lach.*

To listen to this song, [click here](#).

*1988 Deborah Lynn Friedman (ASCAP) Sounds Write Productions, Inc. (ASCAP). Used with permission of Sounds Write Productions, Inc.*

The treasured connection of the queer community to this song is that the lyrics were written by Jewish lesbian feminist historian Savina Teubal z’l and Debbie Friedman for the *Simchat Chochmah* (“Joy of Wisdom”) ceremony that Savina devised in celebration of her 60th birthday. A strong enough connection, but one more proud piece of Jewish Queer history: the ceremony took place, and this song sung by Debbie Friedman premiered, at *Beth Chayim Chadashim* (BCC) in Los Angeles, the world’s first gay and lesbian synagogue (founded in 1972. See <http://www.bcc-la.org>).

And if all that isn’t enough to connect you forever to Abraham and Sarah, an obscure (but getting less obscure thanks to queer Jewish scholarship as well as the internet) passage of Talmud surely will. In tractate *Yevamot* 64b, amidst a discussion of the mitzvah of parenting, “Rabbi Ammi

stated: ‘Abraham and Sarah were originally of doubtful sex [*tumtumim* - a person whose gender cannot be determined]. . . And Rabbi Nahman in the name of Rabbah ben Abbuha [adds]: ‘Our mother Sarah was incapable of procreation. . . she had not even a womb.’” We could of course study this strange little commentary in detail, but for now let’s notice two things: one is that these Rabbis of the Talmud claim that the progenitors of the Jewish people – our first patriarch and matriarch – were of indeterminate gender, and two, they seem completely unperturbed by this idea. Could they be more matter-of-fact here?

One of the favored translations these days of *lech-lecha* (or the feminine form *lechi-lach*) is “go for your own self,” “go, for your own sake,” but as the story shows us, “Go for yourself” means neither “Go, *by* yourself; go alone” nor does it mean “Go only for yourself.” Indeed, while traveling through Torah can become an unexpected journey of self-discovery, it’s lovely to remember that the journey is deeper, more fulfilling, more revealing when we take it with friends and study companions – old and new. We’re barely into a new year of Torah study. May our Torah circles and our Torah study this year bring us closer to our own selves, our own life journeys, and to the communities in which we dwell.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards, Ph.D. is in her 12th year as rabbi of Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) in Los Angeles (mentioned above). [www.bcc-la.org/Clergy.html](http://www.bcc-la.org/Clergy.html) She was ordained by Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in 1994 after studying at its Jerusalem, Los Angeles and New York City campuses. She lives in Los Angeles with her partner of 21 years, Tracy Moore, editor of *Lesbiot:Israeli Lesbians Talk about Sexuality, Feminism, Judaism and Their Lives* (Cassell Press, 1995). Lisa’s brother, Rabbi Laurence Edwards, Ph.D., is rabbi of Ohr Chadash, BCC’s sibling congregation in Chicago. This piece is dedicated to the memory of Savina Teubal (also mentioned above), who died not quite one year ago, just shy of age 80. For more about Savina Teubal, her life, her work, her *Simchat Chochmah* ceremony go to: [www.jwa.org/feminism/html/JWA070.htm](http://www.jwa.org/feminism/html/JWA070.htm) She was a friend, teacher, mentor to many (myself included), and she is missed.

[footnote] See *Etz Chayim*, note on Genesis 12:10