

Sermon Parashat Lech Lecha
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Following is the story of a member of the congregation: “At the ages of 12 and 14, my brothers were trying to avoid mandatory service to the communist government in Cuba so they were put on a plane sent to any where they could go for an opportunity. Of course my parents wanted to send them to the United States but because the restrictions were too great and the quotas already filled, they wouldn’t be able to gain entrance until my brother had qualified and been drafted into the military. So, as the birthday quickly approached my parents put my brothers on a plane that took them from Havana to Curacao to Lisbon to Madrid.

God, it sounds so much like Elian Gonzalez of April, 2000.

In Madrid there was a retired colonel of the Spanish Army who had heard about these boys and volunteered to take them in. Even though they did not know the retired colonel or what would happen to their boys, they relied on the colonel’s kindness and sent their boys to him. The children were sent to Spain to live with strangers in the hopes that at some point they would arrive in the United States. Eventually, the brothers made their second transatlantic flight and it was to the United States. Upon arrival, they made their way to upstate New York to live with an aunt they had also never met. There they waited 2 ½ years to be reunited with their family. They, like so many immigrants to our country, made the flight to this foreign country that would eventually become their own.

When they left home their parents gave them a new watch, a new pen and a record of Cuban music. As they boarded the plane to leave their homeland Cuba, they were forced to turn these items over. They were stripped of anything that belonged to them. From that moment on, their history and the music of their lives would change forever. We all know this story is told in every language and yet we take freedom for granted. Therefore, we must find a way to absorb the people of the world into this beautiful tapestry that is America because this country is the great melting pot, the great salad bowl.

Nahum Sarna in his introduction to Genesis, makes the following insightful comment. “The narratives of the patriarchs of Israel is framed by two historic migrations; into the Promised land and out of it.” (Etz Hayim page 2) The story of our three patriarchs and their spouses begins with Abraham and his migration to Israel and concludes with Jacob leaving Israel and going to Egypt. However, as Ramban points out, it is the parallel that is remarkable. Due to the famine, both Abraham and his grandson Jacob must leave their homes to insure their personal survival. Both are forced to make their way to the more powerful and more affluent communities that will board them in order to make a living. So this morning let’s focus on the difficult stories surrounding Abraham and Sarah’s migration.

The story is an uncomfortable one. Abraham recognizes the necessity of going to Egypt. He realizes they have no choice but to go to Egypt if they are going to survive, so they must make this trip. Please understand this is not the ideological journey foisted on them by God, but an expedition that must be made not from religious conviction but for survival. So they concoct a plan. Though Sarah is beautiful, that may put Abraham’s life in danger, so they lie.

Abraham and Sarah lie because they truly believe their lives are in danger. Abraham becomes wealthy and engages in commerce. He is also given great gifts. Abraham and Sarah become wealthy. The land and the people have been good to them but there is one small glitch. The house of Pharaoh is plagued by a mysterious disease and it is soon discovered the reason for this plague is because of Abraham and Sarah's falsehood. Pharaoh is furious. He is angry when he realizes he is in danger because of the position Abraham and Sarah have put him in. He asks *Lama amarta achoti be*, "Why did you tell me she was your sister?" (Genesis 12:19) There is silence. No answer. Abraham still has no response. What can he say?

The interaction is all based on assumptions about the other. Abraham makes assumptions about Pharaoh and Pharaoh makes assumptions about Abraham. Both are suspicious of the other and because of this distrustful foundation there is no real dialogue. Abraham keeps his wealth and at the very least, they may have all learned a lesson. No. It actually happens again. The whole story happens all over again.

Abraham's story is the same as Jacob's or the Irish or the Japanese or even Jews here in America. That is why our Torah implores us to care for the stranger. Just as we were strangers, so too we must care for the stranger. We must form policy that bespeaks our values. This is not a partisan plea or a pre-election energized by the moment charge. This is a call for thoughtful discussion about how we best protect ourselves and elevate our country. In as much as I believe we need to generate a thoughtful approach to guest worker programs and paths to citizenship, I believe we also need to create safe borders. These borders would let those who earnestly seek a better life into our country, while keeping out those who seek to denigrate our country through drugs and other illegal activities. So you see, this sermon is asking basic questions about what we believe in, about ourselves and the purpose of our great country. Are we voting into law guidelines that protect us and elevate the human experience or are we acting out of a xenophobic impulse that ought to be held in check.

On October 26, 2006 at 11:32 a.m. EST, President Bush signed a bill in *WASHINGTON* authorizing 700 miles of new fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border. "Unfortunately the United States has not been in complete control of its borders for decades, therefore illegal immigration has been on the rise," said Bush at a signing ceremony. "We have a responsibility to enforce our laws," he said. "We have a responsibility to secure our borders. We take this responsibility seriously." And we should. Our very permeable border with Mexico has become one of the greatest challenges in this country's war against drugs. We must find a way to keep drugs out while we allow people in. So the debate continues about the appropriate mechanism for filtering people from illegal contraband. Or at least I hope that is what the debate is about.

In the debate about immigration, one of the most controversial proposals would create a high-tech fence along one-third of the U.S. border with Mexico. Approved by the House in December, the barrier is modeled on an existing 14-mile fence between San Diego, Calif., and Tijuana, Mexico. Supporters say the fencing would bolster homeland security and curb illegal immigration. However it seems antithetical to the American ideal of an open society. The cost is \$2.2 billion. That's roughly \$3 million per mile.

I can't help but think of the outcry in this country when Israel sought to establish a barrier between themselves and those who sought to blow them up. When security is at stake there is no question that we must find ways to protect ourselves, but we cannot permit this dialogue to be lowered to simple all or nothing solution. We cannot permit the discussion to be oversimplified to a yes or no, up or down vote because lives are at stake.

Abraham lies to save his life. Sometimes life isn't so simple. Just a few chapters later God tells Sara that she will get pregnant and have a son. To which she laughs. Says the text she laughs at Abraham because he is just too old. When Abe asks God what was she laughing at God lies. God lies to preserve Abraham's dignity and the rabbis run to God's defense. Our sages justify the lie asserting a white lie to save someone's feelings from being hurt is O.K, but when Abraham lies there is not a single word from a single commentary. Why not? Why can't one Rabbi step up and say he was seeking to save his life for sake of *pekuach nefesh* saving a life it is permitted to lie. The reason is simple. There is no question. When lives are at stake we must do whatever needs to be done to save them. I don't care about political jockeying. I don't care who gets elected on Tuesday and who does not. Our sacred tradition has spoken clearly. We are a wealthy country. We are the world superpower. We are 300 million and growing through birth and immigration.

The story my friend shared with me ends in the following way: 2 1/2 years after putting their sons on "an airplane to freedom", not knowing if they would ever meet again, my parents found a way to get the girls and themselves out. We left to Mexico, where we waited a month to enter the United States. My parents left all that was familiar to them. They left their homeland and the comfort of their own home, their language and their culture, their professional doctorates and all their earthly possessions, just to offer their four children and themselves a life of opportunity and freedom. My brave folks came to this unfamiliar land with the hope of that promise (Lech lecha all over again). They came with only a bag of clothes, without a penny, willing to leave everything behind. They came to labor and to toil. And that they did. To start again from the bottom, as all the Cubans and other immigrants have done. And they have succeeded in this great melting pot. They succeeded thanks to the great American dream.

That is the story of one Cuban family, like all the Cuban families. We all come to pursue the same dream. As a Cuban immigrant, and as an American, I support the dream of opportunity for all mankind. I add my voice to hers.