***Lech L’cha* | a Conversation Sabbath *Dvar Torah***

Given byAmy Shutkin

Kehilla Community Synagogue, Piedmont, California

October 28, 2017

In modern conversational Hebrew, the name of this week’s Torah portion, *Lech L’cha,* translates roughly into “Get out of here!” There are many potential connotations to this ubiquitous phrase. So here’s a “trigger warning:” this *dvar Torah* lives where *Lech L’cha* meets end-of-life decision-making.

*Lech L’cha* is written in the Hebrew command form, masculine. It’s not a request. *Lech L’cha* is the Divine inspired order that a 75-year old Avram (Abraham) heard and obeyed. In sequential leaps of audacious faith, Abraham and Sarah minded this order, gathered all their worldly possessions with them, and journeyed as strangers into a strange land. Thus commenced their epic journey from the city of Ur, located in what is now modern Iraq, through the promised land of Canaan, detouring into Egypt due to famine (foreshadowing the Exodus story), and circling back to settle in Canaan.

This is the passage that promises Abraham’s descendants will become a great nation, numbering the stars. In reading *Lech L’cha* we learn that Abraham’s first-born son, Ishmael, will also come to lead a great, yet separate, nation. A quarter century into their journey the Breath of Life assures Abraham that Sarah will become “…a mother of nations.” By this time Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is 90. Together they will fulfill this prophecy, conceive a son and name him Isaac, as commanded.

Rabbi David Cooper reminds us that biblical prophecies are never fully rendered within the lifetime of any of our Hebrew prophets. For Abraham, this meant learning in advance that his children’s children would suffer 400 years of hardships before returning to live in the Promised Land. Abraham, however, is reassured that he and Sarah will not share this fate. Abraham will “…go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.”

In summary, *Lech L’cha*, both the Torah portion and theexplorations within, describe the arc of many origin stories, including the origin story of the Jewish people. As we recently celebrated *Simchat Torah*, we are reminded that every year we revisit each Torah portion. Kehilla as a community has labored over many of the complex issues with which *Lech L’cha* challenges us. This year, *Lech L’cha* serves as a reflection of how we relate and retell our own life stories and how this in turn facilitates making peace with ourselves.

In this Hebrew year of 5778 Kehilla is exploring a new Jewish community engagement campaign (we’re part of a cohort from all across the country and Canada), led by an expert team from The Conversation Project (TCP), to design and implement advance care planning outreach efforts in our congregation.

In this Torah portion, Avram was renamed Avraham and Sarai became Sarah. We’re calling this Jewish TCP engagement effort by a new name, too - **Kavod Conversations**. Together with faith communities all across North America, this week’s *dvar Torah* is part of a consciousness raising effort called Conversation Sabbath (#ConvoSabbath | October 27th - November 5th). Our goal is simple and transformative: to ensure that everyone’s wishes for end-of-life care are expressed and respected.

We know that discussing end-of-life issues, even with and/or especially with our loved ones can be uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable because we’re talking about end-of-life issues that really matter to us. Our *kavanah*, our loving and compassionate intention, is for the **Kavod Conversations** program to provide Kehilla members with guidance in preparation for each of our individual journeys.

A personal note: My mother has been dealing with these issues for over 50 years. Following a traumatic brain injury sustained in a near-fatal car crash, my father has slowly metamorphosed from the progressive young labor lawyer my mother married into a profound state of dementia. Now in his 92nd year and in declining health, he lives a mostly quiet life inside his own head. In better times he and my mother had held numerous conversations to clarify their end-of-life priorities. She knows what he values (Milwaukee’s legendary Kopp’s chocolate frozen custard), and we can honor his wishes when the time comes.

This summer the national conference for Chevra Kadishas (holy burial societies) was again well attended by Kehilla members. We are regarded respectfully within this group for publication of our groundbreaking Shmira Readings and Psalms, among our other contributions. Additionally, Kehilla continues to pioneer gender-neutral and gender fluid Hebrew and English liturgy for *tahara*, the ritual washing of our deceased*.*

As a long-time member of Kehilla’s Chevra Kadisha, I was unexpectedly moved to tears when, in the course of the weekend, we were introduced to the **Kavod Conversations** project. During the keynote address we were challenged to embrace our own mortality and think about finishing the sentence, “What matters to me at the end of life is…”

My thoughts raced to Hero, my daughter who was raised and bat mitzvahed in the Kehilla community. She is now a young adult living in rural Akron, Ohio. What mattered, I recognized, is that she be with me. I struggled to keep from crying. The tears came. Startled, my phone tazered me silently. It was Hero calling me just at that moment. Later that day I called her back and we talked about the synchronicity. At home following the conference, my husband and I sat together and completed a Conversation Starter Kit. We didn’t see eye to eye on everything. Even after so many years together, some of our responses actually surprised us.

