

Parshat Lech L'cha

SUMMARY

Abram and Sarai leave their home in Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan. However, they never complete the journey, settling in a place called Haran instead.

As this parasha begins, God says to Abram: "Lech lecha" meaning "Go to yourself" or "Go forth" from your home and father's house "to a land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1)." God promises to bless Abram and make of him a great nation. So Abram sets out with Sarai and their material possessions. When they arrive in Canaan, God again appears to Abram to tell him that God will assign this land (Canaan) to Abram's descendants.

Abram first settles in Shechem, but then moves southward. A severe famine induces him to go to Egypt. Worried that the Egyptians will kill him and take his beautiful wife, Sarai, Abram instructs her to say she is his sister. The ploy apparently works, with Sarai being taken into Pharaoh's palace for the pleasure of the Pharaoh, and Abram acquiring many animals and slaves. God, however, afflicts the palace with a plague and Sarai is 'outed' as Pharaoh discovers the lie and sends Abram and Sarai away.

Returning to the land of Canaan, conflict between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen develop, and Abram suggests that they go their separate ways.

Once again, God appears to Abram, promising him a great reward. Abram asks God how this can be, since he is going to die childless. But God promises him that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars of heaven. God directs Abram to offer sacrifices, which Abram does.

Sarai gives Abram her handmaid Hagar to bear a child. But when Hagar becomes pregnant, tensions develop between the two women. When Sarai complains to Abram, he tells her to do what she wants to do. She treats Hagar harshly, and Hagar runs away. An angel of God appears to her and tells her to return, promising her a son, Ishmael.

God again appears to Abram -- now 99 years of age -- repeating promises of the covenant. God changes his name to Abraham, which the Torah ascribes with the meaning "the father of a multitude of nations. God also changes Sarai's name to Sarah. God introduces a sign of the covenant: every male shall be circumcised at eight days old. God also promises that Abraham and Sarah will bear a son, Isaac, who will carry on the covenant. As the portion ends, Abraham, Ishmael, and all the males in Abraham's household are circumcised.