

**Shabbat Lech-Lecha 5765,
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**Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
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When my brother – Larry Edwards – was in rabbinical school in the early 1970s, he used to get teased, along with his classmate Elliot Stevens, for having such non-Jewish name.

By the time I got to rabbinical school – in the late 1980s – the lesbian thang kind of overshadowed the goyishe name thang. Ironically, the other very – non-Jewish named classmate of mine – Bridget Wynne – was also the other lesbian in my class. Although Bridget is almost 6 feet tall, has freckles and wavy red hair, and looks about as much like me as... [Fran or Robin]...I mean, as ...Arlan Wareham or [look around the room], we were often called by each other's name. We used to joke that people might as well just call us "lesbian 1" and "lesbian 2," but maybe after all it was our non-Jewish names that caused people to get confused.

These days in rabbinical school and in Jewish community, there is much more variety in names and in sexual diversity, and people aren't thrown by them as much. But still, they take notice of what some people – Davi, for example – call "exotic."

Last weekend Davi Cheng (one of the great new Jewish names in the world, and THE exemplar of all things EXOTIC – Chinese lesbian Jew by choice congregational president) and her partner, Bracha Yael, went to the first family retreat for Jewish families of ethnic and racial diversity. Sponsored by this wonderful organization Be'chol Lashon ("In every Tongue"), which is seeking not only to reach out to Jewish families of color, of racial and ethnic diversity, but also to create Jewish community that embraces them. I'm sure Davi will be telling us more in the not distant future about that group, and I hope we as a congregation can do some of that community building.

Remember those classic ads for Levy's Real Jewish rye bread – with the African American kid, and the Asian woman, and the Native American guy smiling as they bite into a sandwich on rye? What was the slogan? "rye bread isn't just for Jews anymore?"

No, I'm mixing that up with the orange juice ad...[orange juice isn't just for breakfast anymore]

It was: "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's"...and then the small print was "Real Jewish rye."

Great ads, advertising hall of fame quality, for its time and place – NYC circa 1967 (I googled it).

These days, though, pick those same faces and chances are good that they actually ARE Jewish faces! The statistics on the colors and ethnicities of Jews in the U.S. today (let alone around the world) might astonish you. Davi or I will bring you those statistics another time.

In the mean time, tonight, I want to talk to you a bit – or at least HINT at – what the changing faces of Judaism might mean for us at BCC. And I want to do that tonight by reflecting on this week's Torah portion – Lech Lecha – the one in which God calls Abraham and Sarah to become the patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish people, to leave their homeland and head to a different land – a land God will show them – and to make of them a great nation [Genesis 12:1-2]. Abraham and Sarah decide to take God up on the offer – as Rabbi Katz pointed out to us in Torah study last night; the incentive God offered them were really good, and the signing bonus excellent.

The text tells us that when they left where they were and headed toward Canaan (the Promised Land) they took not only each other and their nephew Lot, and also all their property that they had accumulated, but they also took “the persons whom they had gotten in Haran” [v.5] The Hebrew of that last part reads: v'et ha-nefesh asher asu va'kharan, which literally translates as “the soul they made,” which the midrash famously understands as a reference to the “converts whom they had led to belief in the one true God” [Gen. R. 39:14, in Etz Hayim chumash on p.71, note5]. This verse is the source, say some, of the Jewish tradition of calling converts by their chosen Hebrew name and then ben or bat Avraham

v'Sarah – son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah. Thus Jews by choice have been part of Judaism and Jewish tradition since its very beginnings, or so the midrash would have us believe and that was recorded at least as long ago as the 5th c. CE if not before.

Jewish tradition, then, has long embraced “converts,” Jews-by-choice, who came from many different ethnic origins. And it has long embraced children brought into Jewish families through adoption, and the parents who adopt them. Says the Talmud, “One who brings a person to the Torah is regarded as having given birth to him or her” [BT Sanhedrin 99a, also p.71 note 5 of Etz Chayim chumash]. Those persons who bring people to Torah include not only Jewish parents who raise adopted children as Jews, it also included those of us in Jewish communities such as BCC who welcome and embrace adopted children and adult Jews by choice. We are seen as fulfilling the first, and some say most important, mitzvah God gives to human beings: be fruitful and multiply [Gen. 1]

In our BCC community today the number of such Jews by choice is on the increase – Jewish children who are Jewish by their parents’ choice, as well as adult Jews who are Jewish by their own choice. And a lot of these Jews by choice look a lot like the non-Jews of the Levy’s Rye Bread ads.

Back in the days of Abraham and Sarah I wonder if it was difficult for the Jews who didn’t look like Abraham and Sarah to fit in? My guess is that it wasn’t – and part of that is due to another thing that Abraham and Sarah are famous for (although we don’t read about it until next week’s portion, I’ll give you a preview): their hospitality – they welcomed strangers, they washed their feet, they fed them lavish meals, and they even – as we did already see this week – invited them to come live with them in the promised land. Those souls they made in Haran, according to tradition then, were counted among the seed of Abraham and Sarah, counted equally among their descendants.

We could learn a lot from our ancestors. As welcoming as we claim to be here at BCC, we could be more welcoming still.

Among the verses our study group thought to choose for our verse tonight was this one: “And God brought Abraham outside and said to him, “Look at the skies and count the stars – if you can count them.” And God further said to him, “Thus will your seed be,” [Gen. 15:5].

Rabbi Katz last night pointed out that this is the second promise God makes to Abraham about how numerous his offspring will become. The first promise was to make them as numerous as the dust of the earth [3:15 -16]. And according to Rabbi Katz, Abraham didn’t like that initial promise because he didn’t want his seed to be stepped on, or get dragged around on the bottom of somebody else’s feet, so God changed the offer: like the stars of the sky, then – residents in God’s

own heaven; those mysterious lights in the sky – forever an inspiration to the human mind and heart and soul.

A lot of Jews these days are worried about numbers – are our number decreasing? Are we disappearing?

But both out in the world and here at BCC, I'm more interested in the light we shed than number we reach. Both out in the world and here at BCC, I'm more interested in counting all those who wish to be counted, not for the sheer statistics of it, but in order to embrace, as Abraham and Sarah embraced, all the souls we help to shape, all the persons who would come to dwell with us.

Shabbat shalom