As a community, Kehilla acknowledges our ongoing wrestling and struggles with the complexities of our Divine relationships. These are shared values that ground our conversations. Pursuing our inner truths, what really matters to us, and sharing these with our loved ones is precisely what makes an end-of-life conversation so challenging. According to TCP, “The ultimate goal… is… to change the cultural norm from not having these conversations to having them.”

Kehilla’s **Kavod Conversations** project team agrees with TCP that “to change that norm, we need to impress people with the importance of the conversation, provide them with tools to make it easier to have the conversation, and encourage these critical talks to take place at the kitchen table before there is a crisis.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As a society we have grown increasingly at ease with discussions surrounding responsible sexuality. Similarly we can also acclimate into a comfortable mindset when talking about our end-of-life choices. Take, for example, Dr. Jessica Nutik Zitter. Dr. Nutik Zitter is double-board certified in both pulmonary/critical care medicine and palliative care medicine. She practices at Oakland’s Highland Hospital and is a member of Oakland’s Congregation Beth Jacob. Dr. Nutik Zitter is also the author of [*Extreme Measures*](https://smile.amazon.com/Extreme-Measures-Finding-Better-Path/dp/1101982551/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1505239659&sr=1-1&keywords=Extreme+Measures)*: Finding a Better Path to the End of Life*, a frequent contributor to the New York Times, and is featured in the Oscar-nominated Netflix documentary, [*Extremis*](https://www.netflix.com/title/80106307). This video is now included within Oakland Unified School District’s high school health curriculum. In a New York Times’ Sunday Review op-ed this past February, Dr. Nutik Zitter wrote:

“... a student visiting a dying grandparent might draw from the curriculum to ask a question that could shift the entire conversation. She might ask about a palliative care consultation, for example, or share important information about the patient’s preferences that she elicited during her course. High school, when students are getting their drivers’ licenses and considering organ donation, is the perfect time for this. Where else do we have the attention of our entire society?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Too many people die in a manner they would not choose and too many of their loved ones are left feeling bereaved, guilty, and uncertain. The extraordinary level of high-tech medical care with which we are blessed to have available to us may be a mixed blessing. Such are first-world problems.

Dr. Nutik Zitter painfully acknowledges that not all her patients can be saved and she struggles to resist the professional urge to treat what amounts to untreatable disease. Shifting these patients from a critical care focus, palliative care practice relies on pain medications and sedation to treat a patient’s suffering. In her recent September blog post Dr. Nutik Zitter writes with spiritual audacity about her commitment:

“To me, cultivating bravery means “walking my talk” as a palliative and critical care physician, connecting with my family to make sure I know their preferences and values, and building cultural awareness and community to improve our care of the dying.”

**Kavod Conversations** is not intended to be managed by Kehilla’s Chevra Kadisha. However, as members of our holy burial society we are a group that is “comfortable” dealing with death. The intention is for us to begin planting seeds by introducing this program further and further upstream into our community. Locally, TCP is already embedded within Kaiser’s integrated advance care planning initiatives. Both Alameda and Contra Costa have county sponsored TCP programs and conduct trainings as well. As a result and over time, we trust that an increasingly wide circle of community members will hold their own conversations.

Our Kehilla pilot team includes Allison Rodman, who works in this field professionally and was trained by TCP years ago. Allison will lead the **Kavod Conversations** presentations and trainings. Julie Patrusky is taking on the role of Conversation Guide. As an ordained Jewish chaplain, Julie is available to augment our Kehilla clergy and lay leadership by also providing individual pastoral care. As a professional project manager, my role is to facilitate transparency while leading organizational and programmatic support.

Ultimately it will be up to Kehilla’s spiritual leadership and clergy to integrate elements of this practice into our own life-cycle rituals. Through early spring, the combined **Kavod Conversations** cohort is engaged with adding Jewish elements to the existing TCP framework. In the coming year Kehilla’s **Kavod Conversations** project team will offer guidance and conduct workshops to provide Kehilla leadership, clergy and community with the resources needed to process our final desires and begin talking with our loved ones, in comfortable settings, about our wishes and preferences. If you are curious to learn more now, you can download The Conversation Starter Kit for free from theconversationproject.org website.

Have you had the conversation? Get out of here!

Let’s talk!

Amy Shutkin

ashutkin@gmail.com

1. <http://theconversationproject.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/18/opinion/sunday/first-sex-ed-then-death-ed.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)